



Trafficking Jam

A Caribbean researcher struggles to continue crucial feminist studies

WHEN RESEARCHERS IN Trinidad and Tobago began studying the local sex industry, they stumbled on an unlikely source: secondary schools.

“An older woman would go into the schools posing as an aunt, saying she had to take the child out,” explains Tara Ramoutar, national representative for the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA). The girls were taken to houses to meet with male clientele, then put back in school uniforms to head home.

From its inception in Barbados in April 1985, CAFRA (www.cafra.org) has been promoting and supporting feminist research and activism across the Caribbean. Tracing its roots to women’s resistance during African-Caribbean enslavement and the bonded labor of East Indians and others, CAFRA began as a regional network of organizations, activists and individual researchers who define feminist politics as “a matter of both consciousness and actions.”

Now, however, CAFRA Regional has had to scale down its work due to financial constraints, and does not currently run programs in Trinidad

and Tobago. Research initiatives have been largely halted, and that has left feminist activist scholars with more questions than answers. Sex tourism is on the rise in the Caribbean region, for example, but the extent is unknown. Ramoutar doesn’t even know if the school sex ring was ever broken up, because a follow-up study, funded by the United Nations Development Programme, was never done.

Nonetheless, Ramoutar carries on, even without other support. She notes that women are trafficked to Trinidad from Surinam, Guyana, Colombia and other Spanish-speaking countries, in various disguises. Some arrive with work permits or on vacation, then are taken to work in clubs as prostitutes in the central and southeastern parts of the country. Many are single mothers told they can make a lot of money in a weekend or over a few months. “Men in high places operate in the trade and go to these clubs,” says Ramoutar, thus making it more difficult to expose and close them.

Another concern in Trinidad and Tobago is the high number of missing persons. Ramoutar says that over 500 women, men and children were

reported missing last year, and speculates that some of the missing women are trafficked to other countries to be prostituted or forced into sweatshop labor.

But not all is without hope. More Trinbagonian women are seeking positions of power and leadership, and Ramoutar claims the nation has the highest number of women in government in the Caribbean. Still, many are new to politics and will “toe the political line of their party,” she fears. “They are inexperienced, and not all are gender-sensitive.” She adds that both men and women in government need gender training in order to make real progress on women’s rights, although she sees a positive generational shift in women’s attitudes.

“Younger women are much more vocal and positive, more conscious and aware. They are speaking out; they want to control their lives, bodies, sexualities,” she says. And although domestic violence has long been an issue of concern for CAFRA, Ramoutar says younger women are asserting, “Stop, I am not taking any more of the licks.”

—KATHERINE JAMIESON

▲ Tara Ramoutar (right) carries on her research even without funding.