

WORLDING POSTCOLONIAL SEXUALITIES

Publics, Counterpublics,
Human Rights

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CHAPTER 3

“RIGHTS A DI PLAN”

Sistren and sexual solidarities in Jamaica

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“RIGHTS A DI PLAN”¹

Sistren and sexual solidarities in Jamaica

In 1978, Joan Ross, longest continuing editor of *Sistren*, and the person responsible for transforming it from a newsletter to a magazine with a national, pan-Caribbean, and international circulation, wrote to *Public Opinion* denouncing harassment of gay students at the University of the West Indies. The *Jamaica Gaily News* reprinted extracts from Ross’s article to talk about connections between party-based politics and sexual politics:

At least there is one sister who uses her head and thinks for herself. She understands our position and is not prepared to react emotionally...if only Comrade Ross could get more of her colleagues in the party and the Government to see the justice and right of our case, we would be grateful. Many of us are just as socialist as the next comrade, but our distrusts of totalitarian demagogues inhibit our total commitment. In a choice between our ideology and our sexuality, our sexuality comes first for that is what we *are*, while our politics is what we choose. A very basic matter of priorities.

(Gay Duncan, 1978, 5–6)

Sistren Theatre Collective, a working class women’s group formed in 1977, began publishing its newsletter in 1979 around the same time as the *Jamaica Gaily News* was circulated clandestinely. Unlike the Gay Freedom Movement’s wariness of politics, *Sistren*, which too originated amid a democratic socialist climate of social upliftment for disempowered populations, was inherently and openly political in its goal of social transformation. Though the collective was sometimes assumed to be affiliated to the People’s National Party (PNP), which formed the government at the time, the party affiliations of its members spanned not just the PNP, but also the Worker’s Party of Jamaica (WPJ).² Members of the collective advocated a broad analysis of political economy in which its popular education work involving

theatre, media production and analysis, academic research, and community outreach were geared toward transformative changes in the socio-economic position of women.

The collective's publication *Sistren* was initially a newsletter about its theatre work and national and international policies impacting Jamaican women, before it was reconceptualized as a magazine with a broad Caribbean focus in 1984. It was feminist in all but its name since the term was not popular in Jamaica during the 1970s. The magazine appeared about three times a year peaking at a circulation of three thousand copies. It was distributed nationally and internationally, though in the absence of formal records it is uncertain how much of the readership was international. In 2004, the building which housed *Sistren* in Kensington Crescent, Kingston, burnt to the ground destroying a large collection of material related to the history of the collective, among them extant copies of the newsletter. The collective is still active, but its limited scale of operations makes the process of a systematic archiving difficult to sustain. There are no copies of the newsletter (before it became a magazine) in any institutional holding in the United States or the Caribbean.³ My account in this chapter is based on the digital archive of the magazine, conversations with members of *Sistren* and Women's Media Watch (WMW), and materials available at the University of the West Indies libraries. Wherever possible, I supplement this account by consulting the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA) newsletter and the Barbados-based Women and Development Unit (WAND) publication *Woman Speak*. The Jamaican feminist archive in this chapter thus begins when the gay and lesbian one discontinues.

Activist and social movement literature such as *Sistren* are important though partial sources in understanding the regional context of Jamaican legislation on sexual rights within the Caribbean.⁴ Jamaica is one among the many countries in the region which criminalize homosexuality and one of the few which has not yet legalized abortion. *Sistren*'s community theatre, consciousness raising, and its magazine never directly connected sexual and reproductive autonomy as pressing concerns of the Caribbean women's movement. Increased political and sexualized violence during the decades *Sistren* was most active made its theatrical and print interventions both timely and urgent but also prevented it from addressing non-normative sexualities. In Jamaica, where women, woman-like behavior among men, and manly behavior among women are subject to heinous forms of gendered and sexualized violence, solidarities across differences are crucial to the project of worlding postcolonial sexualities through national, regional, and transnational advocacy. Demands for legislative and governmental responses to gender-based violence, health iniquities, outmoded colonial-era laws criminalizing specific sexual acts, and freedom of reproductive choice can be the basis of these solidarities, though no visible Jamaican organizations explicitly made these claims in the 1980s.⁵

Building on Chapter 2, my aim in this chapter is to establish continuities between women's, gay, and lesbian activism while making it explicit that continuity of preoccupations does not always lead to solidarities between social



FIGURE 3.1 Cover image of an early *Sistren* newsletter reporting on the collective's theatrical performances. Image courtesy of Joan Ross-Frankson, Joan French, and the Sistren Theatre Collective.

movements. Jamaica's neoliberal trajectories of development, staunchly Christian beliefs of large sections of the population, and heteropatriarchal codes are entangled with Euro-colonization and male nationalism.⁶ The question I ask in relation to women's, gay, and lesbian activism is this: if identities come into being in relation to larger bio-political issues and languages of power then under what conditions does space for LGBTQ+ identities and struggles become a political possibility in Caribbean societies like Jamaica? Caribbean and Latin American decolonial feminist thought – especially Sylvia Wynter and Maria Lugones's revisions of Anibal Quijano's concept "coloniality of power" – are useful in answering this question (Wynter 1990; Lugones 2007). Too, policy documents and publications by transnational feminist organizations such as CAFRA and DAWN, housed in the Women's and Development Unit (WAND), Barbados from 1990–1996 provide a possible roadmap

to Jamaican women's long, difficult, and sometimes derailed drive to securing their rights (Sen & Grown 1987). While feminist, gay, and lesbian solidarities are crucial to advance legislative and rights claims of women and sexual minorities in Jamaica and other Southern nations, there is very little evidence of such alliances in *Sistren* magazine. The minimal LGBT language in the magazine reflected the influence of middle class members of the group, especially in the numbers edited in the early 1990s. The overall trajectory of the Sistren Collective indicates that rather than name their politics as explicitly feminist or queer, members chose to work through practice and not through identity or activist categories.

“Chatting” about research

Sistren's contribution to popular theatre and community building based on personal testimonies of members has been studied for its innovative methods of collective creation. In the absence of performance records of Sistren's interventions, the magazine is an important postcolonial feminist historical source. There is, by now, a body of scholarship on class-based differences in training, education, experiences, and life circumstances of the theatre collective's core membership which facilitated as well as challenged their process of collective creation.⁷ The power relationship between classes and the “educated” and “uneducated” was a real but dynamic divide that expressed itself in different cultures of communication even as the process enhanced recognition of the local language, making everyone who engaged into a learner as well as a teacher. The popular education drama methods and workshops of the collective were designed to challenge the social and language divide, as were the production of materials using comic strip formats. The range of communication approaches in the magazine reflected the group's determination to overcome racial, employment, informational, and educational divides in Jamaica. Even as the magazine reported on the group's theatrical activities within and outside the country, and announced new performances and news about its members and “friends” research, educational, and creative activities, it was also a forum for research on Caribbean women and community activities already underway. What follows is an analysis of Sistren's conversational forays (“chats”) into research and the national-transnational networks which connected and supported this work.

As women professionals drew close to Sistren as resource persons or called on the group to support their work in prisons or with AIDS patients, timely responses to this interaction emerged. One such response was Sistren Research founded by university-educated, white collar professionals Honor Ford-Smith and Joan French in 1983; it also included Joan Ross, Imani Tafara-Ama, and Hilary Nicholson (from Women's Media Watch), and several visiting international scholars. The collective “recognized the dearth of information about gender relations in Jamaica” and set up a unit to “research women's situation in Jamaica, popularize the findings, and lend support to women's groups in participatory processes” (*Sistren* 1991a, 25). Lest Sistren Research be construed as securely employed women imposing their priorities on a working class theatre group – an expedient though intellectually lazy critique prevalent in the work of at least one researcher (Smith 2008,

2013) – I reiterate that its findings did not lead to esoteric scholarship. It was cross-fertilization and dual consciousness-raising across colors and classes that developed the collective into one of the most inclusive and innovative lobbies for women’s rights in the global South. Far from being an avenue of self-promotion and career advancement, Sistren Research circulated its studies and analysis among a cross-class selection of readers in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and the diaspora for opinions and advice. Among its various activities were publications on the history of women and work, illustrated booklets on sexual violence and the early Jamaican women’s movement, several video productions, at least two traveling exhibitions, and many historical studies of women in political and labor struggles.

Sistren Research’s landmark achievement was *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* (1987), published to national and international acclaim. Comprising life narratives of thirteen subaltern and two middle class women from the collective, it contained accounts of their childhood, access to or denial of educational opportunities, familial and sexual relationships, work, and situatedness in urban and rural Jamaica. Louise Bennett-Coverley, whose poems popularized the use of Jamaican patwah (patois), launched the book. *Lionheart Gal* was widely reviewed in several academic and popular forums, and *Sistren* magazine carried some of these reviews. While reviewers were unanimous in their positive opinion on the format and structure, Carol Lawes specifically commented on “differences in style and rhythms of speech” of the various narratives indicating the care that had gone into “making this very readable, and...continuing efforts to standardize the writing of the Jamaican language” (1986–1987, 16). Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter has ascribed a “generational” quality to the autobiographical, “personal is the political” credo in which second and third wave feminism was articulated within and outside Jamaica (Wynter & Scott 2000, 137). *Lionheart Gal* illustrates this generational quality, sealing Sistren’s already formidable reputation of producing theatre based on women’s lived experiences to provide a model of feminist analysis that has stood the test of time. The magazine serialized extracts from the book for readers who may not have had ready access to the expensive foreign publication.

Sistren Research’s work on Jamaican women activists from the early to mid-twentieth century led to a series of presentations, article-length publications, informational booklets, reports, and media productions. Ford-Smith and French’s collaboration on the participation of Jamaican women in the 1938 labor uprising yielded the landmark study, “Women’s Labor and Organisation in Jamaica, 1900–1938.” The project was supported by Saskia Wieringa and Rhoda Reddock as part of a larger initiative exploring women’s struggles and research in colonial and contemporary society, bringing together women from all part of the world, including Africa and Asia. Among these were Chaya Dattar and Nandita Gandhi who are recognized as foundational figures in the Indian Women’s Movement. French and Ford-Smith sought inputs from “community group members, Sistren members, and University lecturers” to “test interest and readability at various levels” and seek the “rigours of intellectual scrutiny” (*Sistren* 1986a, 10). The research unit conducted a participatory workshop dramatizing the lives of four

important figures from the early Jamaican women's movement (Amy Ashwood Garvey, Amy Bailey, Adina Spencer, and Molly Huggins) in a skit enacted by Sistren members. Couple of years later this study was the basis of a video docu-drama, *Miss Amy and Miss May*, based on the lives of Amy Bailey and May Farquharson. Since both activists were alive at the time, they had an opportunity to view the film as a moving cross-generational feminist tribute (Francis-Hinds 1990; Brown 1990). In 1996 the unit produced *The Drums Keep Sounding*, a docu-drama on the life of Jamaican performance poet Louise Bennett-Coverley. This research was accessible to readers across Jamaica and the Caribbean in the form of two booklets: *No to Sexual Violence* and *Wid Dis Ring*. When readers wrote to request access to studies conducted by the research unit, the magazine serialized Ford-Smith's literary history of the Jamaican writer Una Marson over three numbers from 1993 to 1994.⁸

Sistren's attempts to balance research-driven work with accessibility and wide reach meant that it juggled various styles of communication. The transcription of Jamaican patwah in *Lionheart Gal*, graphic booklets, and in the cartoon strip "Sista Ansa A Granny Chat 'Bout..." ensured that the magazine conveyed its analysis to academic and popular readership. In its early iterations, the comic strip by long time member, drummer, and artist Mbala was text-heavy with illustrations used to initiate (not necessarily advance) the analysis. In 1985, "Sista Ansa A Chat 'Bout De Decade," introduced the UN Decade for women. Ansa (Jamaican for "answer"), compares the historical and contemporary situation of women by drawing on her grandmother's account of times past. Speaking of the "housewifization" of post-colonial Jamaican women, Granny rejects the idea of the male breadwinner to argue for increases in the wages of female workers in the free zone. Ansa and Granny castigate UN conference planners in Nairobi for ignoring ordinary women who "neva did even know seh 1976–1985 was dedicated to the advancement of woman" since "wi neva did get no advancement." They state their demands forcefully:

We waan di information we me hear seh dem collect in de last 10 years fi put pon toppa we experience fi build we movement. For woman ready fi move; we ready fi lead weself, and we waan well covered on all fronts so we in a better position fi win...[We want the information we heard they had collected in the last 10 years to connect with our experience to build our movement. Women are ready to move; we are ready to lead ourselves, and we want to be prepared on all fronts so that we are in a better position to win].

(*Sistren* 1985a, 12)

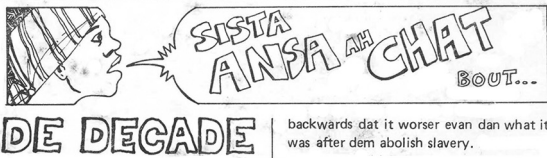
Articulated in patwah, these views reflect the findings of an important study by DAWN which concludes that "rather than improving, the socioeconomic status of the great majority of Third World women has worsened considerably throughout the Decade" (Sen & Grown 1987, 16). From the next number Sista Ansa was an illustrated page-length feature covering Caribbean participation in international women's organizing, their role in subsistence and waged economies, experiences of

infidelity, domestic, and intimate partner violence. In another comic strip, Granny makes structural connections between different aspects of the economy to convince Ansa of the links between a rally for peace and the cost of medications in the country. The narrative arc establishes that governmental expenditure on weapons led to lack of money for public health provisions, increasing the prices of medicines for common people. The artist represents then Jamaican Prime Minister, Edward Seaga, conveying to US President Ronald Reagan a decision “to cut back on education and health so that we can pay back our loan” (*Sistren* 1985b, 4). The page consistently critiqued neocolonial policies of the Jamaican state. As one of the most regular features of the magazine, it survived *Sistren*’s editorial changes after Ross-Frankson. When the magazine introduced thematic numbers – on the economic crisis, the environment, technology, sports, laws concerning women, and the family – Sister Ansa’s conversations commented on these themes.

By the 1980s there was a circle of individuals and organizations labelled “Friends of *Sistren*,” themselves involved in gender advocacy and community education. The Friends network was the impetus for Women’s Media Watch (WMW) which has documented Jamaican media representations of women over the past three decades. Judith Wedderburn mentioned in a group conversation that WMW was one of the various groups for action, advocacy, and education formed out of a UNESCO-*Sistren* workshop, and the only one which continued to function over the years (Wedderburn and Members of WMW 2015). WMW arose as a response to sexually explicit media representations. *Sistren* was the first feminist organization to critique the media’s objectification of women. The collective voiced objections to violence against women in ways that could not be ignored, thus bringing the matter into public discourse.⁹ The magazine allows a glimpse of this multipronged emphasis (drama, workshops, and advocacy) in *Sistren*’s objection to an advertisement by the

**UN Decade For Women Ends:
BUT THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES**

<p>Caribbean women participating in the N.G.O. Forum to mark the end of the UN Decade for Women have concluded that with the notable exception of Cuba, the material conditions of women of their region have regressed in the last ten years. On the other hand the major achievement of the Decade has been the greater consciousness and organization that Caribbean women have developed.</p> <p>These were two of the main conclusions endorsed by a group of 21</p>	<p>genuine problems facing women of the Caribbean.</p> <p>Participants consistently focused upon worsening economic and social problems affecting Caribbean people. The staggering foreign</p>	<p>debt, the harsh conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the deepening inequality in the terms of trade with developed capitalist countries</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Cont'd on P. 12</p>
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DE DECADE

backwards dat it worsen evan dan what it was after dem abolish slavery.

FIGURE 3.2 Section of the column “Sista Ansa A Chat ‘Bout De Decade” that appeared in the 1985 number of *Sistren*. Image courtesy of Joan Ross-Frankson, Joan French, and the *Sistren* Theatre Collective.

Jamaica National Investment Promotion Bureau declaring “Your Bottom Line is Beautiful When you Make it in Jamaica” (*Sistren* 1987, 1). When the American feminist magazine *Ms* received a copy of the advertisement it condemned the sexual objectification in a letter reprinted by *Sistren*: “When things in this country have reached the stage where an organization managed by a woman can publish such an advertisement, then we have indeed ‘come a long way, baby’ and it has all been downhill” (McHardy 1987, 10). Undoubtedly national and international publicity led to a shaming that the Investment Promotion Bureau could ill afford. It withdrew the ad following a protest letter and a meeting between the managing director of the company and several *Sistren* members. This indicates there was already a feminist counterpublic of readers of the magazine. Among those commenting on media images of violence against women were Samere Tansley, a founding member of WMW. Hilary Nicholson, another WMW founder, became an important performer in the theatre collective and a researcher-writer for *Sistren*. These relationships between *Sistren* and WMW indicate the cross-fertilization of organizations in documenting and contesting various forms of representational and structural violence against women. I analyze some of their strategies later in the chapter.

As with the Indian collective *Manushi* and the South African women’s collectives *Speak* and *Agenda*, active during the same years (see Chapters 4 and 7), *Sistren* emerged in the larger context of national and institutional discussions on gender policies. This context influences the analysis of structural factors impacting women’s lives in the wider Caribbean region in the magazine. Two early articles set the tone for this analysis. Camille Lampart covered a university seminar on gender and development in the Caribbean to indicate how established formats of scholarly discussions did not encourage participation or inspire attendees. Observing that despite being very active in redressing gender and economic disparities, many women in Jamaica were still wary of the label feminist, she commends *Sistren*’s sessions in the seminar as “rays of sunshine when we seemed to be drowning in the flood of scholarly papers” (Lampart 1987, 13). Lampart’s observation about the university Women’s Studies group’s reluctance to be one of the focal points for the women’s movement in the country explains the importance of feminist collectives in spaces outside universities and political parties. Though they closely collaborated with Women and Development units at the University of the West Indies, especially after the formation of CAFRA, Jamaican feminists also organized themselves as the Association of Women’s Organizations of Jamaica (AWOJA) in 1988. Ross-Frankson’s article on the Caribbean Women’s Movement describes a regional meeting of CAFRA in Barbados to note that over 50 organizations were part of an umbrella body emerging out of the meeting (Ross-Frankson 1989a, 18).

CAFRA and DAWN, transnational organizations formed during the years the collective was most active, served as conduits of information for *Sistren*. In 1990, the DAWN Secretariat shifted to the WAND unit at UWI Barbados under the leadership of Peggy Antrobus. Appointed as Special Advisor on women by the Government of Jamaica in the 1970s, Antrobus, an early and consistent supporter of *Sistren*, was instrumental in founding the Bureau of Women’s Affairs in the

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JAMAICA
A HEALTHY CLIMATE FOR BUSINESS

FIGURE 3.3 Notice about withdrawal of a sexist advertisement by the Jamaica National Investment Promotion Bureau in *Sistren* magazine. Image courtesy of Joan Ross-Frankson, Joan French, and the Sistren Theatre Collective.

country. Many of her ideas on structural adjustment, its impact on women and development, and South-South women's organizing – including extracts from speeches, policy papers, and interviews – influenced the collective and find their way into the pages of the magazine. Antrobus in turn has acknowledged her enduring personal and official association with *Sistren* as a feminist model. Antrobus was also associated with CAFRA, *Sistren*'s source for a pan-Caribbean perspective on legal reform impacting women and children. CAFRA provided a

platform for Sistren's popular education efforts in the region and a forum for meetings and workshops leading up to the UN conference in Beijing in 1995.

The work of gender and sex

Bringing women's personal experiences into the public sphere, Sistren explored sexual and reproductive violence as central concerns in its life-narratives shaped into drama (Ford-Smith 1989). In later years, the collective moved to a theatre and research methodology based on broader socio-economic analysis. Sistren's gamut of concerns arising from and beyond life-narratives reimagined gender by having its female members play most male roles in the theatrical productions. The productions represented all-female communities connected through experiences of exploitative plantation practices leading to labor uprisings in the Anglophone Caribbean, the subject of Ford-Smith and French's collaborative research (*Ida Revolt inna Jonkonnu Stylee*), agricultural labor conditions of the Jamaican sugar workers (*The Case of Iris Armstrong*), Jamaican histories of rebellion (*Nana Yahi*), urban domestic and factory labor reflecting the group's documentation of women's egregious work situations (*Domestick, Downpression Get a Blow*), urban violence and gang warfare in members' communities (*Muffet Inna All Wi*), housing problems faced by Jamaicans including group members (*Buss Out*), experiences of motherhood and old age based on life-stories and actual conditions in hospitals and old age homes (*Bellywoman Bangarang, QPH*), and struggles to achieve maternity benefits (*Bandoolu Version*).

Exploring multiple connotations of "wuk" (work) as means of livelihood, politicization, and sexual acts, this segment of my analysis describes the ways in which the magazine presented the collective's efforts to transform gender norms and sexual roles as necessary *work* without labeling these efforts radical or feminist. I take this deep dive into the work of gender and sexuality aware that Sistren was not able to confront the question of LGBTQ+ identities or politics either consistently or overtly. Some members of the group were wary of the label feminist and did not want to risk being taken for "sodomites." Others explored relationships with women in their private lives without publicly acknowledging these relationships. Ironically, as the group took its theatre to various parts of the Caribbean, Europe, and North America, the members were sometimes labeled man-haters and sodomites.

The magazine adapted the theatre collective's autobiographical, research, educational, and performance-based content to produce innovative features and articles on gender roles and expectations. Despite her objections to feminist autobiography (Sistren's primary method of analysis), Sylvia Wynter's ideas are crucial to understanding Sistren's goals of decolonization through its drama, community workshops, and activist literature. As part of her attempt to keep race center stage in the analysis of the "human," Wynter struggles against feminists' primary attention to gender. Wynter's ideas dislodge the colonial view of "Man" understood as the white European male exercise of power over "natives." Here is a statement from her famous afterword to *Out of the Kumbia*, a collection of essays on Caribbean women's writing:

In effect, rather than only voicing the “native” woman’s hitherto silenced voice we shall ask: What is the systematic function of her own silencing both as women and, more totally, as “native” women? Of what mode of speech is that absence of speech both as women (masculinist women) and as “native” women (feminist discourse) as imperative function?

(Wynter 1990, 365)

Wynter’s query is similar to Gayatri Spivak’s famous question: “Can the subaltern speak?” (1988). In other words: how do privileged middle class interlocutors listen to native/subaltern women’s speech? In Southern nations such as Jamaica, India, and South Africa, subalternity is often a condition of structural disadvantage involving food and shelter concerns compounded by lack of education, employment, safe housing, healthcare, pervasive violence, and denial of access to cultural institutions. *Sistren*’s theatrical work was a mode of speech that enabled its members and audiences to listen to previously unheard voices and to develop strategies to combat subaltern silencing. The magazine continued this work. Ross-Frankson mentions that during her editorship she ensured the magazine closely replicated *Sistren*’s methods of testimony and collective creation. She worked with contributors of different levels of literacy and writing skills to make their writing publishable (Ross-Frankson 2020). This often led to a characteristic publication format involving transcribed interviews, conversations, opinions, and comments.

Many of the experiences communicated in theatre and through the magazine were about sexual violence. Reports and articles reveal that sexual abuse of children was (and remains) endemic and frequent. *Sistren*’s educational efforts against sexual violence included support of Teens in Action, a group formed after the rape and murder of a teenager in Seaview Gardens, West Kingston. Headed by the collective’s founding member and a Seaview resident, Rebecca Knowles, the group was led by children to combat sexual abuse. Over the years it conducted workshops, discussions, and plays on sexual education, communicated between parents and children, and addressed youth unemployment and gang violence.¹⁰ As in the case of WMW, emerging out of *Sistren*’s political work to address the pervasive sexual objectification of women, Teens in Action embodied cross-generational, cross-class, cross-issue, and cross-community efforts.

With rampant sexual violence in domestic and public contexts, one of *Sistren*’s major tasks was to demystify common “myths” about sexuality. Among the most pervasive was that women secretly enjoy pain during sexual encounters. Departing from its previous strategy of direct interviews, the myth was tested by surveying 20 men and 20 women. Over 50 percent of the respondents felt that “women were masochists, delighting in painful intercourse.” Men equated the ability to give women sexual satisfaction with not being “saaf” (soft) (Candace 1991, 21). As noted in responses to the survey:

Word on the streets, however, is that women “wanted it hard and stiff,” and that a man would be seen as “saaf” if he could not “handle de wuk” [A man would be seen as soft if he could not handle the work of sex].

(Candace 1991, 21)

Male indifference to the “work” of women’s sexual pleasure perpetuated blatant glorification of violence.

Since these beliefs were also propagated in popular culture, the magazine featured “Dancehall Culture” focusing on “slackness,” or the overt, often violent, sexuality propagated in dancehall music. Marva Brown, promoter and manager of dancehall artistes, explains slackness: “My fight is when a DJ say, ‘Hold down a gal and rape her because she love the rape.’ That is my slackness” (Smikle 1994, 17). Caribbean critics analyze “work/wuk,” in its sexual and material manifestations to indicate the proscription of female sexual pleasure in dancehall lyrics (Hope 2000; Saunders 2003). One argument about the “closely knit yet, seemingly, critically opposed discourses of economics and sexuality in Jamaican popular and national culture” examines Jamaican dancehall artist Buju Banton’s advocacy of death to gay men in his song “Boom bye bye” to examine new forms of sexual proscription in Jamaica (Saunders 2003, 97). Reading these lyrics’ description of oral sex as a degraded form of sex work “saaf/soft” men undertake to please women, the critic notes that many songs represent willingness to perform this kind of work as “a sure sign of man’s lack of ambition (as a social or sexual worker)” who is incapable of performing other more demanding kinds of sexual work that can better satisfy a woman (Saunders 2003, 107). There is almost no reference to female pleasure in these sexual practices. Acknowledging Caribbean feminist response to homophobic and misogynist violence in the lyrics, Natasha Barnes addresses the charge that “dancehall’s lyrical language harbors dangerous and hateful ideologies – paranoia about gay and lesbian sexual practices, distrust of women generally” (2006, 121) in contrast to Carolyn Cooper’s reading of dancehall as a site of submerged subaltern consciousness. Cooper writes away the homophobic and misogynist violence embedded in the lyrics and in dancehall at large in the name of the culture as “*reflecting not propagating violence*” (2004a, 25). These crucial connections between sexuality and violence (or violence as the primary means of expressing sexuality) target women and LGBTQ+ people in equally detrimental ways. Dancehall is a complicated, heterogenous space of expression, and its culture both reflects and propagates violence.

The contrast to such violence is an *imagined* egalitarianism in the magazine in which the exceptional is presented as the desired normative, and gender parity is connected to economic imperatives. Theatrical productions and the magazine exploded the “myth of domestic bliss” through the words of women whose partners refused to take a role in daily responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and bringing up the children, and who were often the sole earning members in their families (Ross-Frankson 1987, 3, 12). An editorial titled “Let’s Rope in the Men!” cites DAWN’s assessment of precarious socio-economic conditions in developing societies such as Jamaica to call for equal participation from men:

we are just going to have to demand better in this decade...we are going to have to rope in our brothers to help us do so. Our vision of the world is one in which all of us – man, woman, and pickney – have the same space in which to develop our full potential.

(*Sistren* 1990, 5)

By the early 1990s, following changes in leadership and editors Zadie Neufville and Shirley Campbell, the magazine changed its approach, moving from realistic to idealistic coverage by including short features on male allies in two regular columns titled “Acquainted” and “Can I Call you Sister.”

Presenting models of gender parity, the magazine demonstrated how inequality inhibited full development of men and women’s capacities. In rare cases when Jamaican men accepted equal distribution of childcare and housework responsibilities they were accused of sexual deviancy, clearly indicating that the organization of gender in the modern/colonial gender system is connected to “biological dimorphism” and “patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations” (Lugones 2007, 190). An article titled “Daddies that Do” addresses this by including opinions of men who share in parenting responsibilities. Lee Hall, parenting his two-year-old daughter, says that “no-one has ever called him a ‘Maama-Man’ but that it would not matter if they did” (*Sistren* 1989a, 15). In “Yes, Jamaican Men Can be Loving Parents,” based on research by a male family planning counsellor-educator, single parent, and staff member at the University Hospital, the writer attempts to delink non-traditional gender roles from insinuations of sexual perversity: “When a father has a daughter on his lap, do observers suspect he may be finding sexual gratification? If a father is openly warm and affectionate with his boy-child, will that encourage homosexuality” (*Sistren* 1989b, 14). Bev Hanson’s interview with Barry Chevannes describes how “Uncle Barry,” encourages men to be “nurturers” or at least “find ways to express the nurturing role in a more dynamic way” (*Sistren* 1995a, 10–12). Fathers Incorporated, a group initiated by UWI anthropologist Chevannes, was part of a series of interrogations of Black and Caribbean masculinity and more broadly the family. Sistren ally, Owen “Blacka” Ellis, speaks about his association with Fathers Incorporated to tell the interviewer that men in active parenting roles are labeled homosexuals: “You’ll find that the same group of men Sistren would call conscious men, other men call them mama man... some man because him don’t box down women is considered Mama Man” (*Sistren* 1993a, 34). Sistren’s male allies thus provided important (though exceptional) role models for a transformed masculinity that could accommodate nurturing roles for men, at least within heterosexual relationships.

For women, the tough economic situation often meant that they did not have the luxury of adhering to predefined gendered roles. Interviews indicated that most women were more than willing to accept work where they could find it, especially in professions dominated by men which usually brought in higher wages. A reevaluation of gender was already underway through increased women’s participation in non-traditional, “masculine” professions including construction, motor mechanics, engineering, computer technology, accounting, policing, parks and forest

management, horse training etc. And though the magazine reports and articles do not indicate that women in these professions were labeled sexually deviant (unlike men involved in housework and childcare responsibilities), many faced hostility, aggression, and vicious competitiveness from male colleagues.

Over the years of its existence the collective analyzed the gendering of work under accelerated globalization that, on the one hand, continued exploitation of women in traditional occupations such as farming and domestic help, and on the other, led to new occupations for them in free zones or data processing. Spending time with sugar workers in rural Jamaica and listening to their stories led Sistren to develop their play *The Case of Iris Armstrong*, an acclaimed documentary *Sweet Sugar Rage*, and studies on the lives of female sugar workers. Sistren's efforts to demystify formal and informal work involved conversations in which women described physical and mental costs of repetitive labor. While the history of enslavement in Jamaica had broken down traditional sexual divisions of labor, the prevalence of sexual violence under slavery and its continuation into the twentieth century meant that labor practices were characterized on a sliding scale of respectability along class and color hierarchies. Middle class (often light skinned) women invested in homemaking or "respectable" professions such as teaching, banking, medicine, and accounting were, with rare exceptions, oblivious to blue collar work conditions. Like the sugar workers, free zone employees, factory workers, and domestic help faced slave-like labor conditions. These industries gendered female workers as docile, manageable, nimble, industrious, exploitable employees on lower wages than would be paid to men in similar conditions. Sistren was at the forefront of calls for a thorough and impartial Jamaican and pan-Caribbean governmental review of women's work in traditional and new occupations.

Steady employment and housing are crucial to the analysis of the *work of gender*. It is in this context that the group collaborated with and the magazine reported (for well over a decade) on the activities of the Women's Construction Cooperative (WCC), an organization employing women in a historically male-dominated industry. WCC was part of the Women's Housing Group set up by Sistren and the Canadian University Students Overseas (CUSO) in 1987 to provide women with employment in times of work scarcity. A feature article emphasized training opportunities, clarifying anyone could acquire those skills, and reiterating, "construction skills carry a higher wage level than working in the Free Zone or doing domestic work" (Sistren 1989c, 14). WCC jobs were especially valuable since housing was a major developmental concern in rapidly urbanizing Jamaica. When the demand for construction dropped, the collective initiated a repair and maintenance business strengthening non-engineered houses to withstand hurricanes. While the magazine advanced a critique of gendered division of occupations, its reports also placed WCC's training and capacity development in a cross-generational "nurturing" mode: the image of a woman worker at a construction site is juxtaposed with that of a little girl mixing cement and water to make a doll's house. The WCC women, states the reporter, have set a "fine example" for "the children of flood-stricken Clarendon, especially the little girls" (Sistren 1986/1987, 11). Like Sistren, the WCC ran training

and development programs for women within and outside Jamaica and established a support group for women to discuss common goals, problems, and solutions for members (Rogers & Thomson 1993, 16–17). Sistren and WCC’s trajectories illustrate the successes and struggles of all-women collectives engaged in important work to transform accepted gender roles in the public sphere.

Caribbean social scientists have analyzed the segregation of public versus private in terms of gender, class, and respectability (Brodber 1975; Chevannes 2001). Tracing the segregation of people and public space in Kingston, Charles Carnegies points to how the “inside” and the “outside” as “metaphoric spatial opposition provides Jamaicans a condensed, shorthand way of expressing hegemonic class distinctions.” Within this schema those “born outside, living outside, and working outside bear the dishonour of – but also serve to produce – lower class status.” There are lasting social implications of this spatial opposition:

Children born to unmarried parents, and children fathered by men of higher status with working class women, were stigmatized as “outside” children as opposed to “inside” children who were born under the legal and socially valued canopy of marriage. Likewise, manual and menial labour – work done (though not exclusively) outdoors – has been devalued; as opposed to the more highly regarded white collar work performed for the most part indoors. (Carnegie 2014, 72)

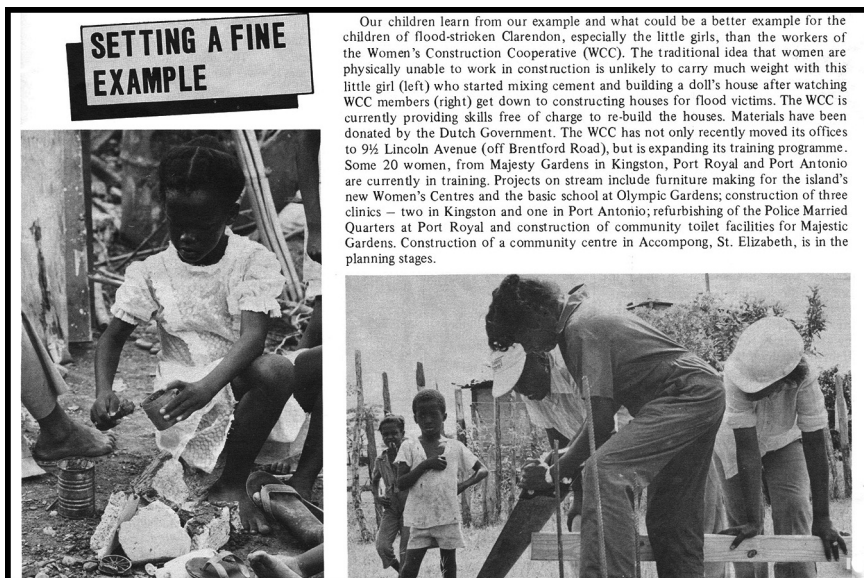


FIGURE 3.4 Report on women workers in the Women's Construction Cooperative in *Sistren* magazine. Image courtesy of Joan Ross-Frankson, Joan French, and the Sistren Theatre Collective.

Sistren disrupted these dichotomies by presenting men in care work and women in formal work to rethink gender largely in the context of waged labor, female-headed, or quasi-family cisgender structures. A fuller account demands consideration of those outside traditional waged economies, normative gender, and heterosexuality.

Sistren's research on informal commercial traders, higglers, and market women offered an evaluation of informal work. Ross-Frankson's multi-part, award-winning feature series, "Women on the Streets" interviewed prostitutes, beggars, and higglers to focus on the economic, gendered, and sexualized violence they faced. The features invite readers to rethink an easy opposition between the "yard" as the primary unit of socialization of girls and the "street" for boys that Caribbean anthropologists established in their research. The first article in the series describes the "sporting life" of two streetwalkers denied educational opportunities in childhood and financial support from men who fathered their children. Sharon, the younger of the two women, talks to the interviewer about her daily clientele: "Women check mi to. Sometimes a man and a woman will check mi and we mek love together [Women check me out as well. Sometimes a man and a woman will check me out and we make love together]" (Ross-Frankson 1985, 3). Tentatively mentioning non-heterosexual and non-monogamous desire, the article presents sex as a means of survival eschewing a discussion on morality or sexual choice: "I drive them to their block. They greet the other girls. Business is slow. Marcia looks desperately up and down the empty street. Sharon laughs and tells me the other girls think I am a client" (Ross-Frankson 1985, 12). The second article reiterates structural connections between economic, social, and sexual vulnerability. Isolyn, who begs for a living in downtown Kingston, has been brought to this condition not by a man but "a system which so easily discards those who cannot manage the race, in the name of 'budgetary constraints,' 'structural adjustment,' and 'lowering the deficit'" (Ross-Frankson 1986, 3). The articles asserted the dignity and humanity of women surviving outside waged and heterosexual marital economies.¹¹

Introducing discussion on gender, sexuality and citizenship in the Caribbean, Faith Smith observes that feminists' engagement with nationalism, popular culture, reproductive and waged labor, and domestic violence in the region laid the groundwork for recent scholarship on sexuality, but that "regional feminist agendas have largely omitted nonheteronormative sexuality" (2011, 9). Addressing the analysis of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean, another scholar writes: "Caribbean counter-publics in many shapes and forms continue to work on the body, work with the body, and work the body as conduit to a collective project of liberation" (Sheller 2012, 260). There are obvious risks in the "study of 'hidden' populations such as sex workers and those engaged in same-sex relations" including gaining access, recognizing power differentials, and trust between the researcher and the subjects of her study (Lazarus 2013, 1). Despite these risks, *Sistren* led the way in representing sexual precarity as inextricably connected to social and economic policies through its performances and the magazine. These policies, the collective maintained, were responsible for criminalization of destitute women earning a desperate living through prostitution and begging. This analysis of work thus moved towards an interrogation of sexuality

without directly invoking sexual object choice or sexual identity politics despite the clearly non-judgmental editorial perspective.

Though we cannot look to Sistren as a point of origin or continuation of the LGBTQ+ activism already underway in Jamaica by this time, the group's trajectory marks an important moment of ambivalence around the work of gender and sexuality in a deeply homophobic society. On the one hand, the group performed with lesbian groups at places like Sisterfire in the United States, had deep connections with Sister Vision, the Black and Women of Color Press in Toronto run by Stephanie Martin and the Jamaican lesbian Makeda Silvera, and some members were in queer relationships. On the other, rampant social and sexual violence meant that there were no spaces for these discussions unlike those available for discussing race and class differences. Some Jamaicans were already aware of these concerns, seeing the group's work and publications as important interpretations of gender and sexuality while making their own connections between women's, lesbian, and gay rights.

Routes to rights

Emphasizing differences between the women's and gay and lesbian movements in North America, Gayle Rubin famously stated that feminism is a theory of gender oppression but that the domain of sexuality demands another mode of theorizing. In Jamaica at a time when there was no scope for public gay and lesbian mobilization (despite the existence of underground gay and lesbian social spaces), Sistren and the larger women's movement forwarded a theory and praxis of gender and sexuality premised on reevaluating work, sexual violence, and reproductive autonomy. During these years transnational feminist advocacy was changing the direction of these worldings. Rejecting neocolonial, imperialist ideas by asserting a feminist politics relevant to the global South, organizations like CAFRA and DAWN were shaping a conversation where postcolonial concerns were front and center. Because LGBTQ+ sexualities still occupied an uncertain place within these conversations, and because its members were reluctant to address the matter, Sistren was not able to analyze the connections. Responding to rampant sexual violence against women and children, the group steered clear of controversies around sexual choice for fear of potential violence, but also because its existence was precarious in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980 death threats and threats of shooting at the theatre led to the cancellation of a performance. In 1981 the group was kicked out of the Edna Manley College following a political regime change in Jamaica. In 1982 members were attacked twice in performance. In the later 1980s and 1990s the group faced a precarious future as its funders were interested in bread and butter "development" concerns, rather than supporting the group's cultural platform which provided some scope for analysis of sexuality through its theatre work. The account I have offered claims that the contours of a feminist-queer analysis emerged not *because* of the group's conscious efforts but *despite* its scrupulous efforts to avoid any discussion of it.

During the early years of its activities *Sistren* collaborated with the Jamaica Council for Human Rights (JCHR), a civil society organization with a broad rights platform. *Sistren*'s attention to the conditions of women inmates in correctional and mental health centers connected its work to the JCHR's mandate as a watchdog organization advocating constitutional and legislative reform. The magazine provides a glimpse of this work in its articles on prisons, asylums, shelters, and hospitals, critiques of inadequate facilities, rampant sexual abuse, and, in some cases, state enforced reproductive violence (through contraception injections and abortions for victims of rape) experienced by female inmates at these institutions. JCHR's success in releasing illegally detained citizens and providing legal assistance to those charged with crimes made it an important ally in *Sistren*'s feminist justice work (Eekhoff 1991, 22). *Sistren* interviewed Florizelle O'Connor, head of JCHR, to inform its readers about the organization's interventions in cases of illegal detention and police brutality. *Sistren* was among the organizations JCHR contacted to seek help in publicizing police atrocities including illegal detention, torture, and assault. O'Connor wrote to delegates at a Jamaican conference on Violence Against Women (1991) asking for support on a heinous case of police brutality in which a constable brutally attacked a young woman, Pauline Mullings. Mullings, who was pregnant at the time of the attack, subsequently miscarried the twins she was expecting and faced repeated police threats after filing a case with JCHR. The magazine reprinted O'Connor's letter and an article describing legal recourses to victims of police violence (O'Connor 1991; *Sistren* 1991b).

Besides its collaboration with civil society organizations such as JCHR and WMW, another of *Sistren*'s routes to rights was a focus on discriminatory legislation impacting women. The Jamaican Offenses Against Persons Act criminalizes abortion leading many in the country to seek illegal and medically unsupervised procedures to end pregnancies. An editorial by Ross-Frankson unequivocally states that women have a right to their bodies: "The decision to have sex goes hand in hand with deciding whether we want to have a child at this time, with this particular man" (1989b, 5). While discussing systemic problems leading to high infant mortality and post-natal depression at the Victoria Jubilee Hospital in Kingston, another article mentions reproductive choice through an anecdote. Learning about babies abandoned at the hospital, the author recounts how

Marlon's teenage mother had him early one afternoon and by 6 o'clock that evening, she had disappeared. For this young woman, who can hardly have begun to know herself, growing Marlon was a task she simply could not cope with.

(Ross-Frankson 1989c, 11)

Similarly, "Say No to Norplant" describes the adverse effects of unsupervised contraceptive implants offered to Jamaican women. Pointing to their side effects, the author observes that some symptoms "may lead some users to think they are pregnant and seek illegal abortion – further endangering their health"

(*Sistren* 1993b, 33). Connecting the right to abortion to women's mental and physical health helped deflect possible backlash from magazine readers and/or the governmental machinery.

Sistren's new editor Zadie Neufville retained the format and focus of the magazine Ross-Frankson had formalized as outgoing editor. A focus on "Women, Sexuality, and Health" (*Sistren* 1991e) under Neufville's editorship indirectly addressed sexual choices. The same number calls for legislative change on rape and other forms of sexual violence, advocates sex education to prevent teenage pregnancy and STDs including HIV/AIDS, and foregrounds women's views on their sexuality.¹² It initiated a tentative conversation on non-normative sexualities by including an article on intimate relationships that is ambiguous about whether the relationships were gay or straight (*Sistren* 1991c, 17) and an extract from Audre Lorde's "biomythography" *Zami* describing the autobiographical narrator's lesbian sexual encounter (Lorde 1991, 17). Here a conversation about women's sexuality dispelled misconceptions about women enjoying pain during sex. Those interviewed for an article titled "Woman on Being Women" talk about how they suppress their sexuality for fear of being called "whores" (*Sistren* 1991d, 38). Some years later a story about a violent man-hating "lesbian," a "pseudo boy" who desires a "real boy to love her" appeared in the magazine (Robinson 1995, 13). Reinforcing stereotypes of male homosexuality as weakness and female homosexuality as unwarranted aggression, the story is out of place amid other nuanced accounts of sexualized violence.¹³ The magazine issued an apology when readers wrote to express their objections to the piece. From the early 1990s the magazine blunderingly introduced sexual identity and desire, though it was unable to advance the conversation. There were no groups led by women openly dealing with LGBT issues at the time. *Sistren* members demonstrated in their practice their consciousness about non-discrimination and rights of women, gay, and lesbian people, never openly addressing the matter. Non-discrimination was so intrinsic to *Sistren's* activities that when there was departure from it in the article stereotyping lesbianism there was a public outcry. This response brought into the limelight the collective's character and stance on the subject and testified to an already existing feminist counterpublic (in part shaped by the magazine's readership) which would not easily accept homophobia.

Related to this is the collective and the magazine's vital but irregular discussion on HIV/AIDS. During the 1990s, following an increase in AIDS-related deaths in the Caribbean in general, and in Jamaica in particular, the women's movement connected sexuality and health, like the incipient health education program of the Gay Freedom Movement. Amid alarming statistics around transmission, the magazine briefly mentions sexual orientation to dispel the perception that AIDS is a gay or "battymen" disease and to spell out the risks faced by women and their (unborn) children. "HIV/AIDS Infections on the Increase" lists unprotected heterosexual contact as the primary source of the infection by providing statistics and recommendations for men and women to prevent transmission (*Sistren* 1991e, 29). The Health Update section publicly commended the first woman in Jamaica to openly admit she had the disease. The column later carried a positive review of "Vibes in a World of Sexuality," a play by

members of the Little People and Teen Players to educate people about the pandemic (*Sistren* 1993c, 25). Though infrequent, the health section and cultural commentary directed some public attention to HIV/AIDS. Paulette Williams' *Sistren* article mentions an increasing number of babies born with the virus who rarely live beyond a few years. The obvious solution to prevent HIV transmission through contraception and legalized abortion is not presented as an option in this or subsequent articles on AIDS (1990, 26).

Several Caribbean nations have debated feminist demands for legalizing abortion over the past half century. A report on the gender development indicators for Jamaica states: "All men and women regardless of creed or race, should have access to the law for redress even from culturally differentiated gender practices" including women's access to "contraceptives and...the freedom to control childbearing if they decide to do so," and men's right to "share in the care, support, and upbringing of their offspring" (Mohammed 2000, 7–8). The 2011 amendments to the Jamaican Constitution include a Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms offering similar gender-based protections as in the report but exclude sexual and reproductive choice as the basis of such protections. As the trajectory of the magazine demonstrates, women's alternative media in Jamaica historically addressed "culturally differentiated gender practices" in somewhat unequal terms; while the right to reproductive choice has been clearly expressed, the right to sexual choice has not been articulated forcefully or clearly. The influence of various denominations of Christianity in Jamaica

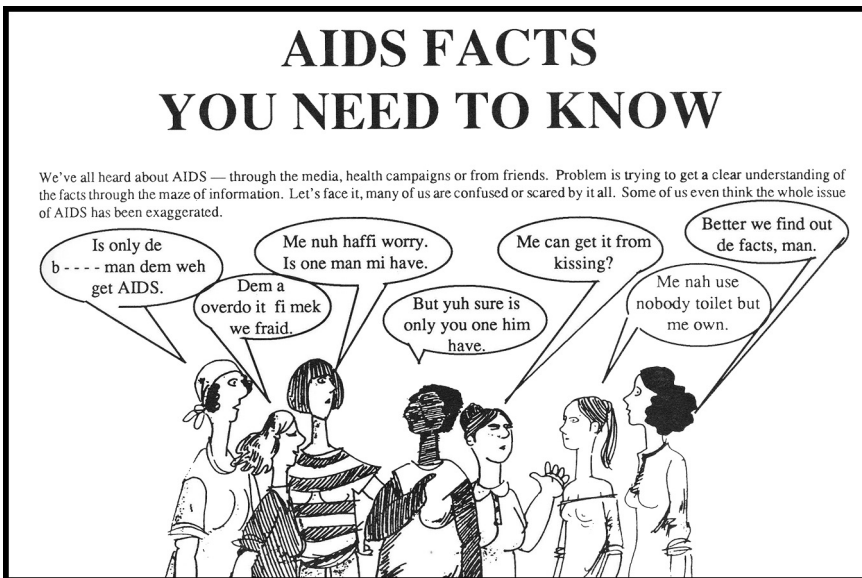


FIGURE 3.5 Section of a graphic dispelling common misunderstandings of AIDS in *Sistren* magazine. Image courtesy of Joan Ross-Frankson, Joan French, and the *Sistren* Theatre Collective.

and the reluctance of postcolonial governments to upset certain sections of the electorate makes it hard to claim either of these rights.

Changes in Jamaican laws to decriminalize homosexuality and abortion are still at the stage of futures to come. Collectives such as Sistren, even with their ambivalence on and inability to address LGBTQ+ rights, helped develop a vocabulary of rights and routes to sexual health, sexual choice, and reproductive autonomy in collaboration with other civil society groups. These can be the basis of feminist-queer solidarities.

Legislative desires

Caribbean feminist-queer solidarities are “*imagined lives*” or “the futures feminism can contribute to bring into being” (Robinson 2011, 206). In positing “imagined lives” as feminist methodology, Tracy Robinson claims that “the vibrant intellectual tradition of family studies in the Caribbean has rarely even hinted that *all intimacy and family life might not be heterosexed*” (2011, 210, emphasis added). Sistren sought to discuss gender and sexuality towards imagined “futures” in several ways: representing women’s work in “masculine” domains; emphasizing male feminist affiliations; and presenting exceptional instances of transformed parenting roles and sexual relations. Sistren’s theatre work and the magazine indicate that not all intimacy and family life is heterosexual. However, such is the inextricable hold of the coloniality of power over postcolonial gender norms and sexual relations – “the modern/colonial gender system” – that although it expressed a well-developed critique of violent heterosexuality, heteronormative social formations were not questioned (Lugones 2007, 189). Nor was it safe to initiate such questioning in the politically charged environment of intra-party and gang violence during the years when Sistren’s performances about masculinized violence and feminist media interventions had already made the group susceptible to charges of lesbianism.

In my conversations with Jamaican scholars and activists I learned that there is a common understanding of human rights as LGBTQ+ rights, making it hard for feminists to articulate rights claims without being accused of sexual “deviancy.” Since the 1980s feminist counterpublics such as Sistren and WMW have sought to shape public opinion to effect legal change. Though much of the activist literature referenced in this chapter including the magazine has ceased publication, and an explosion of digital content means that monitoring/countering media for its misogynist and homophobic representations is not an easy task, other counterpublic articulations (in theatre, music, dance, art, marches, protests, demonstrations) remain as crucial now as in the last decades of the previous century. Never calling on the Jamaican state to decriminalize homosexuality, Sistren made a strong case for the revaluation of gender and sexual roles and legalization of abortion, currently illegal under sections 72 and 73 of the Jamaica Offences Against the Person Act, the same act used to persecute homosexuals under sections 76, 77, 78, and 79.¹⁴

Sistren and the Hannahtown community women’s landmark performance *Slice of Reality* before the Jamaican parliament in 2009 to replace the Offences Against the Persons Act with a Termination of Pregnancy Act yielded no result, a case of what

Maxwell calls “Aborted Reform” (2012). This pioneering attempt echoes failed efforts of gay and lesbian activists to have relevant sections of the same act repealed through a parliamentary petition in 2001. *Jamaican Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education* emphasize that “People have the right to make personal decisions concerning sexuality and reproductive health matters” even though “abortion is illegal in Jamaica” and “there are laws in Jamaica that restrict some types of sexual behavior” (The Jamaica Task Force Committee for Comprehensive Sexuality Education 2008, 63). The National Policy for Gender Equality (NPGE) by the Bureau of Women’s Affairs released by the Jamaican government parenthetically inserted “Gender” in its nomenclature as a promise to mainstream gender concerns largely based on the language of the CEDAW. The policy deliberately deploys the rhetoric of indirection that *Sistren* magazine used in the 1980s and 1990s: “The intention is to bring gender neutrality to the laws, regarding legal protection from sexual violence and exploitation, and to remove from the law the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and discrimination” (Bureau of Women’s Affairs 2010, 14). It does not mention repealing anti-abortion and buggery laws.

In a typical postcolonial trajectory, social movements often (though not always) stake their rights claims through national frameworks and then seek transnational solidarities to “world” these claims. As indicated in *Sistren*’s transnational affiliations with Caribbean and global South collectives CAFRA and DAWN, these claims can garner crucial support that may spur national bureaucracies into action. Unfortunately, this has not yet happened in Jamaica. The women’s rights framework adopted by Jamaican civil society has operated within the 1984 CEDAW parameters signed by the Jamaican government, though the government has not opted to follow the optional protocol allowing a person or a group to appeal to the CEDAW at the UN if they feel their rights are not being protected at the national level. Since international appeal is foreclosed as an option, existing civil society coalitions working to advance a feminist-queer politics based on the broad strokes, ambivalent, and yes, sometimes blundering connections outlined in *Sistren* – health, safety, work, pleasure, and freedom – offer the best hope for imagined futures.

It seems appropriate to conclude this analysis with an account of the Tambourine Army, a feminist-queer group which protests sexual violence, celebrates survivors, and acknowledges *Sistren*’s pioneering work in creating solidarities. A recent piece connects members of the Army to “counterideological groups such as gay rights and women’s rights movements that function in direct contestation to the patriarchal and homophobic norms of heteropatriarchal recolonization” and states, “women’s background in queer organizing is salient for their feminist vision, since members were already embroiled in struggles against gender violence as it is inflected by lesbophobia, transphobia, and homophobia.” (Roper & Wint 2020, 40). In 2017 members of the Tambourine Army protested at the Nazareth Moravian Church against a pastor’s assault of a teenage girl.¹⁵ Joan French mentioned in a personal communication that “old guard” feminists who had been connected to *Sistren* in its hey-day – Jennifer Jones, Opal Palmer Adisa, Judy Wedderburn, Stephanie Martin, and herself – marched with the Tambourine Army on 11 March 2017, against the reservations of

other sections of the old guard women's movement. French believes that clarity on the connections between feminist and queer struggles, especially on human rights concerns, is one of the lasting legacies of Sistren in Jamaica (2020). Bringing together feminist and queer activists, the Army marches onwards and ahead to world sexualities in inherently just ways, demolishing stigma, abuse, and violence in its path, and demanding concrete legislative reform as a future destination so that Jamaica is no longer a "problem" space in feminist and queer histories.

The next chapter moves my analysis of postcolonial sexualities to another context, charting feminist-lesbian convergence and divergence in the Indian women's journal *Manushi* from the 1980s to the late 1990s.

Notes

- 1 The title of this chapter invokes *Rights a di Plan, wid CEDAW in wi han'*: CEDAW for Jamaicans, an informative booklet brought out by the Women's Resource and Outreach Center (WROC) and the United Nations Development fund for Women (UNIFEM) (2008).
- 2 This view is contrary to Karina Smith's opinion that "Sistren is unequivocally aligned with the Manley government, presumably because the group's initial funding came from government agencies" (2008, 236).
- 3 Since 2015, Joan French, formerly of Sistren, has been engaged in a voluntary collaborative initiative involving Sistren members, *Sistren* editors, and researchers, to preserve documents of the Caribbean feminist movement from the 1970s to the 1990s. I collected Sistren materials from 2008–2015 and shared some of these with French. Thanks to her time and labor-intensive efforts, three near-complete sets of WAND, CAFRA, and *Sistren* magazines have been digitally archived. These are available in the Making of Caribbean Feminisms WI Special Collection at the Alma Jordan Library of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. *Sistren* magazine can be accessed at: <http://uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/handle/2139/45158>
- 4 Other important publications included the Jamaica-based Women's Media Watch (WMW) newsletter, and those of the global South collective DAWN.
- 5 Mapping research on Caribbean sexuality, Kamala Kempadoo mentions that the way sexuality has been expressed or practiced in the region can be gleaned from "grey documents that include some mention of sexual praxis (reports, conference papers, theses and policy briefings) and the growing number of more accessible documents (published journal articles, electronic articles, chapters in books, media reports, and books)" (2009, 2).
- 6 My thanks to Honor Ford-Smith for this point and for her suggestion on clarity on internal differences within the group on LGBTQ+ rights; I am grateful for her insights on the reasons why Sistren could not advance a larger conversation on gender and sexuality in Jamaica.
- 7 This body of scholarship includes Carolyn Cooper's review of *Lionheart Gal* (1989), articles on Sistren's theatrical productions by Sharon Green (2004), Afreen Akhter (2008), Karina Smith (2008, 2013), and a chapter in my book-length study *Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama* (Batra 2010).
- 8 Ford-Smith's three-part series was serialized over 1993–1994 (1993a, 1993b, 1994).
- 9 Grateful thanks to Joan French for emphasizing this point in a personal communication. French notes that such was the force of Sistren's interventions that even entities such as the Workers' Party of Jamaica issued a "rule" condemning sexual violence under pressure from its women's arm, the Committee of Women for Progress. French was among the women in Sistren associated with the WPJ.
- 10 These include articles by Imani Tafari Ama (1987, 1989) and Honor Ford-Smith (1991).

- 11 Sistren's play *QPH* represents women who were abandoned by their families, and spent their lives as domestic help, prostitutes, and beggars. Facing poverty and destitution in their old age, they live in a state supported almshouse. The play is based upon an incident when 144 inmates died in a fire at the Eventide Home for the Aged in Slipe Pen, Kingston in 1980.
- 12 Michelle Cave and Joan French's article "Sexual Choice as a Human Rights Issue," for the CAFRA newsletter discusses sexuality in the context of freedom of choice and freedom from violence, taking the Caribbean women's movement to task for failing to address the issue (1995, 17–19). The article is based on a paper first presented by French at a conference on "Critical Perspectives on Human Rights in the Caribbean" in Trinidad and Tobago in January 1995. The Conference was sponsored by CAFRA and the Caribbean Human Rights Network.
- 13 Staceyann Chin's autobiographical persona is that of an angry lesbian growing up poor, parentless, and sexually vulnerable in Jamaica (2000). Chin connects her sexual orientation to the vexed question of reproduction by pointing to the lack of sexual education and reproductive choices in Jamaica. Chin carries forward Patricia Powell's discussion of rape, abuse, and pregnancy of a cross-dressing Chinese-Jamaica protagonist, who bears her captor a child in secret in the novel *Pagoda* (1998).
- 14 Here are the relevant sections of the Act:

Article 72: "Every woman, being with child, who with intent to procure her own miscarriage, shall unlawfully administer to herself any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent; and whosoever, with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall unlawfully administer to her, or cause to be taken by her, any poison or other noxious thing, or shall unlawfully use any instrument or other means whatsoever with the like intent, shall be guilty of felony, and, being convicted thereof, shall be liable to be imprisoned for life, with or without hard labour."

Article 73: "Whosoever shall unlawfully supply or procure any poison or other noxious thing, or any instrument or thing whatsoever, knowing that the same is intended to be unlawfully used or employed with intent to procure the miscarriage of any woman, whether she be or be not with child, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and, being convicted thereof, shall be liable to be imprisoned for a term not exceeding three years, with or without hard labour."

Article 76 (Unnatural Crime): "Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery [anal intercourse] committed either with mankind or with any animal, shall be liable to be imprisoned and kept to hard labour for a term not exceeding ten years."

Article 77 (Attempt): "Whosoever shall attempt to commit the said abominable crime, or shall be guilty of any assault with intent to commit the same, or of any indecent assault upon any male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable to be imprisoned for a term not exceeding seven years, with or without hard labour."

Article 78 (Proof of Carnal Knowledge): "Whenever upon the trial of any offence punishable under this Act, it may be necessary to prove carnal knowledge, it shall not be necessary to prove the actual emission of seed in order to constitute a carnal knowledge, but the carnal knowledge shall be deemed complete upon proof of penetration only."

Article 79 (Outrages on Decency): "Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for a term not exceeding 2 years, with or without hard labour."

- 15 The actions of the group received some notoriety when an "army" founder, Latoya Nugent (also a member of J-FLAG member and founder of WE-CHANGE), hit the leader of the church on the head with a tambourine for having abused her partner as a child (Lewis 2017). See also the Army's Facebook page for recent actions: www.facebook.com/tambourinearmy/