

## 10

### Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: Sistren, Collective Democracy, and the Organization of Cultural Production

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*Honor Ford-Smith*

Feminist organizations, certainly in the Caribbean, often seem disturbingly weak. Since the 1970s we have formed groups, raised consciousness, conducted research, given guidelines for national policy, and developed imaginative methodologies for education and organization. Yet, so far, we have not been able to fundamentally affect women's power in the society on as many levels as we would need to if the power relations between the genders were to be significantly challenged. In spite of the existence of a new organized Jamaican women's movement, recent studies show that women's material conditions are getting worse, not better. Not only has the daily scuffle for survival become tougher, but the prevalence of violence in daily life has strengthened women's reliance on male "backative." In the context of the reorganization of international capital and the division of labor and production worldwide, countries like Jamaica have been crippled by a staggering economic decline. The main institutional actor in this process has been the International Monetary Fund. In exchange for loans to governments in foreign currency, the Fund insists on the complete opening of the economy, the whittling away of the nation-state as we know it, and the divestment of state responsibilities into the hands of private enterprise. In Jamaica, the effect has been horrific. The standard of living of the majority of people in the country is way below what it was in the mid-1970s (Levitt 1990). Apart from astronomical inflation, the country has sustained huge cuts in the provisions for social services and education. The brunt of the burden of these policies is borne by women, who have to take up the slack created by these cuts. It is

women who, through their labor, replace the services that were once the responsibilities of hospitals, schools, and community centers.

Ironically, all this has happened in a context in which female labor has acquired greater significance and potential than at any other time in this century. During the 1980s, national development strategies targeted female labor as never before. Priority plans for economic development were based on the expansion of free-trade zones, offshore data processing, and tourism. All of these activities rely on female labor, so it is not surprising that female unemployment showed a slight decrease in this period. The traditional male working class was no longer in the forefront of the country's economic plans. Women, moreover, began to talk back in songs which spoke about enjoying male sexual attention without accepting male domination and to celebrate making men pay for sex with women. At the same time, women who participated in a UNESCO study on cultural development stated their willingness to organize with other women around issues of sexual violence, education, and employment, but complained about the failure of women's organizations to speak out, analyze, and act on women's problems. They further criticized women's groups for having pretentious procedures biased in favor of middle-class women (Ford-Smith 1988).

Clearly, then, by the late eighties new feminist organizations operating regionally and nationally faced a critical set of contradictions and challenges. Women's deteriorating material conditions were in contradiction to rising expectations about the job market and their increased mobilization. All this indicated that the time was right for a broad and powerful women's movement, a movement strong enough to intervene and transform national development in women's interests. The stark reality, however, was that the majority of women remained outside of women's organizations and were in the lowest echelons of organizations that were run by men. Understanding the constraints that limit the potential of the women's movement is crucial to deepening our effectiveness.

This account examines the factors that limited the success of one Jamaican women's organization: the Sistren Collective, an organization that worked with women both culturally and politically. I examine the expansion of this organization between 1977 and 1988 and identify some of the major problems it faced. In the context of Jamaica's political and cultural history, I ask two questions: How did the funding policies of international agencies affect the group's development? And, how did the group's internal structure affect its development? In essence, I argue that the dictates of international funding agencies exacerbated internal contradictions in the collective structure around race and class, specifically on issues having to do with service and product delivery, education, decision-making, leadership, power, and authority. As a result, the organization became constrained, both in terms of what it offered the community, its ability to develop clear

and effective organizational support, and its ability to satisfy member's needs. I go on to make some suggestions for women's organizations in similar situations, to consider and to propose some of the possible politics and concepts groups might reclaim to avoid some of these problems.

### My Location

This study is based on interviews and on an analysis of the papers of the Sistren Collective. An earlier draft of the study was submitted to the collective for comment and I have revised it in light of many of the comments I received. Nevertheless, what I write here is, in the final instance, very much my own responsibility. My reflections are colored by my own position in the group as Artistic Director, a leadership post I held from the founding of the collective until 1989, when I resigned from full-time work in the organization.

I began the process of reflection partly because of my own desire to open up a dialogue with other women on the problems. But I was also motivated by my need to question how what I experienced as a crisis in the work had come about. I wanted to understand how I was implicated in what had taken place. I wanted to deepen my understanding of the problems and potential of working across differences as well as my understanding of how power worked both among us and outside of us.

As the daughter of a light-skinned professional Jamaican woman and an English working-class man whom I hardly knew, my identities make me simultaneously an insider and an outsider in most contexts. I look white and am certainly socially white in the context of a black-majority country, and this makes me a member of a privileged minority. As a young woman in an audience I was addressing once pointed out, I am "not the popular color." I saw my work in the women's movement as a point from which to subvert privileges which I experienced as causing tremendous violence in the country and in each of us, and as a way of making responsible use of skills which the society had given me. Having been raised and educated in Jamaica in the period leading up to independence and in the early postindependence period, I experienced myself as someone called a "Jamaican." I understood that to mean someone whose identity was constituted by the specific history of that society, a history which included internal conflicts and differences.

By 1988, I began to realize dimly how my work was being influenced by other ways of seeing and making meaning. I began to sense in a very immediate way that volunteerism, good intentions, and hard work were not strong enough weapons against the weight of a history of multileveled colonialism. Out of this crisis, it slowly dawned on me that what appears to undermine privilege from one vantage point can be reframed and reread as the reenactment of an old text of privilege or may, in fact, simply consolidate old power relations in new forms. While I framed our actions as insurgent behavior,

colonial narratives conditioning the behavior of people who look like me and who work with women who look like the majority of Sistren, and vice versa, regulated our work in the discourses of the missionary, the plantation, and now most recently, the development worker.

One of the subtexts of this account, then, concerns the unraveling of the intricate and thick fabric out of which work for social change is made. An underlying theme in the account is the examination of how work across differences is made. I am trying to get at the meaning of the silences and denials in our work, and I am trying to interrogate what was said and done, in order to reveal the complex interrelationship of layers of power, privilege, and resistances in daily life.

The writing of this study was an extremely painful process for me for several reasons. First, I was writing about problems, and so the emphasis is deliberately negative. I also had to face the things in myself and in the organization that infected me with an overwhelming sense of failure, powerlessness, rage, or guilt. Secondly, I had to grapple with the idea of how useful it would be to make public some of our most knotty conflicts. Part of what made it most difficult was the absence of a language to get across the complexity of the lived crises and often unspoken causes behind the conflicts. I hope that the experience described here will help to stimulate the development of such a language. I also hope that it will spark a debate on funding for women's groups. Perhaps work like this can provoke feminist and antiracist theory to provide a more complete language of organizational process and practice for feminist workplaces. A language is needed that will help to analyze and address the contradiction between the emancipatory goals of groups and their internal practice, between their interest in transforming social relations toward liberatory power relations and the tense, conflicted organizational culture of many women's groups. Organizational development theory, as it currently exists, has been developed largely in the corporate world. It is premised on empiricism and on liberal ideas of the self and the rights of individuals; it is generally devoid of critical content on context or power relations. Little attention has been paid to the task of sorting out what is useful and not useful for addressing problems of practice in a workplace whose concern is intervention for social change. This study, then, aims to provide a focus for some of the critical issues that might confront those wishing to go further in this work.

### The History and Impact of Sistren

#### *The Early Years: 1977-1980*

In May 1977, twelve women employed in a special government scheme came together voluntarily to present a short play at a workers' cultural festival

in celebration of workers' struggles in Jamaica. The Jamaica School of Drama, part of the newly developed complex of schools of the arts at the Cultural Training Centre opened in 1976, was asked to support the workers' festival by supplying the workers with a tutor-director. I was selected from the school's small staff to take on this role. The play was called *Downpression Get a Blow*. After the play was presented, the group decided to stay together. Thus began Sistren, as a part-time voluntary women's drama group.

The Jamaica School of Drama continued to support the group by considering my work with it a part of the school's outreach program and by providing a space in which the group could work. I devised a program of training in acting skills based on the use of personal testimony. Through this method, the problems of women could be shared, the commonalities in their experiences identified and discussed. Through analysis, storytelling and improvisation, we produced a participatory theatrical presentation.

According to early documentation, Sistren's aims were to create theater for and with working-class women, to form a self-reliant cooperative enterprise, and to provide its members with an income. Between 1977 and 1980, the group concentrated on producing one play a year. By 1981, it had presented four major works. One of these plays, *QPH*,<sup>1</sup> won national awards for excellence, and another, *Bellywoman Bangarang*, was honored for its experimental qualities. Two of these plays concentrated on the life stories of women in the group and two others were concerned with women's history. The project was administered with the help of various advisory and action groups who, at different times, met with representatives from Sistren to plan and support its activities. Some training in group administration was provided by the Jamaican Women's Bureau, with which we collaborated until 1981. The cofounders of the organization at this stage were Lorna Burrell-Haslam, Pauline Crawford, Beverley Elliot, Lillian Foster, Lana Finikin, Barbara Gayle, Beverley Hanson, Rebecca Knowles, Vivette Lewis, Jasmine Smith, Cerene Stephenson, and Jerline Todd. Later, these women came to describe themselves as founding members.

#### *Political Context*

Sistren was born in a moment of democratic opening—that is, at a moment in history in which there was a possibility for those who are oppressed to intervene in history and transform their society. In our case, this happened in the 1970s when a left-leaning social-democratic government under Michael Manley came to power in Jamaica. State facilities suddenly opened up to grassroots people. Various forms of support were made available to community organizations. New institutional forms were invented. All these things supported needs which had hitherto been invisible or silent.

In 1973, Jamaica became the first Caribbean country to establish a women's bureau, prompted by the United Nations campaign around the situa-

tion of women. In 1975, the World Decade of Women was launched. As a result of these initiatives, there was much public discussion in Jamaica about what was then called "women and development." Under the dynamic leadership of Beverley Anderson-Manley, the women's arm of the ruling People's National Party Women's Movement (PNPWM) had mobilized and organized large numbers of women in support of reforms. Collaborative organizational programs with various women's associations were established and the number of women running for posts in local government increased. Minimum-wage legislation aimed at improving the working conditions of domestic servants. A law providing for equal work claimed to make discrimination against women workers illegal. The abolition of bastardy laws meant that women who had children outside of marriage (the majority of the population) would, like their children, no longer be stigmatized. Such widespread mass mobilization of women had not been seen since the 1930s, when there was a major uprising against colonial rule.

The Special Employment Program (SEP), from which the majority of Sistren members came, was created in response to high levels of female unemployment, and the state's commitment to the idea that women should have wage work. The program employed about 10,000 women, who were initially given "temporary" work as street cleaners, with the intention that they would subsequently be trained for something "more productive." Although few women in the program did, in fact, receive further training, the women who made up Sistren were among those who were retrained as teachers' aides and placed in schools. Today, Sistren is the only remaining evidence of the SEP.

The organized women's movement provided the context out of which Sistren grew because it legitimized women's examination of their own struggles. Yet, by its own acknowledgment, that movement was not feminist. At the time, "feminist" was taken to be synonymous with bra-burning white women anxious to kill off the male sex and reduce all political matters to a simple-minded conflict between men and women. This, after all, was what the media were projecting. Any suggestion that men had privileges that women did not have was regarded suspiciously on the left as an attempt to "divide the struggle." Nevertheless, in spite of defensive reassurances that the women's movement was not "anti-man," Sistren provided an organizational space and ideology in which women gained the strength to question their experience. It placed them in situations that made very obvious the contradiction between what was actually happening and the ideal image of women projected in the society.

Sistren's approach, in its early days, differed from that of the organized women's movement in two main ways. First, it paid more attention to the "private" areas of women's lives, to issues such as sexuality and reproduc-

tive rights. It brought a more qualitative personal element to the political analysis of the women's movement. It also openly criticized male privileges and did so in a thoroughly Jamaican idiom while serving as a support group around women's personal experiences and struggles. Secondly, and I will discuss this in greater detail below, Sistren emphasized cultural production and the representation of women's experience in the arts and media as an important site of struggle. It linked art and education with politics, offering its work in drama, life history, and other forms as a space to arouse and nurture rebel consciousness.

In the 1970s, political reforms brought the issue of Jamaican culture under serious examination. The way it was defined and the way it functioned were being questioned. The state gave a nod of approval to the importance of what was then called "cultural development" and tried to find ways of giving greater legitimacy to popular creative work. It was as a result of this that the Cultural Training Centre (housing four schools of the arts) was opened. The importance of legitimizing hitherto subordinated popular traditions was emphasized as a means of developing national identity.

In a general sense, then, Sistren was both representative of its time and different from the majority of women's groups in its vision. In its early work, the emphasis on cultural work characterized it as both different from and complementary to other approaches. It is unlikely that a program of this kind would begin today. Then, we had access to state facilities and our project was framed in a particular political context, which included policies directed toward legitimizing the popular.

#### *The Cultural Context and Sistren's Cultural Work*

The Caribbean was the base for European colonial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The islands are among the oldest colonial possessions. Some are still colonies. As one economist has put it, the central contradiction of Caribbean culture is that its activities have been created to satisfy the needs of other societies. This contradiction is very strongly felt in Jamaica where the eradication of the indigenous Taino culture was almost total. There, the violent importation of, first, enslaved Africans and, then, indentured Asians and Africans has meant that cultural legitimacy belonged, first, to Europeans and, now, to Euro-North Americans. In this sense, Jamaica, like the rest of the Caribbean, differs from many other colonized countries that have maintained more visible signs of precolonial traditions. As a result of this history, in Jamaica, wherever the plantation has been the dominant institution, the history of violence, deep hierarchy, and patronage has resulted in extreme social alienation. The dominant presence of the United States of America—militarily, economi-

cally, and through the mass media—means that what is projected as most desirable is only achievable through emigration. Large numbers of people migrate yearly, many of whom are among the country's best educated and most highly skilled citizens.

Attempts to resist this process, to legitimize and make meaning in one's own experience have always existed. They have resulted in the creation of Caribbean religions, languages, oral traditions, and family structures which exist separately and apart from the official systems of meaning that are institutionalized in the society. For example, polygamy and polyandry are against the law; English is the official language; the system of justice is officially administered through courts of law; and Christianity is the official religion. In reality, however, there is an informal, unofficial culture that contradicts many of the official practices. The enforcement of justice between groups, for example, may be administered in religious rituals which have a non-Christian, African base. Many Jamaicans live in long-term relationships with more than one sexual partner and attempts to define the Caribbean family have not yet resulted in any clear consensus.

That which might be labeled "Jamaican," then, is that which has been created in an attempt to meet the needs of, and to give meaning to, the specific experience of those who live on the island, not the needs of dominant forces from outside. Some of the places where creativity has been most evident have been in language, religion, and the popular arts, which have proved more difficult to control than the material resources of the country. We, in so-called Third-World societies, have both inherited and transformed notions of "art" and "culture" transmitted over centuries by European colonizers. In the Western European tradition, centuries of capitalist development have resulted in very specific notions of the artist and of culture. A tension or an animosity between the political and the aesthetic—between the concept of social justice and the concept of beauty and pleasure—has gradually come to be accepted and has been institutionalized in modes of artistic production since the European Enlightenment. Although there are flickering attempts to bridge this opposition, the fundamental dichotomy of the two discourses is an organizing principle under capitalism. By the terms of this arrangement, the artist has come to be thought of as a highly sensitive, innately gifted individual whose work is somehow cordoned off from the economic and political processes that affect the lives of ordinary people.

At the time *Sistren* was formed, those involved in cultural work were struggling to develop a new relationship between artist and community. The conceptual framework created by Rex Nettleford for training practitioners of the arts at the Cultural Training Centre spoke, for instance, of "cultural agents" rather than artists. This "agent" was to be able to practice at least one of the artistic disciplines and to be able to insert his or her work

within a community in order to facilitate that community's representations of itself. In other words, the artist was regarded as a cultural worker, who would serve the community by offering a space and a process for creating representations. The artist was to be a teacher as well as a creator of products—a worker positioned in a continuum with other workers in society. This is a different conception of the artist than that of a gifted individual who exists and produces in a marginal space apparently outside the relations of power, producing lovely commodities within a fairly fixed spectrum for consumption in the world market. The cultural workers' site of intervention is in the production of meaning-making and representation, activities that help to form subjects who desire change.

#### *Times Change: 1980*

In 1980, things changed. National elections took place in an atmosphere of undeclared civil war. Against the background of the deaths of at least 1,000 youths, the conservative opposition swept into power. Immediately, national priorities began to be reversed. Across the island, programs that had aimed at building popular power were dismantled. Workers' cooperatives and community enterprise organizations closed down. Nationalized industries were privatized. The monetarist policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated local policy. Huge loans flooded the country, so that, by 1988, the tiny island had become one of the most indebted per-capita nations in the world.

Almost overnight, the women's organizations which had been allied to the party in power were unable to command support. Their networks and campaigns disappeared, creating a kind of political vacuum for women. The employment program in which most members of *Sistren* still worked was threatened because it was seen as partisan and "unproductive." It was not long before the program was discontinued and the women left jobless.

The events of 1980, including the massive defeats of the popular movement, made it clear that in the future any real attention to gender concerns would require the development of an independent women's movement. The party-affiliated movement, while very important, had not developed the power to articulate gender concerns strongly enough to influence party politics consistently. An autonomous women's movement for social change was needed that could function outside of the control of the traditional party political boundaries. By developing guarantees of power outside male-dominated organizations, women would be able to struggle more effectively within them and with them. At the same time, this would mean developing feminist analyses of national problems that would relate the position and condition of women to the problems and political practice of the country and the development strategies being pursued. This way of thinking had

many implications for Sistren's work as a theater collective and workers' organization.

*Organizing Sister Groups: Expansion of the Workshop Program, 1982*

The awareness of the need for a new type of women's organization was based not only on the collapse of the organized women's movement of the 1970s but also on a critique of what had been achieved in that period and in the early 1980s. In creating the play *The Case of Iris Armstrong* (1982), we worked extensively with sugar workers and discussed the limitations of some of the legislation addressing women workers that had been passed in the 1970s. Through the case of a female supervisor in charge of women workers, we demonstrated that work was undervalued whenever women did it. The traditional sexual division of labor resulted in women being paid less and in their labor being consistently devalued in relation to men's. We showed that this situation was tied to the fact that women were primarily regarded as responsible for the care and maintenance of the home, the sick, the aged, the children, and the men. They were expected to do such work for free—because they were women. This relationship was then extended into the labor market.

As we began to speak out more on these issues and as we moved across the country doing workshops and plays, more and more women wanted to work with us in the theater or in sister groups. They wanted, as they put it, to "join Sistren."

In 1982, the collective began to organize and serve groups of women using the drama methodology that had been devised with them. Sistren traveled to rural and urban communities to create workshops in which women who worked as vendors and agricultural workers articulated their concerns and worked toward acting on them. This work went beyond the articulation of personal experience to link material uncovered in testimony to information about the society in general and to an analysis of women's position in it. Much of it was facilitated through Joan French's contribution to the critical content of our educational strategy.

By the end of 1984, a number of sister groups had been created. Two of these were in rural areas and two in Kingston. One of these, a group called Friends of Sistren, produced a booklet called *No to Sexual Violence*<sup>2</sup> that was distributed widely. One of the rural groups successfully organized to get water brought into their community. Their membership swelled.

However, at the end of 1985, the majority of the collective voted to discontinue its group-building work with community women, ostensibly because of the intense difficulty of providing organizational support for such work. After 1985, it was decided to offer our services to groups that

already existed and that could provide the necessary organizational infrastructure for our work. There was strong feeling and conflict within the group about this decision. At about the same time, the number of plays produced for theater also began to decline. After 1981, instead of producing one new full-length play per year, one play was produced approximately every two or three years.

*Sistren's Social Impact*

It is difficult to measure Sistren's impact on Jamaican society with any precision. However, we can report some impressions. In 1987, the collective reached approximately 8,000 people through its theater and workshop program. It distributed 3,000 copies of its newsletter three times a year. Not all of this audience was within Jamaica and, based on records kept, it is impossible to determine precisely how much of the readership of the magazine, for instance, comes from overseas. Sistren toured internationally every year, performing to audiences interested in women's theater and Caribbean culture. It offered workshops on drama-in-education locally and abroad, and it also received countless requests to participate in a variety of workshops and seminars on women's issues.

Between 1980 and 1989, the amount of national media coverage Sistren commanded grew steadily. One can assume from this that most Jamaicans have heard of it. At the same time, there are many people, especially among those living in the rural areas, who have never heard of the group's work. Our own straw poll indicates that of those who have heard of it, few know exactly what it does. Some think it is a kind of charity, some a Communist organization, others a feminist group and still others a part-time theater group that is an arm of the Socialist Party. An evaluation carried out by Cheryl Ryman in 1992 showed that Sistren's work in drama is seen as the most important aspect of its approach to work with women.

In particular sectors the impact is stronger. For example, in a 1987 study of Jamaican nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) receiving aid from the Canadian NGO, CUSO, Sistren was cited as one of the few examples of a development agency addressing the concerns of women as a priority. Academics and students, locally and abroad, also make frequent studies of Sistren's work in the theater, and in research. A number of articles on the group's methodology and its origins have been published. A number of post-graduate students have included the work of the group in their theses and at least two have made the group their entire subject. The leaders of most women's organizations, which represent a minority of women in the country, have heard of Sistren, and most of them are familiar with the type of work the group does, although not necessarily in a very specific sense.

Some of these organizations collaborate with Sistren and use the collective as a resource in their projects and programs. Sistren, then, has acted as a catalyst for further organizing on the part of women. In 1989 the research arm of Sistren was associated with a number of networking initiatives with women, among them Free Trade Zone workers, a Media Watch Group, and a Women's Action Committee. Sistren produces an annual celebration of International Women's Day. Sistren also supported the development of the Association of Women's Organizations of Jamaica, which emerged in the late eighties and which functions as an independent women's umbrella organization lobbying for women's interests in the nineties.

In a general sense, the group has offered an alternative image of women, particularly of black working-class women. Through its plays, workshops, and other activities, Sistren has brought to light many of women's hidden experiences; it has shown the strengths and desires of Jamaican working-class women and the importance of this for the future of the society. It has opened a small space within which the forms of resistance created by working-class women are recognized. It has offered a commentary on women's relationship to power in the society and it has tried to create spaces within which critical Caribbean feminist perspectives could be nurtured. It has also encouraged women to organize and to represent their ideas in writing, drama, and other means, although the extent to which it has been able to offer women the concrete means to do this has been limited. In this sense, Sistren has offered an example of an alternative to the glamorized icons presented on television and in the newspapers in Jamaica.

Over the twelve years of its work, the collective has laid the basis for the development of a participatory approach to working with Caribbean women and for a methodology in popular drama and popular education. It has built up an aesthetic which is based on interpretations of the daily realities of Jamaican women combined with popular myths, images, and dramatic poetry. The use of documentary investigations of women's lives, oral tradition, ritual, and popular music have all combined to contribute to the development of Caribbean theater and literature. The collective has created a number of scripts and a book, *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*. Its series of screen-printed pictures has posed alternative visual images of women and gender. Pioneering research has been carried out on women's history, cultural development, and by Imani Tafari-Ama on women and Rastafari. Sistren's magazine, edited by Joan Ross-Frankson, grew in popularity and circulation annually. Both in its method and in its composition, Sistren's approach is original and unusual in the region.

#### *What Sistren Means to Members*

According to the majority of the working-class founding members themselves, the principal achievement of Sistren lies not in its impact on the posi-

tion of women in Jamaican society as a whole but in what the organization has been able to provide for its own members. In the early days, most members of the group regarded our work as an exercise in self-help which would later impact on the society. Jasmine Smith recalls,

It was my first opportunity to be in the public and to meet other women. From [the time] I leave school, I start having children, then I stay home and work in bars, club, and factories. I didn't have any time to go out, although I had a feeling to leave the yard. I used to be three or four hours early when the group first started, just to leave the yard and meet other people. I didn't know you could go out, sit with other women, and talk your problems in a constructive way. If you live in a tenant yard and you hear people curse each other about their problems, you wouldn't want to talk your own. If anything happen to you, you just want to keep it to yourself.

And, as Lana Finkin remembers,

Before we did our first play, I had an interest in working around issues of concern to women. I used to work with women in political groups, but that was not enough. We only just meet and sit and talk. We weren't getting anywhere with how to solve the problems, what to do about it. When Sistren came together, I realize that this is something that can speak on behalf of women. There isn't anywhere in our society that working-class women can go and let their voices be heard. When I see Sistren form, I say Sistren can help to make men realize that women can survive on their own.

In interviews conducted for this study, the majority of working-class members said that the greatest achievements of the group have been the international recognition it has won, the provision of a salary to its members, and the purchase of its own organizational base. A smaller number of middle-class resource people and new members, as well as three founding working-class members, felt that the major achievement was what the group meant for Jamaican women. The following quotes represent founders' views of how the work has affected both their way of thinking about themselves and their skills:

One time ago you'd look 'pon tings and say 'Cho! Me can't bodder wid how life stay and wid how money stay and how people stay because a jus one of dose tings. Mek it pass by. One time me jus live everyday as it come. But now dat me see dat tings can change and people can change mi jus feel seh, well if dere needs

to be a change, me jus say someting or do someting den. (*Myrtle Thompson*)

Sistren help to bring about the awareness of women in me definitely, for di first time, even if me go out a street and hear people, whether man or woman, talk tings fi downgrade woman me wouldn't know how to address it. Now me find meself, if me hear anybody say anything to downgrade woman me can address it. It give me courage to deal wid anybody, no care who you may be. (*Becky*)

I've gained a lot of skills, like acting skills. I know how to really move on stage, how to use my voice. I've gained a lot. (*Beverly Elliot*)

Ah get fi find out dat ah am gifted wid drawing and designing. Over di years we build up a silk-screen-printing project. Ah started to mek designs based off a me own life, di lives of women sugar workers, domestic workers, old women, and di teenage maddas. Now di main designer for Sistren prints is me. (*Cerine Stephenson*)

#### Funding Follies

Funding was a problem for Sistren from the very beginning. This was so both because of the poverty of the country and the poverty of the group. Early on, we had to choose between accepting funding from international agencies and local financing. Below, I shall examine what both options meant for us as well as how they affected our growth.

#### Local Financing

Between 1977 and 1981, the group was financed largely from local sources, primarily through the generous in-kind contribution of the Jamaica School of Drama, which provided Sistren with office and rehearsal space and with training.<sup>3</sup> The Women's Bureau offered some help in cooperative training and friends of the School of Drama assisted with additional technical support for the theater. Even then, however, one needed a cash budget to pay for correspondence, transport, and subsistence for members, and to mount productions.

It very soon became clear that the amount of time that it took to raise small amounts of money from local businesses was not worth the mental and physical strain involved. Local capital was not interested in giving any

significant support to a small women's group that would earn them neither tax deductions nor publicity as champions of the poor.

In 1980, with the withdrawal of state support, we were faced squarely with the option of continuing to depend on the pittance that could be raised locally or shifting our source of support to international agencies. Had we continued to depend on local funding, we would have either faded out altogether, as many groups did at the time, or our program, limited as it then was, would have been seriously affected. Our working-class members were seriously constrained in the amount of time they could offer voluntarily. Self-sacrificing, do-gooding ladies are, with good reason, confined to the upper classes. As the cost of living rose rapidly, even they began to curtail their activities and volunteer work threatened to become a thing of the past.

In effect, then, there was little choice for us. We had to seek international funding if we wanted to continue to work. But, needless to say, the funding process brought with it a whole host of new problems.

#### *International Development Agencies and the Women-and-Development Thrust*

All the agencies involved in funding development work are based in the so-called advanced capitalist world. Their policies are often tied to the politics of their governments or to powerful special interest groups in their countries. Aid, to put it somewhat crudely, is related to both the search for markets and the search for international political support. As far as Jamaica is concerned, the agencies with the greatest interest come from Canada, the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Britain. Although the policies of development agencies vary widely, in general, those funding the activities of NGOs involved with women can be said to have three criteria: a) the production of a multiplier effect; b) a direct influence on a grassroots target group; c) the achievement of some kind of measurable "improvement" in a given situation in relation to a particular problem (usually determined by the donor agency).

At its most serious level, the crisis that faced us in 1980-82 was economic. We had to find an income for our members and a space to work. It also meant meeting the above criteria. We had to find a way of filling a need in the society and offering a product or service. This, in itself, had huge implications.

We were not familiar at the time with the subtleties of international development policies. But it seemed that the international women's movement had provided us with a loophole through which we could slip to avoid extinction. Sistren was able to get funding in 1980 because the international women's movement had begun to gain ground and to have an impact on the policies of international aid agencies. By the late seventies a number of



agencies were specifically looking for projects which they classified under the heading of "women and development." At that time, many who worked in aid agencies or with women who implemented development projects accepted the idea that "development" was somehow value-free and inherently progressive. It was by and large assumed that women did not participate in the development process. Therefore, work that women were, in fact, doing in their home and on plots of land was not considered part of "developing" the society. Efforts were centered in the 1970s on "integrating women in development" without questioning the assumptions on which the concept of development was based.

*Production First: An Experience with "Income Generation"*

In 1978, we presented a short series of scenes at a regional workshop for the Women's Bureau suggesting that women organize into producer cooperatives. After the presentation, we were approached by a woman from the Ford Foundation who said that she was sure funding for our work could be found in U.S. Her agency did not fund cultural work, but she would see if she could interest others in our work.

From the beginning of our dialogue, these agencies made it clear that the problem with our work was that it was not "income-generating." Theater, they said, was most interesting but it would not put bread on the table. We argued back about the need to use the arts to educate women about their rights and their position in society. We argued that confidence-building was essential and that there was a huge problem with cultural alienation in the country which could be best redressed through work around culture. Perhaps our work would motivate others to produce. They countered, "Yes, that is all very well and good, but do you expect us to continue putting more and more money into your work? You need to do something that is productive."

"The arts can be productive, and, anyway, that's precisely the problem," we replied. "Isn't women's work always seen as unproductive? Yet, without this so-called unproductive work, no so-called productive work can happen. Besides, why shouldn't we do something we're good at such as drama, participation, and dialogue? We know how to do that."

"Development," came the retort, "means getting your production going. Saving what you make so you can reinvest it. Not spending what you don't have. Choose something sensible that can earn you some money and then you can talk about education and the arts. You need to be self-reliant."

"But the whole region is dependent," we argued. "How do you expect a small group like us to be self-reliant? Do commodity production and education have to be separate? What place do cultural and educational

activities have in international assistance?" The arguments went back and forth in this vein.

The whole discussion brought into sharp focus the bias that characterizes much of the thinking on so-called development. It is seen primarily as a process of economic growth through which poor countries are modernized and become absorbed into the market while becoming increasingly reliant on Western science and technology. It has brought about the acceptance of universalized categories of measurement (such as GDP, GNP, per-capita income, and so on) which presuppose Western standards as the ideal and often ignore what is most specific to any given society. In cases where economic growth has occurred, it has brought with it a host of new problems, not the least of which have been extreme inequities in wealth. In many countries, what has been developed are the tastes and desires which lead to national indebtedness and an unequal position in the world market. Development theory has produced a whole discourse which carries its own language, schools, professionals, and institutions. The discourse imprisons those located within it into a tightly regulated perception of reality and a tightly regulated set of relations defined by the international marketplace and foreign aid.

Nadine Gordimer has characterized development workers as the new missionaries. The relationships between many agencies and the projects they support can be compared to work done by the European churches in colonial societies in the nineteenth century. However, the language of development is different. There is no reference to the soul. And the details of how to achieve salvation depend on changing sets of agency priorities that are often applied globally in spite of enormous differences in country conditions. While God reigns supreme in the Christian cosmology, science and economics preside infallibly over the development process. Regulation is implemented in an effort to standardize and measure results in widely differing situations. Issues around the specificity of cultures, the formation of identities, questions of race and language are not part of the development paradigm. Any view that considers the formation of subjects on their own terms is regarded as dangerous, not so much because it threatens large blocs of power (at present, it is rare that such large claims can be made) but because it sets up confrontations with the everyday privileges that, in many cases, justify the labor of the development worker and his or her sense of power.

As far as most development agencies are concerned, the place of theater and the arts is a non-issue. The arts are unproductive frivolities that can be justified only if they can be proven to be "useful" in the crudest forms, as in education. "Development" apparently does not include pleasure, even the pursuit of pleasurable opportunities for reflection or the creation of cultural products that mirror the collective consciousness. "Development," one con-

cludes, is a "scientific" phenomenon opposed, it is implied, to the arts, which are dangerous luxuries threatening to undo all of science's sweet categories and Western social organization.

The debate about income versus education ended with Sistren starting our own screen-printing textile project. Typically, like many young groups with little experience, we did very little research before embarking on our venture. We chose screen-printing in a somewhat arbitrary way. Our costume designer (Beti Campbell) was a trained textile designer. She had taught members of the group screen-printing in the midst of one of our productions. People liked it; it seemed to go with theater, and so we began. Years later, the project continues to fight for its life. Ironically, it has, at times, been supported by earnings from the theater project, which—contrary to predictions—earns more than any of the other areas of Sistren's work. Textiles have never made a profit. It has never been able to afford the cost of enough personnel skilled in marketing and production management. Nor has it been able to afford the time to train its staff in these areas.

The project was born out of pressure from development agencies rather than out of the consideration and commitment of the whole group. It did not have the full support of all Sistren members and, therefore, in practice, it took second place to the theater work. In the early days, production fluctuated widely and was often interrupted. The same table was used for screen-printing as was used for meetings. The same people printed and designed as did theater, and there were disagreements over the division of labor and the prestige and value given to each component of the work. There were no production targets and no clear hours of production. No wonder quality control was inconsistent.

All told, the textile project was unable to develop a profile sufficiently independent of theater. At a national level, in the 1980s, the project functioned in a situation in which small businesses had the highest failure rate of any form of production in the country. The national infrastructure made it far easier for multinational, export-oriented investment to thrive. Locally, lack of credit and unavailability of raw materials are among some of the practical problems which the project still has to overcome. For example, a T-shirt might be available in cotton this week but only in polyester next week. This spells disaster for orders since customers cannot be guaranteed what they want.

Silk-screened products face the same problems that all Caribbean crafts confront. Because of the relatively high cost of imported raw materials and labor, they are more expensive than similar items from other countries which are produced for local consumption. This, coupled with the fact that the cost of living in Jamaica is higher than in many other formerly colonized countries, means that there are no easy solutions to the difficulties of the project. At the same time, because the financial investment in the project

has been enormous and because some members of the collective have developed considerable skill in some aspects of the work, the collective has never been able to make the decision to cut its losses and close the project. Neither did it implement proposals that would turn it into a profit-making business.

The advice given to us by development agencies to generate another income-producing area of activity was ill-advised, given the context in which we were operating and the resources available to us. Instead, we should have concentrated our efforts on developing the educational and income-earning potential of the theater. Polarizing education and production in the way that we were encouraged to do was not useful. In fact, any process that aims at releasing human creativity to the fullest involves both education *and* production. We needed to find better ways to make the two work together, not ways of driving them further apart, especially by taking on an extra responsibility we were unprepared to deal with. Involvement in a new area of work forced us to overextend our activities in the following ways: we produced theatre; we were self-managed; we documented our work; we publicized our work; we produced educational workshops for women in the local communities; we did our internal education work; and we now printed and marketed textiles. Our structure, which had been overburdened from the start, creaked, groaned, and expanded again, before it was ready to do so. In the early 1980s, however, we were in no position to argue with any agency. They had the handle and we had the blade.

#### *Intensified Labour*

At the start of our relations with funding agencies, we were not a well-known or successful group. We were a small project, just beginning, and we had to prove ourselves. Agencies largely decided which areas of work would be considered part of the "development process," where it was to be done, and with whom. They defined the terms on which they funded groups and we negotiated within them. An early attempt to argue with one of our major funders, the Inter-American Foundation, about what they defined as our "unacceptable political" activities—an anti-apartheid rally—resulted in our discontinuing relations with them. The loss of their grant pushed us dangerously close to total collapse. From this, we learned an important lesson. Dealing with funders is a highly diplomatic art. It involves balancing the power, keeping your fronts covered, and never putting all your eggs in one basket.

Diversifying our funding sources as a young project meant that some agencies who believed we were unknown insisted on funding our work on a project-to-project basis. We were frequently required to present a project document which covered a short-term time frame and which promised to

deliver a particular product or outcome. After this period, the agency's responsibility toward us would end. The implications of this were enormous for our work.

For one thing, it meant that the paperwork multiplied. The number of grant applications and the number of appointments with agency representatives all multiplied. The accounting administration dramatically multiplied in an effort to find money for the real needs of the project. Three agencies required us to produce receipts for every penny we spent "in order to give a good example to our donors and to cover for other organizations who are unable to present such a good record." For a small organization with an already overburdened staff and in a country where photocopying costs are astronomical and machines often scarce or far away, this was a deeply oppressive task.

Many agencies funding short-term projects refused to fund administrative overhead costs such as space rental, equipment, and salaries. Money to pay rent, then, had to be squeezed from other areas. The refusal of agencies to take these administrative costs seriously meant that we could hardly pass inspection for adherence to national health and safety laws which any employer is obliged to meet. The poor working conditions that we problematized in our educational work were being reproduced under our very noses.

#### *Accountability to Whom?*

Most aid agencies were primarily interested in funding short-term projects that would produce quick and measurable results. But measurable by whom? And by whose standards? Essentially, agencies wanted to know that their funding criteria had been met. The people who were presumably being served had little input in evaluating the achievements of the project; they had even less say in establishing the criteria for evaluation.

Sistren's limited resources made it impossible for us to do more than a very simple on-the-spot evaluation of what had been offered, whether it was a popular education workshop or a play. This minimal assessment allowed us basically to keep up the required level of accounting and reporting to agencies. It was much harder to develop, at the same time, a long-term process of evaluation and accountability to the target group, or even to maintain an awareness of their importance. We were preoccupied with record keeping. Only in this way, we believed, could we maintain our credibility, our chances of getting another grant, and, thus, guarantees of our survival.

Coming at the period in our development when it did, project-to-project funding prevented us from putting into place long-term strategies for

the growth and consolidation of the organization. Issues such as staff welfare benefits and incentives were put on the back burner, so that by the end of the 1980s we had to deal with accumulated burnout and exhaustion. While we struggled to meet the criteria set by aid agencies, we also deferred attending to internal organizational problems. Creative workshops for personal development, group recreational activities, and sensitive forms of conflict resolution were luxuries we could hardly consider in the rush to establish one small project after another. There was no time to stop and look at the system in peace, no money for developing procedures for more effective administration. Levels of self-exploitation were extremely high.

All this, coupled with problems in the collective structure, put us firmly on the road to crisis management. The effect of this style of management, together with the pressure imposed by project-to-project funding, was to give more power to certain women within Sistren, namely those who had a variety of skills and who were capable of switching concentration from one task to another. These women acquired various functions within the group and began to monopolize information about different work procedures. Those in the group who found this switching of focus confusing or who did not have the skills to enable them to shift quickly between tasks resented those who did and the power it gave them. And paradoxically, the different skills and capacities to respond to the various demands were essential to the functioning of the group.

#### *The Contradictions of Funding*

On the one hand funding agencies claimed that they were setting up self-reliant grassroots structures; but, on the other hand, they required accounting and reporting processes which could only be done by people who had either university-level qualifications or many years of experience. It should come as no surprise that most grassroots women's organizations get no funding at all to boost the specialized skills and procedures required. A rhetorical emphasis was placed on funding grassroots women's work and on building up the productive capacities of women's groups when, in fact, the way that the agencies operated led to exactly the opposite results.

Indeed, to be able to expand and to function efficiently, the organization needed to attract members with a certain level of skill and consciousness, and to provide its grassroots members with the means to acquire such training formally. However, acquiring such skills would mean that they were no longer eligible for "grass-roots" funding. This catch-22 locked them into a structure of eternal dependency.

By 1984, Sistren's funding situation had shifted. The group had become quite well-known. Instead of having to plead for funds, we now had agen-

cies falling over themselves to aid us because we were seen as an example of a successful "women's project." Donor agencies which had been quite rude to us in the early days when we were so desperately in need of money now openly courted us. We had so many visits from so many friendly agencies that it was all we could do to fit them into our schedule. This was especially true in the Northern winter, the preferred time to travel to the sunny Caribbean. Greater aid also meant greater demands on us to deliver, but it did not mean that our staff had any greater access to staff benefits or to more job security than they had had ten years previously.

The personal situation of the working-class members had become more contradictory than ever. On the surface, Sistren had become a great success. But once members stepped outside the organization, they had little chance of getting a better job. Though they had been trained as dramatists and animators, their lack of formal qualifications meant that once they left Sistren, their skills would probably not be recognized. In any case, the society had little demand for cultural workers.

On the other hand, Sistren members were no longer seen as being "grass roots" within their communities. They had traveled extensively and been exposed to new and different ideas. In their jobs, they earned salaries that placed them amongst the top one-third in the country, earning more in 1989 than graduate teachers. The theater team were "stars," spoken about on television, radio, and in the newspapers. The irony of this is that they were stars because they were grassroots, but they were no longer grassroots because they were stars. Among members, this contradiction created a deep sense of dependency on the group and, at the same time on the outside, enormous resentment toward it. Each person's identity seemed indelibly bound up with the group. To leave the group would be to become nothing. Yet, the group itself was not secure. Surely one day the aid would dry up. Or we would not be able to negotiate so well. What would happen to us then? Who would we be as individuals without this institution? Would we be anything at all?

This feeling of insecurity was heightened by the local economic and political situation. State support for health, education, and housing had been stripped away by the impact of the IMF on the Jamaican economy. Each woman's ability to earn a relatively high income had become of crucial importance to her survival, let alone her capacity to support a family. Each woman had, therefore, become deeply aware of her responsibility for herself. The need to "have something to show for all these years of work!" expressed itself again and again. In meetings, members frequently expressed the feeling that they had been robbed or exploited by "the group."

This situation increased tension between founding members and new employees. By 1986, the collective had hired approximately seven new

employees and had a total (full- and part-time) staff of approximately twenty-one. Inevitably, new employees were skilled in formal ways that the founding members were not, even though the latter may have had more experience. Founding members felt threatened by the income levels that newcomers were able to demand. They felt that expenditure on higher salaries for new employees would undermine their chances for improved job benefits. Newcomers, they thought, might in time become members of the collective. They might "take over," i.e., control power in the organization by commanding a majority vote in the General Meeting. Feeling threatened in this way, founding members bonded together and refused to take disciplinary action against each other, especially where new employees were involved. They also refused to decide on the question of how "membership" in the collective was to be granted and what it meant. The issue of benefits, and who was eligible for them, also became highly contentious.

New employees, on the other hand, wanted to know why Sistren didn't practice what it preached. As far as they were concerned, to be introduced into the organization on a less-than-equal basis was going against the democratic philosophy of collectivism. In their view, the group seemed hypocritical, and inefficient to boot. If they, as employees, could not even become members of the collective, well then, they implied, Sistren was worse than any capitalist business exploiting its employees.

### The Contradictions of Collectivity

A big problem which emerged in 1978 was the question of how the group was to be administered. What processes of decision-making could be worked out in relation to artistic policies, funding, welfare, and education? Prior to 1980, the group's structure had been very much that of tutors and students within the context of an extension program of the Jamaica School of Drama. As the work of the group grew, we experimented with structures of decision-making, all of which involved volunteer advisors from outside. Volunteers were brought in to sit on an advisory board and then on an action committee. Some of them made important contributions, but too often they either did the minimum or could not be found when needed. Sistren sent representatives to these groups but this caused conflict among those founders to whom they reported. None of these experiments met the day-to-day administrative needs of the group, nor did they advance the issues of popular culture and gender around which the group worked.

As founding Artistic Director and tutor, I had become central to all the group's activities. By 1981, I was exhausted. It was clear that I had taken on far too many functions. The collective was frequently criticized for being "my" group rather than a genuine collective. It became clear that if the

group was to survive into the 1980s and become more democratic, a new structure had to be found. All of us were in agreement about this. The structure which replaced earlier ones was based on the principle of collective decision-making.

The collective structure was intended to be nonhierarchical and self-managing. It was based on the idea that our personal practice within the organization was as important as our active work toward change in the society as a whole. If we were to be a genuine collective, we could not reproduce in our internal structure the inequitable power relations found in the wider society. Instead, we had to develop a broadly democratic structure that emphasized equality among all the members and that gave everyone a chance to participate and influence policy and action. We did not want to reproduce a structure that equated skill with authority or that divided brain from hand. In a sense, the structure that we built aimed to prefigure the kind of ideal society we wanted to create.

It consisted of a central body, "the General Meeting," in which all policy and executive decisions were made. General meetings were weekly or biweekly events. There was a rotating chair. Record keeping was done by the official secretary of the group as these were regarded as important legal documents of the collective. The agenda was devised collectively, each member having a chance to put whatever she wanted on the agenda. Administrative work assigned by the General Meeting was dealt with by teams. There was a finance team, which kept records and raised funds (although anyone could raise funds individually for a special project), a public-relations team, and, at various times, a secretarial team. There was no board, no trustees, no group of people outside of ourselves to whom we were formally accountable (other than, of course, funders). We had no manual of operations, no constitution, no rules, and no job descriptions. We had no formal way of recording General Meeting decisions as a set of precedents, the general principles of which could be applied as part of the collective's practice. We had no system of checks and balances on our operations.

Annually, we held an evaluation. The purpose was to analyze the past year's work and to determine policy for the year to come. Here lay the beginnings of a structure for reporting and assessing the group's impact. Budgeting was done separately, which meant that there was no clear relationship between the annual evaluation, the development of a yearly plan, and the presentation of statements of income and expenditure. As far as earnings went, there was initially a small income differential between full-time people involved in training the Sistren members and founding members. In 1986, this system was abolished in favor of one standard salary.

As a result, there were no salary scales, no clear indications of increments or incentives. There was, however, a commitment to a very high increase of

25 percent per year as concession to the very high levels of national inflation. As early as 1979, the collective offered all full-time members participation in a health plan, and once a year offered a tiny sum of money to a fund for Sistren children. We were never able to clarify the issue of employee benefits because there was always an enormous insecurity about where our budget was going to come from.

#### *Internal Conflicts and Problems*

In the 1980s, Sistren was unique among many other feminist organizations in that it brought together middle-class and working-class women to work on a supposedly equal basis. The middle-class women were named resource people by Sistren members. This partnership between different classes is different from middle-class women providing a professional service to working-class women or working-class women working in their own groups "at the base" and then collaborating with middle-class women around specific issues. In many ways, the working relationship between the middle- and working-class women in Sistren was one of the most creative features of the group. It was also one of the most problematic.

Education was a major issue. Though we all had much to learn about the kind of work in which we were involved, the fact is that concentrated among the early group were many of the skills required by the collective to manage its affairs and to deliver a service that would be taken seriously. The educational qualifications of the middle-class people, for instance, were high. All were university educated, most at a post-graduate level. We could type, and some spoke as many as three languages. Two of us had been educated at one of the best schools on the island and had some access to an "old girls" network. All spoke standard English and had traveled widely. Most importantly, our qualifications were recognized in the wider society outside of the collective.

The working-class members, on the other hand, were working to upgrade basic educational skills. Some had finished secondary school, others had not. Some had difficulty reading, and they felt a great deal of stress when their jobs required them to confront their lack of reading skills. As Beverly Elliot put it,

At that time, whenever I see a script come forward and I know I have to deal with the script, I used to have a lot of migraine headache because I know I just cyaan deal with it. What I totally depend on dat time is me memory. So I always ask one of the Sistren to help me, just read it for me about three times and I try remember. I don't know what really happen why I cyaan spell and read. I have to just blame it on mi young days. My

mother have eight of us and I was the biggest girl. She didn't get any help from mi fadda for us so she had to go out to work. When di rest a children get to go to school, I don't get to go because I was di biggest one so I had to be dere cooking di food, washing di clothes, and taking care of the house.

It was working-class members who brought to the collective popular cultural knowledge and language which had been made invisible and inferiorized by centuries of colonization. Working-class Sistren, like countless other Jamaican women, could teach the middle class about issues such as orality, the Jamaican language, and the lived reality of black working-class Jamaican culture. In this knowledge and lived experience are buried the contradictory values of Jamaican collective experience. An unstated belief was that naming the insurgent aspect of these values and the forces which give rise to them was central to any liberatory project; within them were contained the seeds of an alternative to the acceptance of oppressive structures.

In the early days of Sistren, this "tradeoff" of the different kinds of skills which middle- and working-class members brought to the group was possible in only a limited way. The way theater was taught to members of Sistren had implications for the validation of popular culture and the development of a sense of self-worth. The process of the drama improvisations taught the language of the theater while, at the same time, allowing people to reveal and reflect on their own experience. But it did not teach people how to theorize about their experience, nor did it teach them how to teach.

When we began to expand and to serve more people outside the organization, the internal educational experiment within Sistren itself received less and less formal attention. The way we came to define "knowledge" shifted. The particular areas in which working-class women had knowledge no longer seemed to count. This problem and the lack of attention to the educational experiment were linked to the pressures we faced in meeting the demands of our funders. They were also linked to our own ambivalence about whether we should give more weight to meeting the internal needs of members or to servicing others.

Very few educational resources exist for working-class women in Jamaica. Those that exist tend to separate the acquisition of skills from the development of critical consciousness. They rarely address, in a thorough way, the difficult issues of power, identity, race, class, and gender. Given the lack of appropriate educational programs that Sistren could draw on, resource people within the group continued to teach members what they could in order to build the organization. Current affairs, feminist theory, Caribbean history, theater skills, accounting, teaching techniques, management, public

relations—all these things were being taught in a somewhat haphazard way between rehearsals, workshops, and general meetings.

#### *Failure to Validate New Skills*

Unfortunately, no formal recognition was given to the internal education process or to the teaching role of the resource people. This meant that there was no space within Sistren for theorizing the development of the educational methodologies we used. Many, many highly creative non-formal techniques were being implemented, but there was no systematic attempt among the resource people as teachers to analyze pedagogically and methodologically exactly what we were doing. At the same time, the central ingredient of the early work got lost: the focus on working-class women reflecting on "hidden" aspects of working-class culture and communicating those to a broader audience. For example, *Lionheart Gal* teaches a great deal about working-class culture. It is able to do this because members speak for themselves in their own language and are not spoken for. The ability to analyze this culture and the methods of unearthing and reflecting on it would need to have been given very focussed attention if it were to have been nurtured and extended to other groups of women. This work had implications for methodologies of knowledge production across a whole range of disciplines. But the layers of thought and experience being uncovered were never fully theorized. In my view, the problem raised questions of critical pedagogy, cultural production, and the politics of representation. At the same time there was an absence of theoretical tools which could help in the development of decolonized feminist knowledge and a politics/aesthetics around forms of representation. In the context of the Caribbean, this would also have meant developing tools to examine the creolization process—that process of transculturation within which people of Asian, African, Aboriginal, and European backgrounds, clashed, grappled with, adapted to, and transformed each other in the unequal context of colonization.

One of the resource people, Joan French, analyzed the problem in relation to teaching in this way:

There has never been enough space for the "teaching" lessons to be learnt, partly because objectively that area ha[d] little space within the collective and little hope of getting it (outside of theater in which practice dominates). There was never enough space to question how working-class Sistren's experience with the formal system differed from their experience of being taught by the resource persons or to ask what were the shortcomings of the ways in which

we taught, or what were the possibilities of new forms of teaching appropriate to the situation of grassroots women. The implications of this are very far-reaching. Things like a sense of self-worth and validation of one's own culture and language while learning another are very important issues.

Linked to the failure to analyze the teaching methodology was the question of how to assess the progress of learners. Learning on the job became an enshrined principle in Sistren but nowhere did learning lead to graduation. Nor was there any clear and systematic way to validate skills and experience learned on the job. This could have led ultimately to the abolition of the distinction between the resource people and other collective members. The lack of formal recognition for gaining skills and experience within the group was compounded by the fact that there was no way of gaining formal recognition in the wider society for what had been taught within Sistren. The consequences of these problems affected both the middle-class resource persons and the working-class members.

The effect of unplanned and inadequately theorized methodologies was that members were overburdened and had to learn too much all at once. Members were expected to learn management, basic English, accounting, acting, teaching skills, and feminist theory. They had to attend dance classes and current-affairs discussions and somewhere, in all of this, actually do the work. In addition, they had to attend interminable meetings and do domestic chores. Joan French commented on the effects of this process:

In areas where they were actually learning, they were not given one specific area of learning (such as accounting or workshop skills) which could be developed as their skills increased. Rather they were asked to perform equally in all these various fields.

Perhaps this dispersed energy accounts in part for the ambivalence with which working-class members regarded the acquisition of skills which middle-class women had. Some members were reluctant to take on additional responsibilities and wanted things to remain more or less the same. They felt that when they tried they failed and were "put down" by the resource people or teachers. They became afraid to attempt certain things, and doubtful of their own ability to take responsibility. Others wanted the same skills as the resource people and actively agitated to lead struggles within the group to get them. Perhaps if the issue of how to do critical education and cultural production had been addressed more clearly, some of these problems would not have arisen.

### *The Persistence of Informal Power*

The second area of difficulty in the relationship between the working-class and middle-class women related to the issue of the informal power of the resource people (that is, power over other members that was not legitimized in the structure of the group). I need to point out here that it was not only resource people who held informal power within the group. Working-class members also held informal power. However, in the interviews done for this study, it was the power of the resource people that emerged again and again as a problem.

Theoretically, all Sistren members were equal in the General Meeting. Each woman had only one vote and supposedly all had equal power. But, in fact, the power of the resource people was partly guaranteed by their social location outside of Sistren; their skills were more marketable and valued at a higher price. In the 1980s, most of them were lighter-skinned or white in a society where race is deeply associated with class. Within Sistren, that power differential was also assured by the fact that it was the resource people who actually ran the funding and production processes. This was true especially for the first eight or so years of Sistren's development, during which founding members were learning many different skills and producing drama and theatre at the same time. Another difference between the two groups was that they tended to support different political parties. The working-class women supported one party and three out of four resource people were active with another.

The fact that everyone did not have a clear job description amplified the problem. The jobs which did have descriptions changed their boundaries frequently. I held the job of Artistic Director. The meaning of this title was never clearly defined. In practice, I worked out the original concept of the organization, including its image and methodology, and I did some internal training. Until 1986, I presented annual proposals for the program of work and developed the artistic concept behind the theater work. Until 1985, along with Hilary Nicholson, I initiated discussions with many funding agencies. I also directed and wrote scripts. A great deal of this I did without reflecting on the organizational meaning of these tasks and without a sense of their relationship to the institution's development. There was no clear structure of accountability for any of us within this staff-driven organization we had become.

The collective gave no importance to defining job descriptions or to identifying the kinds of decisions which could be made independently of the General Meeting. Without clarity on these issues there was, among the working-class members, a sense that the resource people were using their skills to hold on to power. Hilary Nicholson recalls,

We started hearing about the executive that sat in the back room, wrote up the agenda, typed it and made sure that things that they wanted to see on the agenda had been passed around before. And we developed the dem [them] and the oonoo [you] syndrome. Members would say, "Dem say oonoo fi organize di workshops on di hill." Translated it means "they say that you must ..." which somehow leaves "me" out of it.

But the problem went beyond class. No one was clear about her area of work and no one was confident that decision-making was working in practice. Efforts to redress this problem meant that more and more issues were dealt with collectively in general meetings of all forms, varieties, and lengths. No power could be effectively ceded from the General Meeting since any decisions taken outside of this body would be harshly criticized, ignored, or overturned. The effort to democratize the group meant that enormously long hours were spent in meetings. In spite of this, women still spoke as if they were passive recipients of group decisions and claimed to be absolved from responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. The collective process had aimed at achieving the exact opposite, that is, that all members were to participate in and feel responsible for decision-making.

At first, Sistren's claim to be a self-reliant organization was interpreted to mean that everybody could and should do everything. To insist that everyone get involved in the work teams meant going as slow as the slowest person, an extremely costly and ineffective process. This way of working assumed not only that we were equal but that equality meant sameness. The fact that we were not equal and that each person had a different talent or ability became incompatible with the ideal of the system. Gradually, members who were still "not too hot on the reading and writing business" became less and less involved in the administrative work. They found themselves with nothing to do for hours, while others worked overtime. An unequal division of labor sprang up within the collective and began to cause demoralization. On the one hand, there were those who felt they were working harder and taking more responsibility but not being paid extra or receiving sufficient credit. On the other hand, there were those who felt "we all start di same" and that a kind of "elite Sistren" was developing in which some members tried to lord it over others. When a working-class member was given a task that involved organizing other members, another member's response might be, "You cyaan tell me wa fi do. We all start di same." In this way, members sometimes undermined efforts on the part of working-class women to assume leadership.

*Race, Middle-Class Women, and the Denial of Power Needs*

Perhaps partly as a result of all of these difficulties, working-class members often felt that opinions were being forced on them by middle-class women. During this period, most of the middle-class women were white or light-skinned, and so this power inequity came to be seen as a race issue:

You have some white-face people, resource people who know how to structure things, but at times they behave like boss, and they would like to turn you inna idiot. Sometimes if you have something to say, you don't really feel to say it because they make you feel like idiot. (*May Thompson*)

They try to force you to do something you don't want to do or understand. If you don't understand, they make you feel like you are not in their league, you don't understand what they are dealing with. Some resource people have a way of looking down on us Sistren because we are not educated. (*Cerene Stephenson*)

Before 1985, I was often projected as "the leader." The fact that I am apparently white became central to questioning the group's sincerity in projecting the concerns of black working-class women. "How can a black working-class group have a white director, especially if it is a collective?" There were also questions about the power and involvement of other white or light-skinned women in the collective. Cerene Stephenson describes the effect of race on resistance toward the resource people:

Resource people within di group, I would call dem white-face people dem, dey used to be di people who up-front in everyting, go to meeting, mek decision. . . . so it becomes a problem weh yuh find dere's a conflict with di working-class and di upper-middle-class people dem. Every time di resource people dem go to a meeting, people would always say, "Where is Sistren? Who is Sistren?" Dey cyaan believe dat dose people is Sistren because deh heard of working-class women and dem no recognize dem as working-class women but as middle class. So dere come a time when each and everybody haffi tek a stand and dat stand is dat since as how we are working-class people and people asking for Sistren, each individual of Sistren have to go there and face up the people and mek decision. We di same one always have a fuss wid dem and say "Dem go out deh and tek decision about dis an no know if people will agree



to it." Definitely it couldn't work so individual members haffi go out deh and decide fi tek dem own decision.

In the language of organizational development, what Stephenson describes corresponds to what behavioral scientists call the "storming" phase in group development (Laiken 1991). In this phase of development, members struggle against dependency, and conflicts occur around power and decision-making in the organization. The problem in *Sistren* was that the structure so masked the power relations in the group that any open renegotiation of power was almost impossible. It is difficult to give up power if you deny having it and if you claim to have no power needs. Thus, the organization got stuck, spinning its wheels around the question of power. In its publicity, the group was described as working class. In fact, this publicity and the image *Sistren* projected had been designed by the middle-class resource people to stress the fact that the group was made up of working-class women whose experience was "living testimony to the meaning of oppression." The middle-class women were members and workers in the organization, too, but we made little effort to analyze our specific situation as women.

We, imposed on ourselves a virtual silence about our own experience of class and of becoming raced and sexed. When we spoke of middle-class women and their actions, it was with such stringent and judgmental criticism that a visitor from another planet might never have suspected that we came from that class. The implied self-hatred was never interrogated. We painted ourselves out of the picture in theory, while we remained at the center of the organization's work struggling to shape things in practice. While the collective had established a method of speaking out about personal experiences of oppression, this was almost always offered to working-class women, while we middle-class women facilitated or coached. Rarely did middle-class women or white women make spontaneous self-disclosures in workshops or forums. Not only did we deny what lay behind our own experiences of race and class but, since we denied it, we had no basis on which to examine the relations between classes and races which we were creating within the organization. And we were attempting and achieving some powerful and positive relations. The silence around our experience of oppression, privilege, and race made it clear that this was something about which we were uncomfortable and something we did not feel free to name. It was as if there was an unwritten rule that we should not interrogate our own lives.

The reasons for all this denial and self-censorship are extremely complex. In my view, part of the problem has to do with the way middle-class women's identity has been constructed in Jamaican colonial history and

internalized by women over generations. As many feminist historians have pointed out, in European societies from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, the ideal image of women has been that of a maternalistic housewife, a patroness of charity who is either asexual or whose sexual needs could be met by motherhood within the heterosexual family. Ideally, this Lady Bountiful was financially comfortable, which is to say, middle class and white. She was invested with responsibility for passing on morality and social virtues to her children and to society. She was the bearer of the highest cultural values of the society. She did not speak about her own needs and expressions of anger were absolutely taboo. Her domain was the domestic and the private. In public, she became the social worker.

The impact of this image on colonial society was substantial. In a former slave society, in which missionary churches were perceived as important agents of reform for the poor, the importance of these white women in the provision of social services was immense. Their do-gooder image alone fed into the acceptance of cultural dependency, which had already been cultivated through economic institutions like the plantation. Until the end of the 1930s, this image was limited to white expatriate and near-white upper-middle-class women, who, for instance, made up the membership of the Women's Social Service Club, a prominent women's organization formed in 1919. These women achieved high public visibility and wielded considerable power within the domain of social services.

Black and brown women were represented as "uncivilized," "exotic," "laborers," "promiscuous," and "primitive" in colonial discourse. They were forced to struggle against these racist mythologies by fighting for the privileges that went with the feminine ideal: access to education, management of the social services made available to poor black women or jobs in the clerical sector. They fought to gain from the professionalizing of the social services. They struggled to be considered civilizing forces of their race. While this transformed the color of the image, it meant that upwardly mobile women had to distance themselves from poor black women, since it was the latter who had to be "uplifted." Women in the Garvey Movement and the Women's Liberal Club, women such as Amy Bailey and Una Marson, believed that social work was an important duty for educated women. After 1944, the Jamaica Federation of Women brought together women of all classes and sexes around the ideal of voluntary work, marriage, and the notion of separate spheres for men and women. This organization, which at one time incorporated one third of the population in its ranks, spread the domestic ideal so far, so wide and so deep that even today, many women throughout Jamaica still identify women organizing with the activities of making jams and jellies and the crocheting of doilies. Women whose anger with the limitations of the text of Lady Bountiful forces them to step

beyond it risk being ridiculed as mad. The madness resonates differently among the races.

Counternarratives and images in the literature through the 1960s have been complicated by representations of black and brown women across class. Peasant and working-class black women have fascinated writers (mainly male ones), who have often romanticized them and depicted them as close to nature, hard-working, humorous, exotic, loyal, and, naturally (if unfortunately), sexually promiscuous. Examples of these stereotypes can be found in the writings of Louise Bennett, Claude McKay, Roger Mais, H. G. DeLisser, and Vic Reid. Middle-class black and brown women, on the other hand, as Rhonda Cobham has pointed out (Cobham 1982), have largely been negatively depicted—as frustrated, artificial, self-seeking temptresses, embodiments of the worst of bourgeois aspirations. For a middle-class woman to be a woman, she has to violate the myth of the “natural” black woman, act in opposition to it.

In the 1930s, Una Marson dramatized this problem in her play *Pocomania*, in which the heroine is caught between a desire to express her African identity, her inability to do this and remain middle class. To become middle class, then, meant acting against one’s “nature,” and becoming socially white because the cultural symbols of Africa had to be left behind. The heroine Marson evokes a woman uprooted, paralyzed with loss and marooned in a cultural minefield, unable to act on her own needs and subject to madness as a result. The anger behind her grief and loss is taboo, and inexpressible because middle-class women are not permitted to recognize their own anger, let alone to express it on their own behalf. Marson’s heroine loses her voice and collapses. This is the risk to black women who transgress social whiteness and challenge the image of the good woman. Most recently, the work of writers like Jean Binta Breeze and Erna Brodber have suggested alternative narratives, but these women, too, invoke the spirit of madness which must be confronted in the search for a new possibility.

For a white or brown woman to speak against the narrative is to summon up the older, more negative counterimages of collusion in slavery, the violence of interracial sexual contact, and the intergenerational shame associated with those legacies. For white women, to act against the text is to risk being understood in the terms of the other narratives of whiteness that exist in the society. On the one hand, there is the suicidal madwoman in the attic, Charlotte Brontë’s creole heiress from Spanish Town, whom Jean Rhys later represented in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This pathetic figure is unable to speak for herself, out of control, simultaneously derided yet tolerated by callous caregivers. She is anticolonial, but unable to find a role for herself in postslavery society. She ends up dead—having committed suicide. The other popular counterimage is even older and dates back to slavery. It is that of the depraved white woman and is based on the myth of slave

owner Annie Palmer, the white witch of Rose Hall. She appropriated African religious practices like obeah and used them to dominate and exploit black people and to sexually tyrannize black and white men. More cruel than the most cruel white master, she, too, ends up dead—murdered by one of her black lovers.

The idea that middle-class women had to act as patrons and “social mothers” if they were to have any interclass relations with working-class women is a narrative that is deeply rooted in the structure of colonial society. But more than this, it has been internalized through education, family, and in forms of representation. It conditions expectations and desires, as well a sense of what is possible for women of different classes and races. It cannot be voluntaristically rewritten by strong-willed individuals simply because they wish to do so. The “good” middle-class woman of both races is she who has no needs, never speaks about herself, and never expresses anger except on another’s behalf. She works tirelessly for the welfare of others, and she is passively heterosexual, or if necessary, asexual. She remains at the center, but does so without looking inward to her own needs. She denies her own power needs and stays in control by focusing outward to ward off the confusion that might result from confronting the unexplored self.

This model has been central to the culture of Jamaican women’s organizations throughout the twentieth century. No other image has proven as potent or has been as carefully diffused throughout all the social institutions. Caribbean Socialist discourses, with their silence around sexuality, their conflation of race and class, their continued emphasis on notions of unified class identity, on work, and the working class as the class of the future, offer no real alternative to these women. Socialist images of women later supplemented the image by adding a public persona, that of the women worker, but the “nature” of women’s identity went largely unchallenged, and women were now expected to be worker, wife, mother *and* do voluntary work for the country. For women to speak about their own needs is to presumably risk being seen as “self-indulgent” in a situation in which oppression is formulated as a fundamentally economic relation and in which solutions to economic instability are equated with psychic well-being.

By not problematizing our own situation, we middle-class women were being “good girls,” inadvertently playing into that old colonial image of middle-class femininity. By “facilitating” working-class women’s expression of their own oppression and not our own, we were engineering only a partial picture of the situation confronting Jamaican women. Our function was almost voyeuristic: we were collaborating with the economism of Western development models by fetishizing “grass roots” women. None of this is to deny the importance of constructing alternative images of work-

ing-class women, of talking back to the dominant classes and to men, and of creating a new vision of society from this standpoint. But our problem was that in silencing ourselves, we were denying our own differences and complexities. We avoided naming our own experience, which might have created a real basis for transforming old class-based dynamics. By keeping our mouths shut, we allowed the construct of the "good woman" to remain intact. We missed an opportunity to envision and formulate new images of women's identity and interclass relations.

The failure to interrogate our own power and position allowed us to use our skills while continuing to deny the issues of power underlying them. At the same time, the working-class members could benefit from the skills of the middle-class women without clarifying the nuts and bolts of the relationship and without learning those skills and risking exercising them. Dependency and patronage implicate both parties.

Yet the resource people contributed much to forming Sistren, to keeping it alive, and to developing its work. We were not only "vessels of authority" or "wielders of power." We also had personal and collective needs for affirmation. In practice, we often deferred to majority working-class decisions. However, these problems were never adequately addressed or resolved. As resource person Joan French put it,

The structure never honestly recognized the similarities and differences between the resource people. Because we were guilt-ridden about our class power, we made ourselves into nonpersons in theory, but we remained individuals in reality. The failure to deal with that meant tensions developed between resource persons, and these, together with the weight of the individuals' role and their work with Sistren, had an impact on the perceptions and behavior of founding members. . . . We talked too much about what "grass roots" Sistren "should" do and too little about what we were doing. We needed to examine things like the nature of resource people available, the particularities and limitations of these resource people, regeneration, expansion, and, possibly, eventual abolition of these kinds of resources altogether.

In this failure to fully conceptualize our role, function, and needs, work operated as a proxy for class and color, rather than as a set of skills which could be acquired.

#### *Personality Politics and the Small Group*

Personality conflicts also developed and deepened over time. This is probably inevitable in any small, informally differentiated group, particularly

where individuals are in close ongoing contact. These conflicts between group and individual were exacerbated by aspects of the group's history.

In Sistren, the early focus on sharing personal experiences of oppression encouraged such expressions in the group. From very early on, close bonds were established between founding members through the drama workshops which emphasized speaking out about personal experiences. Often these workshops got at things that members had long held pent up inside them. This process established the small group as a place where personal difficulties could be reflected upon and reenacted. In a sense, Sistren was like a therapy group, though obviously this was not the intention.

When the group activity of sharing experiences was replaced by decision-making and management, Sistren did not establish another space where the work around personal issues could continue. Suddenly, there was no space for personal problems, everyday crises, or the resolution of conflicts. Members were, of course, free to put whatever they liked on the agenda of the General Meeting. But now no one seemed to want to speak openly about problems with lovers or medical difficulties, especially in between making decisions about policy, tours, or the visits of foreigners. The argumentative style of the General Meeting did not offer a sufficiently judgment-free environment for the full discussion of personal life problems.

Needless to say, the earlier need to discuss such experiences did not just disappear; instead, it became submerged within the management agenda. Meetings often became a place where people unconsciously acted out their personal problems—not by trying to discuss them but by establishing behavioral patterns and conflicts that were repeated again and again. Some of these behavior patterns were related to issues outside the group and some to conflicts between members. Most of these conflicts or patterns were never solved or changed.

Small groups tend to become a substitute for the family, and in this context, individuals tend to reexperience unresolved problems from early childhood. Within Sistren, most of us would have denied that this kind of psychological scenario had anything to do with our organizational patterns. Yet, how else can the repeated patterns around divergent issues be fully explained? The tendency to relive patterns set early in one's life seems to me to be very strong in women's groups, because women's groups often have a commitment to dealing with the personal, giving individuals permission to raise their own unresolved experiences. In particular, it seems inevitable that issues around the mother—generally one's primary caretaker and first intimate relationship—will begin to surface. Unless these are dealt with, they will disrupt group work.

This has many implications for what we call democracy. Issues which surface for debate are often only one aspect of what is really taking place, which might include the dramatization of problems that have plagued a

woman all her life. The undifferentiated group structure, such as existed in Sistren, did nothing to establish a working culture in which the demands of production could co-exist with a support structure for resolving self-destructive patterns of behavior.

*Language and Rationality in Sistren's "Parliamentary Democracy"*

There were other problems specific to the structure and process of the General Meeting. Meetings followed a type of parliamentary procedure in that they relied on argument and debate. They were generally not working meetings where tasks were carried out, although occasionally this happened, too. In the main, however, the meetings were based on discussion. Not surprisingly, Rebecca Knowles dubbed the General Meeting the "Sistren Parliament."

It was assumed that within the meeting, everyone was able to articulate her thoughts in a rational way. In its drama work, Sistren used a methodology that aimed at uniting feeling and action. This approach was based on the understanding that the verbal argument was not always the best educational method for adults who had been excluded from the formal educational system in childhood. We seemed to forget this key principle when we came to work with ourselves.

The greatest problems in making the meeting system work stem from the vast differences in education and language. In the General Meeting language shifted back and forth between Jamaican and English. The resource people, products of colonial education, expressed ideas in English. Working-class women often expressed resistance through body language, sound, and other forms of nonverbal communication. As some members of Sistren point out in *Lionheart Gal*, working-class Jamaican girls are frequently discouraged from questioning or arguing with authority figures, whether these are parents, religious leaders, or school personnel. The belt or the stick is often the reward for enquiry. This means that when questioning does take place, it is often couched in a nonconfrontational, indirect form. There is frequently a tendency to question privately with a friend and then to undermine the positions one has officially agreed to. It is done by signifying disagreement and using personal power to act on the situation. This kind of covert resistance is deeply rooted in Jamaican history. It has been a response to colonial patterns of domination, and extends beyond decision-making processes.

These patterns of culture and communication posed extremely difficult problems for our attempt to build a democratic process. The effectiveness of the system of parliamentary democracy depends on one's ability to construct an argument in language, one's ability to debate and confront. The challenge facing us was how to take the different styles of discourse into

consideration, and how to overcome disparity in language and the fear of overt disagreement.

Argument is not equivalent to truth. In our context the conflict between argument and truth caused further problems since it involved women of different classes. Members would sometimes agree to decisions they did not fully understand because they did not want to hold things up or because they could not think of any argument to use in favor of their alternative. This happened even when members were very uncomfortable with the way things were going, and often resulted in a division between discussion and action.

Resistance to the language and power of the resource people was often demonstrated. It usually took the form of silence, pouting, aggressive anger, abuse, tears, or sleeping. Working-class members of Sistren were reluctant to put their ideas into words because that left them open to disagreement. When someone did not understand the English used, they felt humiliated by having to stop the process over and over again to get clarification. Resistance, then, often led to stalemates on issues of great importance.

Collective decisions were uniting positions; the majority ruled. We never discussed the option of operating by consensus rather than by majority rule. Nor did we discuss the possibility of tolerating minority positions within the group on particular issues, though obviously, there was oftentimes a wide variety of opinions. Here, there was a sense that equality signified sameness and rigid agreement, rather than a willingness to tolerate different views and practices within the same organization.

*Questions of Discipline, Authority, and Responsibility*

The General Meeting was responsible for enforcing discipline in the collective. It failed most of the time. The collective never managed to come up with disciplinary action that could be applied to all without prejudice. This was partly because a majority vote was necessary to enforce discipline and most of the time members balked at the prospect. Some members were afraid of others with particularly dominating personalities. Others wanted to keep the "elite Sistren" from gaining more power, or to attack or condone actions of the resource people. Sometimes, someone wanted to be seen as the power or leader of a team. Thus, the members who had no "posse," or allies to defend them within the collective, were frequently disciplined while others got away with all kinds of things. Added to this, there was no disciplinary code, so each time there was a disciplinary problem, special sanctions had to be invented from scratch. Sometimes consequences varied in intensity and were felt to be unfairly applied. Lorna Burrell comments on the whole problem this way:

I am not totally against our system, but we need to know more about how the outside deals with problems such as ours. For instance, we, like many other groups, have things like petty thieving. If you have that problem in an outside group and you can't identify the guilty person, everybody else will have to pay the penalty, so they are quick to identify the problem. Sometimes, in our collective, if you have petty thieving going on and you catch a person red-handed, nobody wants to say it is that person because we feel that we begin at one time, so we must be together at all times. Now, I feel this is the height of foolishness and we are supporting slackness. How on earth, then, would you really pull through when you have things like that going on? You are developing hatred. When some people are willing to make decisions for discipline, some are against it. Not only with petty thieving but with everything. When discipline comes about, you have a split and there is no solution.

A number of problems in the collective stemmed from our failure to deal with the question of authority. For example, a decision made by a majority of members in one setting could be overturned by the small group charged with its implementation. This disregard for collective authority affected our ability to do things quickly, especially where a quick response to a specific situation was required. If there were a statement to be made or an action to be taken, a meeting of the entire collective was necessary before approval could be given. The collective could not respond fast enough because of its structure.

The attempts by individual members to exercise authority led to more and more issues being decided in lengthy meetings. The collective refused to accept the authority of one or two people about anything. General meetings would sometimes last as long as eight hours and then spill over into the next day. Sometimes life itself seemed like one long meeting. Some members were not interested in all the details of managing the group but wanted simply to be good actors, teachers, or accountants. Others wanted to specialize in management and administration. This was not possible given the overwhelming amount of time spent in collective decision-making.

#### *The Effects of the Collective Structure*

The amount of time required for collective decision-making increased as the group's areas of work expanded. We became so busy debating issues of race, class, political affiliation, finances, and status among ourselves that we had less time to produce. While we were busy feeling the impact of political

transformation in our small organization at deeply personal levels, the world continued as it always had. The time we were able to spend addressing issues of education and the transfer of skills diminished. The time we were able to spend clarifying our theater methodology diminished. The time we were able to spend producing new plays, screen-prints, and doing workshops diminished. Between 1984 and 1987, Sistren produced only one major new work, *Muffet Inna All A We*. Magazines and books that were meant to form a documentation center for women piled up and collected dust as no one had time to deal with them. And, we were all tired *all the time*.

In 1984, the collective voted to abandon two years of group-building workshops in urban and rural communities. This had been one of the main areas of work through which the participatory drama methodology around women's issues was being passed on. It was also an area of work through which the collective had systematic contact with the concerns and culture of a broad group of working-class women, and it provided a voice for women who wanted to "join Sistren." This decision to cut off group-building work was taken without consulting the very women with whom we had been working. Still, many women of all classes wanted to have a stake in the group, to become involved in the organization, and to grow as it grew. Sistren decided to continue to serve groups that were already organized. But it did not change the fact that only a very small percentage of women in Jamaica were in *any* organization at all and that an even smaller percentage were in women's organizations. By 1985, Sistren had become one of the most visible women's groups nationally. But the question of its responsibility to its founders, to the women it served and its commitment to different kinds of work remained unresolved.

#### Conclusion

A major problem in Sistren's internal organization was the way it came to equate democracy with a single notion: collective decision-making. The undifferentiated collective form presents a number of problems. It can be antithetical to productivity and service delivery because it tends to privilege internal practice over external impact. Given the complex networks of power that affect groups and individuals, apparently radical democratic forms of decision-making often mask the perpetuation of central contradictions such as race and class. Where ideological variety or difference exists within a group, these become perceived as obstacles to sameness rather than as opportunities to develop the richness and complexity of the group's work. The undifferentiated collective structure lends itself to the exercise of power by informal leaders whose roles can never be clearly defined, who are not clearly accountable within the group, and who tend to operate covertly.

Real processes of decision-making, then, become masked, and the organization becomes bogged down in a morass of endless meetings, low productivity, a sense of diffused responsibility, and low morale.

I would argue, as others have, that decision-making processes that are entirely collective only work effectively in very small organizations with limited and tightly defined aims and objectives. Given the constraints of Jamaica's political and cultural context and the economic problems facing groups like *Sistren*, the collective decision-making model may not be the single most effective way to ensure democracy. When an organization grows and takes on varied activities, there is a need to move away from the informal, vaguely defined collective structure. Clearly, a variety of structures need to be created to deal with different objectives. But the model of collective decision-making is sometimes idealistically and dogmatically imposed on situations as varied as campaign activity, production of goods and services, and self-help. In *Sistren's* history, the phase of intense collectivity was a necessary one. Although I have deliberately stressed its negative features, it unquestionably exposed members to new areas of decision-making and acquainted everyone with the skills of advocacy. By 1988, however, the movement toward some specialization and differentiation also seemed necessary and inevitable, if the problems were to be solved.

What shape can be envisioned for a democratic organization other than the collective? There can be no dogmatic answer to this question. Just as the collective decision-making model works in some situations, but not in others, there can be no one true democratic organizational form that will work effectively in all cultures and in all political and economic contexts. Perhaps, though, there is something to be learned from appropriating and adapting some of the ideas about organizational processes from group psychology and from the practical experiences of businesses, associations, and other organizations, even though ten years ago they were condemned as hierarchical, patriarchal, and bureaucratic. Two concepts that need much fuller discussion within the women's movement are management and leadership, and their relationship to collective forms of governance. In an effort to throw out the charismatic leader, or the emergence of a personality cult, alternative forms of leadership have not really been defined.

Within women's groups, it is especially difficult to grant and accept leadership from other women. Historically, women have been excluded from the allocation of power. Male, white, middle-class privilege has been so founded on hierarchy, division, and specialization that the women's movement has been cautious about reproducing forms that seem to imitate these models. In the Caribbean, it is particularly difficult to come to terms with the issue of leadership in an open way because race, class, and skill are tied together and because resistance to the forms of domination are often covert, informal, and

unnamed. However, to avoid the discussion of leadership is no solution. Leadership, as others have argued, always exists, whether it is legitimized or not. Informal leadership can result in far greater authoritarianism than leadership which is formal and accountable. The time has come to get the issue out into the open.

Part of the problem in *Sistren* was a failure to recognize the need for different kinds of leadership appropriate to different kinds of work and applicable to different moments in the life of the organization. Beyond this, there was a failure to speak openly about women's power needs. The denial of the power and life experience of middle-class women, the failure to recognize and name differences in identities and needs, meant that feminist analysis was only partial. It also meant that there was no way to talk about how to work together across differences, let alone how to negotiate new forms of leadership. The failure to analyze and discuss the position of middle-class women of different identities meant that these women's needs were never explicitly part of the story. When power needs are denied, it is impossible to deal with questions of leadership in ways that lead to creative solutions.

The term "management" is sometimes interpreted as an authoritarian big boot, squeezing the lifeblood out of its underlings. In our setting, "management" carried the connotation of exploiters from "the evil empire" of capitalism. The term certainly does not connote structures that focus the goals of an organization and the needs of those who work in it. Instead, it conjures up images of rigid bureaucracy manipulated by those who occupy top positions in a monolithic hierarchy. In rejecting the worst of capitalism, however, we must not throw out the baby with the bath water. Management and leadership, whether they reside in individuals or in groups of people, need to be controlled. This can be done by defining both what is to be managed and how leaders can be held accountable at different moments in an organization's life. Such structures need to allow for different approaches and greater autonomy within different sections of an organization. Issues of skills transfer and education could then be addressed in a systematic and consistent way. A key concept in thinking about democratic management, then, is accountability, a concept that can be applied differently within an organization and with those it serves.

The second major problem that confronted *Sistren* was the effect of international funding policies on the organization. International agencies funding development projects have an enormous amount of power. One only has to see the files of any agency involved in "development" to recognize the wealth of information they have accumulated about organizations working for social change. Dispensing funds gives them tremendous power over people's lives all over the world. They are able to shape the lives of the organi-

zations they support, not simply because they fund them, but also because of the processes and regimes of disciplines to which they require the organizations to adhere. The term "partner," currently being used by donor agencies to describe their relationship with recipient organizations, only obscures what remains a very real power relation. This ostensible egalitarian label obscures the way in which the power differential produces and regulates the reality of those who are funded.

The obvious first step toward changing relations here is to use the structures that we have built since the 1970s to begin to raise funds locally to support organizations that serve women. We were not always able to do this, but now we have enough of a history to begin this struggle. All kinds of strategies are possible, including creating a regional foundation, charging for some of the services we offer, and developing partnerships between business and professional women and working-class women in our own countries. Building our own indigenous sources of funding is crucial to the future if we are ever to find our way out of the dependency trap. Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to this among regional women's organizations. Bringing women's groups together to discuss combined strategies for local funding would be a first step.

Organizations like Sistren cannot yet do without foreign funders if they are to continue to offer the same range of services. However, we are at the stage where women's organizations working together—first regionally, then internationally—can use their lobbying power to build alliances. A key factor in such a lobby is the building of relationships with partner groups in host countries and nongovernmental agencies. Such links will strengthen the chances of creating structures that are accountable to the groups at home and abroad. At the moment, very little consultation on funding takes place between women's groups, NGOs, and funders. A first step toward building dialogue would be to establish a forum in which information about the relations of funding and the problems, procedures, and privileges to which they give rise can be discussed. Such a dialogue would strengthen alliances between women's groups and contribute to building joint negotiating power.

One issue that women's groups need to face squarely is the tendency of agencies to prioritize material production over educational and cultural processes, and to see these areas as separate and distinct. In the long run, this separation serves to entrench dependency because it ensures that internal processes of organizational development and transfer of skills are always subsumed under the "more important" processes of production. In fact, culture and economics are inextricably linked. In Sistren's case, it would have been far better to develop the experimental, educational, and cultural work, and to build gradually an economic base from this. Instead, the energies of the group were divided, reproducing the very divisions

Jamaican society has made among creative, educational, and economic work. These separations multiplied the training and administrative needs of the project and ultimately helped to retard the development of Sistren's educational and artistic work.

On the other hand, the importance of building up some form of self-financing in groups like Sistren cannot be ignored. Any single issue or set of issues that are prioritized for funding by agencies can be used against the development of effective organizational processes. International funding agencies often determine priorities, which are then applied in a blanket way. The political and cultural context and the available skills and resources are all areas that need very careful consideration. When local factors are not taken into consideration, choices about program activities can be made with negative consequences for local organizations. This is especially true when organizations are young or when they operate in a conservative context in which there is little capacity for negotiation with more powerful international agencies. When an organization's survival is at stake, meeting the criteria of international agencies will take priority over developing processes of accountability to its constituency. In Sistren's case, the organization did not have the capacity to develop both processes simultaneously. I have shown the negative consequences for Sistren's development of the blanket imposition of "income generation" as a solution to women's problems and have argued that it created many more problems than it solved. Such mistakes cannot be waved away. Their implications mushroom into new difficulties, which are often harder to deal with than the problems they were originally meant to solve. They involve people's lives, hopes, energies, investments, and resources in deep ways. The disillusionment and bitterness they create profoundly affect an organization's potential to have an impact on its community and to build a healthy working culture.

Finally, the emphasis of international agencies on funding "grass-roots" women seems to be contradictory and simplistic. Grass-roots women are not miracle workers, and, like middle-class women, they need to study and understand a situation before they can work effectively in it. The fact that someone is, by birth, "grass-roots" does not necessarily make them more understanding of the causes of poverty, or what will change them. It does not give them a keener sense of justice or of how to deal with others. It does not necessarily make them more effective at their jobs. Funding policies sometimes seem prone to fetishizing grass-roots women, confusing class and sex origins with class and gender consciousness. Agency policies sometimes emphasize the delivery of funding to grass-roots women while ignoring the many complex processes involving gender and class processes that reproduce the very conditions funding is supposed to alleviate. In the end, funding does not always contribute to social transformation. In fact, as was

the case with Sistren, funding reproduced the very relationships of dependency and domination between aid agencies and recipients that the group was attempting so desperately to overturn.

The deleterious effects of funding practices which I have mapped in this essay ought not to cloud the possibility of strategic alliance building with certain individuals within agencies. There are staff members in some organizations who are genuinely troubled by the operation of dependency and domination and are interested in reconfiguring questions of accountability. They want to use their organizational leverage to help bring about social change. Yet it is up to us, organizations like Sistren and regional feminist groups, to construct the terms of a genuinely internationalist alliance in order to bring about radical changes in the societies in which we live.