Introduction

International Women’s Day, now in its 100th year of celebration, has always held great significance for the working women of the world, and this year is a special one on their yearly calendar as well as their socio-political almanac. Women, the world over, are planning various activities to celebrate their achievements and to honour all those women past and present, who made such achievements possible. According to the United Nations, it is a time for women “to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of their countries and communities”1.

On the observance of a ‘women’s day’, the General Assembly indicates that for the United Nations, this observance takes place for two reasons:

1. to recognize the fact that securing peace and social progress and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms require the active participation, equality and development of women; and to acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security. For the women of the world, the Day's symbolism has a wider meaning: it is an occasion to review how far they have come in their struggle for equality, peace and development. It is also an opportunity to unite, network and mobilize for meaningful change2.

While this may be so, we need to ask ourselves the question: why after 100 years are women still struggling for ‘equality, justice and peace’? We could simply say that it is because the roots of International Women’s Day are to found in capitalism and its context in socialism, two diametrically opposed systems of social existence. For International Women’s Day was born from the womb of capitalism into the cradle of socialism.

The Genesis of International Women’s Day

International Women’s Day (IWD) with its political and human rights theme was first declared in 1910, and the first event to mark the occasion was held in 1911 when over one million women were united in their fight for women’s right to vote, to work and to end discrimination through rallies in Germany, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland where Marxism and social democracy held political prominence. Originally called the International Working Women’s Day and first celebrated on March 19, IWD continues to be a celebration by all women, regardless of class, colour, race, culture, station in life, ideological predisposition and political hue, in recognition of the social, economic and political gains women have made locally or nationally, regionally and even internationally, in their quest for ‘women’s rights’ to protect themselves from social injury and social insult. What is significant about International Women’s Day, is that this ‘women’s
day’ was introduced by the Socialist Party of America as a socialist political event, and first celebrated in Germany where the Marxist Social Democratic Party was to become Germany’s largest political party in the Reichstag (legislature of the German state under the Second and Third Reich, the former German state) after the 1912 elections. In fact, it was the German Marxist revolutionary, Clara Zetkin who, in 1910, proposed to the International Socialist Women’s Conference that March 8 be set aside for women’s struggle against exploitation and marginalisation. A staunch supporter of the rights of all women, particularly working class women, Zetkin argued that working women, like their male counterparts, experienced the cruelty of long working hours and extremely low wages and that since the fundamental interests of working women were identical to those of working men, it was patently clear that liberation for working class women could come through an alliance with working men under the banner of socialism. In this international socio-political matrix, socialism was meant to be the harbinger for social justice broadly and justice for women in particular. Little wonder, then, that the process of providing every person, whether man or woman, with the same opportunity to fulfill himself or herself began in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe where it was felt that depriving women of rights was not biologically determined but was rooted in the exploitative relations which characterised a society structured along the lines of social and economic discrimination and based on the private ownership of property, industry and enterprise. Therefore, in what was called the ‘Socialist bloc’, IWD gained both national observance, being an official holiday in some 28 countries, and national prominence when women’s rights were enshrined in many constitutions of the East. For example, Article 35 of the Constitution of the Soviet Union reads:

Women and men have equal rights in the USSR. Exercise of these rights is ensured by according women equal access with men to education and vocational and professional training, equal opportunities in employment, remuneration, and promotion and in social and political and cultural activity and by special labour and health protection measures for women; by providing conditions enabling mothers to work; by legal protection, and material and moral support for mothers and children, including paid leaves and other benefits for expectant mothers, and gradual reduction of working time for mothers with small children.

In the German Democratic Republic, the “equal status of women was unambiguously stipulated in the country’s Constitution: “their right to work, equal pay for equal work, the right to the same education, the right to holidays and recreation, and their right to equal participation in social life”. In China, Chairman Mao claimed that women hold up half of the sky and in Cuba, Vietnam and elsewhere in the ‘socialist world’ women’s rights followed the pattern established under the rubric of socialism where it was deemed necessary to clarify the position of women in the society, the home and the entire population through relevant laws, policies and measures implemented to ensure the socio-economic and political comfort of all women.

In the West, where social, economic and political systems are organised along the lines of capitalist relations of production, exchange and distribution with their attendant culture, morals, laws and social and political infrastructure, the situation was different. Women’s historical struggles brought little change for women: for example in the United States of America, the struggle for the right to vote for white women was protracted and black women got the right to vote only in the 1960s. Women, in the imagination of the male superstructure, were deficient of
mind (as were black people) and were, therefore, unable to grasp the complexities of political life. In fact, IWD was first celebrated in the West, as a popular event, in the 1970s as a result of the strength of both local and international women’s movement, and based on the example of the ‘Socialist bloc’ which provided a kind of blueprint for women’s inclusion in the economic and political matters: e.g. the right to work, the right to leisure and recreation and so. Women in the West therefore, confronted their respective state to demand that women’s voices be heard, their material and social condition be addressed and their demands met. Specifically, IWD was first celebrated in the West in 1977 only after the General Assembly of the United Nations, taking its cue from the ‘Socialist bloc’, declared March 8 as the UN Day for Women’s Rights and International Peace.

This was the context within which IWD was first celebrated here in Jamaica in the 1970s, a period of ‘national liberation’, when some women’s groups led the way. This period of national liberation which saw the democratic socialist programme of development, introduced by the PNP administration led by former prime minister and trade unionist, Michael Manley, provided the context, for the first time in the country’s history, for addressing directly the concerns of women and children, on the agitation of local women’s groups which, themselves, had embraced ideas of social change. The Committee of Women for Progress and the PNP Women’s Movement, for example, were responsible, in large part, for maternity leave legislation, a Status of Children Act and legislation relating to equal pay for equal work of equal value.

‘Christianity in Action’

The democratic socialist reform programme, packaged in liberal Christianity and popularised as “Christianity in Action”, “Socialism is the Christian way of life in action” and “Socialism is Love” rested on the basic principle of “belief in the equality of every human being before God, the government and the law and, therefore, of the right of every human being to equality of opportunity, equality of rights and entitlement to security and social justice” (Peoples’ National, “Democratic Socialism: The Jamaican Model”, Jamaica: n.d. p. 30, pamphlet). Justice was seen as equality and the entitlement to universal human rights, even though there were elements in the society who accepted the notion and practice of human rights and justice, but rejected any notion of religious relevance because in their framework of analysis, they saw no relationship between the material and the Spirit(ual). In the case of Latin America, for example, the issue of women’s rights and justice was embodied in Christian doctrine and expressed in a feminist theology/a feminist theology of liberation, embodying such values as freedom, equality and justice.

The relevance of religion to social and political life in our region cannot be discounted because religion, in every epoch of our lives, has appeared as ideology critique and a critique of an oppressive social order embodying such values as freedom, equality and justice. From the days of slavery, of colonialism, Nanny, Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle, Marcus Garvey and Rastafari, theology has informed social movements in the Caribbean and Latin America where Christianity has provided and continues to provide a set of universal values and ideas of change. That is to say, theological interpretation by the poor, women and other marginalised social groups
constituted a platform for the denunciation of exploitation, a hope for liberation and a channel of protest and radical/revolutionary action.

Therefore, the declaration of democratic socialism as “Christianity in Action” was not of keeping with historical traditions and political culture and the embrace of the more positive aspects of biblical doctrine in societies where Christianity has always provided the context for social change, based on the view that where a just God is absent, injustice rules. Furthermore, in fusing Christianity with political thought, the Manley-led administration was seeking to expand the prophetic character of Christianity to assist in the “definition, validation and articulation of just political, economic and social objectives” (Michael Manley, “From the Shackles of Domination and Oppression” Jamaica: Agency for Public Information, 1978, 13) meant to address the “imperfections in the human condition” of the Jamaican people which had resulted from the “historical failures of the body politic to provide the objective conditions necessary” (Manley, “From the Shackles of Domination and Oppression, 14) for relations of social justice. This politico-religious move was based on the peoples’ sense of cooperation and, according to Manley, the lessons and benefits our people derive from their Christian faith and their experience as members of the Church and the pastoral community in a country where most of the churchgoers are women.

So, in a society where upwards of 50 per cent of households are headed by single mothers, “Socialism is Love” and “Christianity in Action” included policies relating to solving the problem of unemployment, the socialisation of health and education, the provision of low cost housing and rent control, skills training and an adult literacy programme (JAMAL), school uniform subsidies and a school feeding programme for children in primary schools, subsidised costs for basic food items, improved status for children, equal pay for women (as mentioned before) and a women’s affairs bureau, and a land lease programme which provided land for some 14,000 farmers. Additionally, there was the introduction of a 40-hour, five-day work week; a national minimum wage (first demanded by Marcus Garvey’s Peoples Political Party from as early as 1929); workers rights and worker participation “to create an industrial democracy at the workplace” as well as worker cooperatives in the sugar industry; a Maternity Leave Law; a Status of Children Act and a Family Court to protect women and children; a new mental health law and free education for the handicapped and free education to the tertiary level; a national housing trust, a fund for housing construction with compulsory contributions by employers and employees geared towards providing housing for the poor and lower classes; and an increase in poor relief funds for the aged and indigent and increased National Insurance Scheme pensions for the old. All of these policies and laws protected the interest of women, even though women, particularly poor women, were not at the centre of analysis, but included in the group “socially disadvantaged”.

Socialism and Christianity had real material meaning for the Jamaican people in a situation where Christianity was meant to provide the framework for justice and socialism which shares with Christianity the values of liberation, equality and justice for all including women as workers and as mothers, the practice of justice.
But, philosophical differences aside, Christianity and socialism share the same principles of the advancement of humanity and social justice, an urgent requirement if we as a people are to commit ourselves to “human liberation and the liberation of the human spirit” as Michael Manley intended for the people of Jamaica, from the historical and contemporary social relationships of exploitation and the broader social, political and ideological/mental and cultural subjugation of our people which continue to dominate social life today. The intention was to transform religious doctrine into a social gospel, as a critical people-centred response to the politics and economics of poverty, social injustice and foreign domination: the secular was to be nurtured in the crucible of the religious as the religious was to be tested in the furnace of the secular.

While women were not located at the centre of social analysis and political action, a more favourable climate for women’s agitation and attention to women’s rights had existed, making it that much easier for their voices to be raised and their words to be heard.

However, that context no longer exists. Democratic socialism has been rejected by our people who now hunger and thirst after righteousness and are now seeking some kind of liberation from the Gospel of neo-liberalism and the ‘evil’ of capitalism and globalisation which were embraced as their saviour of humanity. We are now witnessing mute ‘voices’ and a period in which women, women’s rights, issues of social justice, ideas and principles of an alternate social order are waiting to be thrown on rubbish heap of history. In a general sense, the socialist bloc has been subverted and that too has implications for women’s demands for justice and social advancement.

It is not strange, therefore, that after 100 years, women as a social group, which transcend national borders, are still demanding justice. Women’s fundamental rights, women’s human rights are not yet seen as inalienable and indivisible and integral to the universal system of human rights. Women continue to face discrimination and marginalisation, do not share equally in the fruits of labour and comprise some 70 percent of the world’s poor. Women continue to face ideological and social marginalisation although they are central to the processes of production and reproduction. Women continue to hold most low paying and ‘indecent’ jobs as they continue to populate national workforces and the international political economy as the spinal cord of a system which holds them in subjugation to their male counterparts for whom the benefits and rewards of society are reserved.

For us in today’s world, the unequal position of women, taken for granted for centuries, is still rooted in capitalism which can and at the same time, cannot offer them the political and economic foundation for their own liberation or emancipation from the injustices of society. It can offer the conditions for such change because such conditions of injustice can awaken our critical reason and deepen our social consciousness as seen in the resistance to capitalist exploitation by working women in a number of instances, particularly those leading to the introduction of IWD in the first place. But, at the same time, and this is the crux of the matter, capitalism cannot offer the political and economic foundation for women’s own liberation or emancipation from the injustices of society since that system of social and economic existence
today, is governed and kept alive by a set of ideas which are incapable of creating social alternatives and which are unable to project a future for a liberated womankind, a liberated humankind. In our view, such a system which subverts social justice also finds its legitimation in a conservative interpretation of Christianity, a fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity which is associated with traditional universalist ideas and values of elitism. For us, such ideas and values militate against the “Christian way of life in action” because they undermine freedom, self-expression, social action and Christian love, equality, security and social justice.

Perhaps, after all, there was something good in the ideas and principles of democratic/socialism as there is still need for a project of social justice, even if it is for women only; for women as women and women as workers: a project of social justice which goes beyond the simple age-old demand by women for “women’s equality” and now, in recent times, the demand for an amorphous “gender equality”, a concept and demand which obfuscates more than it illuminates.

**Women and Labour**

Following from the above, it is my view that International Women’s Day 2011 under the theme, “Equal Access to Education, Training, Science and Technology: Pathway to Decent work for Women” should not be celebrated without purposeful thought and without reflection because the genesis of this women’s day is to be found in the poor social services and the social inequalities expressed in the harsh working conditions and increasing levels of poverty working women, working class women, faced at the turn of the 20th Century, a period when capitalism had taken root and was in its glory days in the U.S.A. and Europe and globalisation, in its early expression, was mining the wealth of the countries of the South and exporting such wealth to their own countries to advance development in those countries. This was context, still in existence, that working women confronted capitalism, the capitalist state/the established order, the status quo, challenging them for fundamental changes in their social, economic and political condition and circumstances.

Therefore, the choice of theme is no accident because our framework of social existence is the ever present and ever engulfing globalisation, diametrically opposed to socialism with its attendant social ills. Today, in a general sense, then, we find discrimination in education and training, hiring and remuneration and promotion as well as inflexible working conditions, lack of access to productive resources and lack of sharing family responsibilities plus a lack of or insufficient services such as child care continue to restrict employment opportunities for women (Platform of Action and the Beijing Declaration 1995). In addition, “attitudinal obstacles inhibit women’s participation and in some countries restrict the access of women and girls to education and training for economic management” (Platform of Action and the Beijing Declaration 1995, 94). In this respect, the Platform of Action and the Beijing Declaration of 1995 also notes that “there are considerable differences in women’s and men’s access to and opportunities to exert power over economic structures in their societies. In most parts of the world, women are virtually absent from or are poorly represented in economic decision-making, including the formulation of financial, monetary, commercial and other economic policies as well as tax systems and rules governing pay “ (p. 93). It further notes that: ‘…women have been particularly affected by the economic situation and restructuring processes which have changed the nature of employment and in some cases, have led to a loss of jobs, even for professional and skilled jobs….many women have entered the informal sector owing to the lack of other
opportunities (p. 94).

The prevailing situation has prompted regional trade unions to craft a response to the effects of globalisation on workers in the interest of equal access and decent work for women through Labour’s *Platform of the Americas*.

Globalization has exacted a very high toll from our peoples, not only those living in marginalized regions, but also in countries where globalization is perceived to have been a success. Since the free-market model was introduced in the Americas, every indicator of social well-being and working conditions has deteriorated significantly: employment, job stability, the quality of life, social mobility rates and levels of equality. The predatory attitude of capital toward our hemisphere's abundant and unprotected natural resources and toward stewardship of the environment, the insistent cheapening of the cost of labour and its increasing precariousness, growing inequalities regarding gender, class, race and ethnic origin all considered incentives to attract investment place in serious jeopardy the survival of important regions of the Americas. The scarcity of decent jobs has frayed the social safety net, reducing labour rights to mere declarations, annulling the potential of social dialogue between government, business and labour, and undermining companies' commitment to their social responsibility (p. 2).

In light of this situation:

We, the millions of working women and men forced into unemployment, pushed into poverty, battered by precarious working conditions and labour flexibility, obliged to leave our farms and our homes, urge the governments of the Americas to abandon the policies inspired by free-market fundamentalism. The hemisphere is in urgent need of an approach to sustainable development which places decent jobs and social justice at its heart, and the creation of mechanisms for the state to ensure no citizen is left behind. We need new policies designed from a gender perspective, which seek primarily to strengthen democracy, broaden opportunities for citizens to participate in decision-making at national and regional levels, reduce inequality, create decent work with dignified working conditions and full employment for all men and women in the Americas (p.3).

Women must be more Reflective

At this time, we, as women and men at all levels of society, must, therefore, be more reflective in our women’s celebrations this year because the social, economic and political condition of women, and in some instances, cultural traditions, have not changed fundamentally since the declaration of IWD in 1911, precisely because capitalism with its ideology of patriarchy and its reservoir of poor, unemployed and unwaged workers, most of whom are women, has not changed its character and globalisation has only intensified that character. This is precisely why we, as thinking and committed women and men, need to give political meaning to IWD so that it and its benefits cannot be eroded by capitalism which gave birth to it in the first instance, but the existence of such a day can have life in the same way that socialism gave life to IWD with expressions of material, social and political benefits and in our case expressions of neighbourly love (although women still have to overcome their ideological marginalisation).

Finally, I wish to leave you with a few questions for consideration. In our Jamaica, how many gains have women made in this country since the 1970s? How many gains have workers made since the 1970s? How many gains have women as workers made since the 1970s? How many gains have women as human beings made since the 1970s?

When we consider the little progress women, generally, have made since the 1970s, the reversal of these gains, the neutralisation of the feminist movement, the potential demise of the labour movement, the inability of genderism to advance women’s issues, the dominance of religious
fundamentalism and the absence of socialism (even with its weaknesses) it becomes even clearer that there is even more a need for a project of social justice. However, the question is: can there be justice in a framework of injustice.

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