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Resisting the ‘cancer of silence’: The formation of sistren’s ‘feminist democracy’

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Abstract
Writing in the 1980s, Honor Ford-Smith, the then Artistic Director of Sistren, described Sistren Theatre Collective’s theatre productions and outreach work as attempting to ‘resist’ the ‘cancer of silence’ that was closing down the spaces in Jamaican society in which cultural work develops. The ‘cancer of silence’ was, according to Ford-Smith, embodied in Jamaica-US relations and the IMF Structural Adjustment Program, both of which brought about decreased support for cultural production, particularly that which critiqued local and global hegemonies. Ford-Smith was also reflecting on the change in political climate engendered by Edward Seaga’s Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in the 1980s compared with that of the Michael Manley led People’s National Party (PNP) of the 1970s.
Resisting the ‘Cancer of Silence’: The Formation of Sistren’s ‘Feminist Democracy’

Writing in the 1980s, Honor Ford-Smith, the then Artistic Director of Sistren, described Sistren Theatre Collective’s theatre productions and outreach work as attempting to ‘resist’ the ‘cancer of silence’ that was closing down the spaces in Jamaican society in which cultural work develops. The ‘cancer of silence’ was, according to Ford-Smith, embodied in Jamaica-US relations and the IMF Structural Adjustment Program, both of which brought about decreased support for cultural production, particularly that which critiqued local and global hegemonies. Ford-Smith was also reflecting on the change in political climate engendered by Edward Seaga’s Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in the 1980s compared with that of the Michael Manley led People’s National Party (PNP) of the 1970s. Although Obika Gray points out that both political parties were expediently appropriating ‘the “nation language” of downtrodden groups’ (74) in their political campaigns, under Manley’s democratic socialist government cultural workers were encouraged to experiment with theatrical forms and to create theatre around social issues as an integral part of the process of decolonisation (I will call the spaces that were created for such experimentation ‘aesthetic’ spaces, to use Augusto Boal’s terminology¹). These ‘aesthetic spaces’, however, were perceived as threatening to the Seaga regime and, as a result, it attempted to silence oppositional voices within the society. However, Anthony Payne reports that ‘[t]he intense politicisation of the Manley period had created a more aware public opinion in Jamaica, and popular aspirations for social justice, inspired by the PNP’s socialism, were not extinguished but were re-directed at the JLP’ (89).

The Seaga government’s fostering of closer ties with the United States brought about the suppression of dissident voices within Jamaican society, many of whom had either been supporters of Manley’s socialist experiment and/or ‘cultural agents’² involved in developing grassroots cultural organisations. Re-colonisation, in the form of external and internal neo-colonialism, stifled the emergence of popular movements and stymied the aspirations of disadvantaged groups working for the alleviation of poverty through community decision-making processes. Community cultural organisations collapsed from lack of funding or were censored and/or harassed by the new regime. The members of Sistren, who were working as street cleaners in a PNP-funded unemployment
alleviation program (called the Impact Program), found themselves unemployed and ‘homeless’ after the Seaga government cancelled the program and banned them from using the Cultural Training Centre’s facilities at the Jamaica School of Drama. Justifying their actions, the JLP claimed that ‘only PNP partisans were employed in what they saw as an essentially unproductive exercise’ (Wilson 43). By 1980, the members of Sistren were no longer working as street cleaners, but had been retrained to work as teachers’ aides. Working in schools had a positive effect on their respective sense of self and enabled them to improve their educational skills.

Further, the political climate engendered by the JLP empowered ultra-conservatives within the society. The murder of Mikey Smith, Dub poet and cultural worker, in 1983 is a case in point. Ford-Smith suggests that Smith’s death was indicative of ‘an unnamed crisis’ affecting cultural workers in the Caribbean: ‘Its effects are felt in death … in harassment, in migration and/or long periods of temporary exile. It is felt in an inability to speak truthfully about what is happening in the society and a crippling tendency to repeat old formulas over and over again’ (n.d. 4). Mikey Smith described his own poetry as political, but suggested that he was not ‘sectarian inna my view. Me lick out gainst baldhead, PNP, JLP, any one of them P-deh’ (40). Artists with an acute sense of social injustice, such as Smith, have suffered the contradiction of being courted by overseas markets at the same time as they are persecuted for political protest within their own countries. Smith had toured many countries throughout the world, and was preparing to tour Britain at the time of his murder (Morris 40). Smith is not the only artist to die tragically for his criticism of political wrongdoing. Gordon Rohlehr lists numerous artists and activists who have been persecuted and/or murdered for their critique of Caribbean societies. He points out that the State could not afford to foster these voices, dependent as it was upon tourism and US economic assistance: ‘Where necessary, they imprisoned or muzzled them, and under extreme circumstances, they assassinated the voice’ (41–42).

In order to resist the ‘cancer of silence’, it is necessary to identify the processes of re-colonisation in the era of globalisation. In Jamaica, the ‘economic crisis’ resulted in increased unemployment, the devaluation of the currency, the elimination of government subsidies to farmers, decreased union involvement, and an increase in the number of women working in the informal sector (Safa and Antrobus 1992; Levitt 2005). In the face of economic crises such as these, cultural workers are ambivalent about the form of resistance they should adopt. Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gomés-Peña writes: ‘In this unprecedented “post-democratic era” … civic, human, and labour rights, education, and art are perceived as expendable budget items, minor privileges, and nostalgic concerns’ (11). In the era of globalisation, funding for cultural production is rarely offered by the State; cultural workers must seek financial support from organisations that are often external to their situation. This is because ‘radical’ performance,
that is ‘acts that question or re-envision ingrained social arrangements of power’ (Cohen-Cruz 1), has the potential to bring about social change. The available sources of funding for such cultural production are limited and often involve negotiating grants with development agencies or marketing cultural work in the global capitalist marketplace (Ford-Smith n.d. 26). Needless to say, some funding sources have the potential to compromise and depoliticise dissident voices. Although both scenarios present ethical dilemmas for cultural workers, the importance of survival has taken priority over political standpoints. Some cultural workers accept funding from development agencies, as Eugene van Erven points out, with the attitude that the money is global capitalist profit and should be used to finance subversive activities. These groups deliberately tailor their funding applications to meet development agency requirements and to justify their actions by claiming that development agencies are ‘representatives of the very imperialist cultures that created colonies in the first place and continue to benefit from neocolonialism now’ (232). Jo Rowlands also asserts that groups that apply for Women In Development funding are equally capable of ‘identify[ing] trends in funding criteria, and will strategically or even cynically, include in funding applications the wordings necessary to obtain funding approval’ (28). Even Honor Ford-Smith admits that the popularity of Women in Development projects in the late 1970s provided ‘a loophole through which [Sistren] could slip to avoid extinction’ (1989 59). Others attempt to escape the repressive forces in their societies by participating in the globalisation of cultural production. In many societies, surviving on the earnings from one’s cultural production is almost impossible; the profitable marketplace for such products exists in the North. This presents a dilemma for cultural workers as the messages embedded in their cultural production are targeted at local audiences, yet financial rewards must be sought further afield.

Sistren’s cultural work in Jamaica during the 1980s was at the forefront of feminist anti-globalisation activism in the Caribbean region and, at the same time, it was adversely impacted by the forces of globalisation (Green 2004; 2006). In order to survive, Sistren applied for development agency funding which financed the group’s activities throughout the 1980s; however, the funding caused Sistren internal problems leading it to the brink of collapse in recent years. Until the 1980s, Sistren had been operating mainly as a consciousness-raising group which theatricalised the major themes of its discussions. The prospect of long-term unemployment for Sistren members, and the effects of IMF Structural Adjustment programs on Jamaican women in general, prompted Sistren to put its consciousness-raising into practice on a broader front. This is not to suggest, however that Sistren’s work lost its political edge. On the contrary, it became ‘fervently political’ (Wilson 44), but was able to achieve political ‘neutrality’ within Jamaica by securing aid agency funding under the guise of Women in Development.
Despite the company’s efforts to raise their own funds through community activities, such as car washes and jam drives (Ford-Smith 1997b 226–27), development agency funding proved to be more reliable and consistent. In return, development agencies expected Sistren to establish a business enterprise in order to become self-sufficient. Sistren Textiles, inspired by the screen printed costumes that were designed for the group’s second major production, Nana Yah, satisfied development agency requirements. Sistren’s transformation under the guise of Women in Development allowed the company to, firstly, critique the status of women in Jamaican society and, secondly, conduct consciousness-raising workshops with groups of women throughout the island. Given Jamaica’s political climate in the 1980s, it was imperative for Sistren to strengthen its base of support, a task that necessitated fostering transnational alliances. Hence the focus of the group’s work shifted from making plays to conducting community development workshops.

Sharon Green has published two recent articles on Sistren’s work, in 2004 and 2006 respectively, in which she discusses the impact of globalisation on Sistren’s community theatre work. Her main argument is that ‘the challenges posed by globalisation have eroded the original function of Sistren’s cultural practice as a source of empowerment for poor Jamaican women’ by looking to Sistren’s ‘international connections’ as the reason the group’s work changed in the Jamaican context (2006 113). While Green mentions development agency funding and the international women’s movement as two of the main players shaping Sistren’s work on the international scene, she does not go into any detail about Sistren’s transformation from a theatre co-operative to a Women and Development non-government organisation; a transformation intrinsically linked to the onset of late global capitalism and the modernisation agendas of international aid donors.

In this essay, I will look at Sistren’s transformation into a ‘feminist democracy’, a term coined by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997) in the introduction to their edited collection Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, in order to discuss the way in which Sistren both resisted and complied with the processes of globalisation. Feminist democracies are born out of the decolonisation movement and respond to the State’s treatment of women; they provide a space for questioning naturalised hierarchies in society with the aim of transforming relationships between people through collective organisation. Within feminist democracies, agency is theorised differently so that self-determination becomes a reality; alternatives are proposed to bring about social change; and transnational alliances are fostered (xxviii–xxix). By looking at the criteria outlined by Alexander and Mohanty, I will discuss the way in which Sistren’s work reflects on, protests against, intervenes in, but is ultimately co-opted by, the process of globalisation. I will also investigate the ways in which Sistren’s cultural work and organisational structure to some extent complicate and contest the concept of ‘feminist democracy’.
**Women and the State**

From 1980 onwards, Sistren’s theatrical productions became increasingly political in orientation, and particularly analysed the treatment of women by the ‘apparatus of government’. Productions and workshop programs were devised around the following issues: the IMF Structural Adjustment Program; the care of the aged and infirm; unionisation; and the sexual division of labour.

In the Seaga era, Sistren members’ decisions on projects that the company should undertake became more focused on political events, economic trends, and social structures. Therefore the company placed greater emphasis on developing its workshop program, which reached more women — and particularly more working-class women — while the company’s productions were effective in bringing working-class women’s concerns to the attention of middle-class Jamaicans; the company’s importance as a grassroots organisation was in its ability to reach even the poorest women in Jamaican society through its community outreach program. The phrase ‘the personal is political’ is particularly apposite for describing Sistren’s approach in the 1980s. Sistren’s work focused on real life experiences of social injustice, problems facing working women, the roles women have played in union organising, feminist mobilisation and protests against inequality. Sistren members used their personal testimonies to empower groups of women in diverse situations. A workshop conducted in a women’s prison, for example, was particularly effective, according to Ford-Smith, because of the use of personal testimony. One Sistren member described her experience of being intimidated by a man to hide stolen goods, which sparked a series of testimonies among the inmates that highlighted a commonality of experience: ‘It was a testimony about oppression and the more women joined in, the louder the protest’ (nd 124).

A particularly effective series of workshops conducted with women working in Jamaica’s sugar industry has fortunately been well documented on video. Joan French, a school teacher, union organiser and middle-class Sistren member, was the co-ordinator of the workshop program at this time, and the methodology Sistren members employed developed out of her ‘contribution to the critical content of our educational strategy’ (Ford-Smith 1997b 222). The company divided into two workshop teams: one working with the sugar workers and the other with middle- and working-class urban women. The rural team visited Sugar Town, a multi-national-owned sugar plantation situated in the parish of Clarendon, in which many women work planting and harvesting sugar cane. In 1982, the year in which Sistren members began the workshop program, the female sugar workers were earning JA $9.60 per day for their labour. Sistren members conducted interviews with the sugar workers, which were filmed for the group’s subsequent video production titled *Sweet Sugar Rage*. The video begins by juxtaposing the lives of rural and urban women. The workshop conducted with the sugar workers further enhanced these similarities. Warm-up games and songs were used to develop trust between the women. This was followed by the
performance of an excerpt from Sistren’s play, *Domesticks*, in which the working conditions for female domestic workers is delineated. To begin the performance, Sistren members marched into the space chanting ‘A-sugar, a-sugar’ which was used as a framing device to connect the lives of the sugar workers to those of the domestic helpers. Chairs were arranged in a semi-circle on which the actors sat during the performance. Sistren member Bev Hanson moved into the centre of the space to mime the domestic chore of ironing while singing a folk song which described the domestic duties women are required to perform. An excerpt from Sistren’s play, *Domesticks*, followed and this sparked a discussion with the sugar workers concerning the nature of women’s oppression (Sistren Theatre Collective 1986).

Much of Sistren’s work in the sugar belt involved recording the testimonies of the sugar workers. In the interviews the women describe their lives as revolving around domestic duties, children and the physically demanding work on the sugar plantation. The conditions under which the women worked were extremely poor. Not only did they have to purchase their own tools in order to perform their duties, but the fertilisers used to treat the cane burnt their hands, legs and arms. The interviews with the female sugar workers are juxtaposed with interviews with the male supervisor who also happened to be the union representative. When asked if he felt the women were paid adequately for their labour, he said he believed so. He also pointed out that the women were not forced to work on the plantation, and that the adverse affect of the fertiliser was not an important issue as some women were affected more than others. The inequalities endured by women workers in the sugar belt were further exemplified in the testimony of Miss Iris Armstrong, who was promoted to a supervisory position as a result of an illness that prevented her from working in the fields. Not only was she refused the same rate of pay as her male counterparts, she was also denied the same working conditions. The male supervisors were able to ride on mules whereas she had to walk in the hot sun. Further, none of the women working on the estate was given the opportunity to learn how to drive the tractor or operate any of the machines thus ensuring their position at the bottom of the plantation hierarchy (Sistren Theatre Collective 1986). The testimonies pointed up the sexual division of labour on sugar plantations that began in 1780 ‘with the introduction of machines into farming, when men and not women were forced to use the new technology. With emancipation … men came increasingly to occupy positions in the sugar factories’ (Osirim 48). The sugar industry, as Nettleford points out, ‘remains … a symbol of servitude for social-conscious advocates of change…’ (1972 142), and this was made particularly evident in Sistren’s workshops and subsequent theatrical production, *The Case of Miss Iris Armstrong*.

Sistren’s workshop teams discussed the issues arising from the sugar workers’ testimonies. They then created the play which was used to educate urban working- and middle-class women in Kingston about the problems faced by the sugar workers. *The Case of Miss Iris Armstrong* was first performed in
a hall in front of workshop participants. Some bags of sugar demarcated the performance space. Sistren members entered the stage by collectively chanting whilst miming work on the plantation. In the same vein as Sistren’s previous productions, group members played the male characters by donning fake beards and caricaturing male physicality and verbal expressions. The play depicts the preferential treatment given to men on the plantation. Miss Iris is portrayed fighting for equal pay with the help of Brother Mawga, a male supervisor on the plantation. The male management are characterised by their drunkenness and sexism towards the female sugar workers. The point in the discussion when Iris agrees to accept $12 per day despite the rate of pay for men being $15 per day is where the audience is invited to find solutions to her problem. The workshop participants were divided into groups in which they discussed the issues raised in the play. One participant suggested that Iris should ask the pastor of her church to confront the plantation management. This was then improvised. Another solution was to mobilise other sugar workers to support Miss Iris’ case. In the discussion following the improvisations, working-class urban women suggested that their middle-class counterparts needed to join their struggle otherwise social change was unlikely to occur (Sistren Theatre Collective 1986).

The workshops, filmed and replayed for the women in the sugar belt, reaffirmed for the participants the need to establish a women’s organisation. Joan French reports that thirty of the women involved in the workshops expressed interest in joining the organisation. In subsequent workshops these women were asked to identify an issue that they could act upon successfully, and repair to the community’s water pump was identified. At the beginning of the workshop, Sistren members played the game, ‘Machines’ as a warm-up exercise, using their bodies to simulate a sewing machine, which prompted a discussion about men’s and women’s labour. The next stage involved a series of improvisations around the crises that ensued from the water shortage. The final stage in the workshops involved role-playing the discussion with the local councillor regarding the water pump. The sugar workers then met with the councillor who arranged to have a more regular water supply delivered to the community whilst the pump was being repaired (French 3).

While Green argues that the project with the sugar workers ‘epitomises Sistren’s goals: to empower individuals and communities to take action to improve their lives’ (2004 480), Ford-Smith writes that Sistren members voted to discontinue the collective’s group building project ‘because of the intense difficulty of providing organisational support for such work’ (1997 222). Ironically, the practicalities of responding to the State’s treatment of women were made difficult by the nature of project-to-project development funding, sometimes given by organisations with a feminist focus, which did not make follow-up work with communities viable. As Laurell Fletcher Gayle argues in her 2006 Master of Business dissertation, ‘[t]he
overemphasis by donors on short-term projects … is at the heart of the financial challenges faced by the organisation’ (71).

**Collective Organisation**

As I have mentioned previously, Sistren members were profoundly affected by the change in political climate in the 1980s. The prospect of long-term unemployment prompted members of the group to transform the co-operative into a professional theatre collective and Women-in-Development NGO. In collectively organised theatre companies, all participants are equal, administrative tasks are shared, and decisions are voted upon by the group. Most collectives are leaderless, although there are many examples where leaders emerge and guide the other participants. In feminist theatre collectives, emphasis is placed on the therapeutic and political aspects of the creative process rather than the decisions themselves. By discussing personal experiences, and then theatricalising them within the collective, feminist collaborative theatre practice helped “women to “see” their lives politically: to raise awareness of oppression and to encourage women’s creativity’ (Aston 2). Further, Alexander and Mohanty identify collective organisation and socialist principles as being fundamental to ‘feminist democracy’: they enable ‘understanding socioeconomic, ideological, cultural, and psychic hierarchies of rule, their interconnectedness, and their effects on disenfranchised people’ (xxviii); through gaining such an understanding, ‘an alternative vision of change’ can be crafted (xxix).

Ford-Smith suggests that Sistren adopted collectivity because the group was influenced by the ethos of socialism and, therefore, felt it was ‘the best and most democratic way of working at the time … collectives were historically a means of opposing individualistic profit making strategies’ (1997a). Further, Sistren’s collective structure was a way of preserving the participatory decision-making models established by the Manley government (Payne 64) and was, therefore, a conscious political act. Sistren’s collective model revolved around a General Meeting, in which decisions were made and policies established via consensus among the founding members of the company. Each Sistren member was given an opportunity to express her ideas and raise concerns at the meeting, and facilitation was based on a roster system so that all members could participate equally (Ford-Smith 1997b 236).

The collective structure adopted by Sistren in the late 1970s is, in many ways, Sistren’s greatest and most difficult experiment. Relationships between people were changed through middle-and working-class women working together to achieve the same goals. However, tensions arose when collectivity masked differences of race and class. External pressures in the form of development agency funding demanded that ‘formal’ skills be given prominence. This, in turn, created a race and class divide which caused much bitterness between working-class and middle-class members alike. Ford-Smith (1997b) suggests that the middle-class members of Sistren did not openly acknowledge the imbalance of
power within the group or speak about their own needs as women because of the negative image of ‘light-skinned’ Jamaicans. The working-class women refused to allow any of the middle-class members, Ford-Smith excepted, to become official members of the company. According to Fletcher Gayle, ‘[t]his group had the power to determine who became a member and, so far, after almost thirty years, has not allowed anyone else to be so recognised’ (52).

Sistren’s ‘feminist democracy’, established in an era of democratic socialist idealism, was not as democratic as it appeared to outside observers of the group. Although reflection on the problems associated with collective organising as they were played out within Sistren brought about a sharper vision of social change in that it became clear that both middle and working-class women needed to speak to each other and to the wider society about the problems they were facing on a daily basis, there also arose the need to publicly address the imbalance of power that Jamaica’s social stratification engenders rather than mask it behind the façade of collectivity. In 2006 Sistren’s ‘collective’ model was still causing internal problems for the group. The working-class ‘members’ of the collective were ‘not prepared to surrender ownership to a class of individuals who, in the Jamaican context, are regarded as “privileged” and always in control’ (Fletcher Gayle 55).

**Agency**

Although Sistren has staged numerous theatrical productions, toured to many countries, and won prizes for their theatre and outreach work, the working-class members of the company claim that the organisation’s major achievement ‘lies not in its impact on the position of women in Jamaican society as a whole, but rather in what the organisation has been able to provide for its members’ (Ford-Smith 1989 32). In their embryonic stage, Sistren used drama more for the purpose of self-reflection and self-empowerment than community outreach. Sharing their testimonies in the ‘aesthetic space’ made clear to Sistren members that their experiences of oppression were not isolated incidents; reality was demystified which, in turn, unified the women in the group. As Alexander and Mohanty point out, within ‘feminist democracy’ ‘women do not imagine themselves as victims or dependents of governing structures but as agents of their own lives… And agency is anchored in the practice of thinking of oneself as part of feminist collectives and organisations’ (xxviii [italics in original]).

The effectiveness of ‘feminist democracy’ can be seen in the activities of two groups of women about whom Sistren has created plays: textile workers and sugar workers. Sistren’s first skit, *Downpression Get a Blow* (1977), depicted the conditions for women working in a multinational US-owned garment factory in which union organising was/is strongly discouraged. Ten years later, Ford-Smith reports that in Jamaica’s Free Trade Zones there is tremendous activity going on and where the women are organising themselves and are … speaking out themselves about certain questions and issues. And that’s a
very hopeful sign because it means that the U.S.’s sort of policy plan for the region has
in a funny kind of way created the very conditions for resistance to that policy.

(1987 1)

Similarly, Sistren’s workshop program with women in Sugar Town resulted in the
establishment of a women’s organisation that lobbied the local council to have the
community’s water pump repaired (French 3).

**Transnational Alliances**

Sistren’s activities in the 1980s could not have been achieved without the
support of their transnational feminist alliances. In 1980, the Jamaican women’s
movement faltered and its demise could not have come at a more inopportune
time. The impact of the IMF’s austerity measures had created a situation in which
women’s issues took on greater urgency. The absence of a strong feminist voice
to protest against the economic oppression of women prompted Sistren members
to organise themselves into an active feminist organisation through which they
could critique gender relations in Jamaican society without remaining faithful
to political party agendas. Sistren members, many of whom were also the heads
of households, were directly affected by both the change in political climate and
the economic ‘reforms’ introduced by Manley and then continued by the Seaga
government on behalf of the IMF. The international women’s movement provided
a safety net for Sistren members. From within the women’s movement’s protective
embrace, particularly in conjunction with the United Nations focus on women’s
issues, Sistren could continue to critique the inequalities of race, gender, and
class in Jamaican society. Peggy Antrobus, founding director of the Women and
Development Unit (WAND), suggests that the United Nations Decade for Women
created myriad opportunities for women in the Caribbean and made West Indian
women more aware of patterns of oppression in the South; it ‘opened a space for
strategising across regional and national borders’ (1). Sistren was one of the first
organisations that the women’s bureau assisted which in turn made it one of the
first Jamaican Women in Development projects. WAND, from its inception, was
funded by US development agencies, such as the Carnegie Corporation, proving
to other Caribbean women’s organisations that the concerns of women were
attractive to funding agencies. WAND provided training and support for non-
government organisations, such as Sistren, as well as initiating and implementing
women’s development projects throughout the region.

The international women’s movement not only provided support for Sistren
members, it also supplied a discursive framework that they could use to explain
their activities to funding bodies and government officials. Alexander and
Mohanty assert that ‘feminist democracy needs some theorisation of transborder
participatory democracy which is outside the purview of the imperial’ (xxix). The
international women’s movement’s involvement in pressuring the United Nations,
the World Bank, and other development agencies to recognise women’s needs gave
rise to the discourse of Women in Development. Sistren’s work fitted neatly into
this discursive framework and, in some ways, the company became indoctrinated by it. Sistren’s projects between 1980 and 1988 all reflect the strategies inherent in development discourse: Sistren members’ personal testimonies were used to achieve solidarity with men and women from similar backgrounds; the aesthetic space was described as a space for consciousness-raising; and their workshop program was used to ‘empower’ women to become leaders in their respective communities. Becoming one of the most important Women and Development non-government organisations in the region, however, brought a range of added pressures which the company, due to its rapid transformation, was never equipped to adequately cope with. Survival in the Seaga era required immediate action despite Sistren members’ need for improved literacy and organisational skills.

Co-optation

Ironically, Sistren’s increasing dependency on development agency funding in the 1980s — financial support that enabled it to survive the onslaught of globalisation — caused its demise throughout the 1990s (Nzegwu 2002). Development agencies expect returns on money provided, but ignore the internal stresses on small organisations, such as lack of training and resources. On the one hand, the company’s decision to apply for development agency funding grants at such an early stage in its development, and the way it used the grants, enabled it to survive in the 1980s. However, on the other hand, the company has been used as living proof of development agency rhetoric and ‘showcased’ internationally to share its success story with development educators and/or audiences for whom Sistren’s members’ struggles may not have much meaning. Cheryl Ryman, who wrote an evaluation report of Sistren’s work, suggests that Sistren’s international tours took preference over their local performances and workshop schedule (During the 1980s, the group was funded to tour the Caribbean, Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada). ‘All in all, their overseas constituency provided a very alluring and very satisfying environment personally and collectively’ (25–26). The IMF SAP had created an economic environment in which Jamaican communities were struggling to provide health and educational services let alone supply resources for Sistren’s workshops. Sistren’s international constituency, on the other hand, had the money and interest to finance Sistren’s tours. Lillian Foster notes that on one of Sistren’s tours to Canada, ‘[p]eople were clamouring that the time was too short, they wanted us to stay’ (48). Focusing on international tours, however, meant that Sistren members had to prepare themselves for presenting their work in front of relatively unknown audiences and modifying the language and iconography used in their productions. Rhonda Cobham and Honor Ford-Smith point out that ‘many of the play’s images are only read with difficulty by audiences beyond the Caribbean, or they may be reinterpreted devoid of their original social and political nuances’ (xxxiii).

Ironically, Sistren member Rebecca Knowles points out that groups like Sistren can only work if the members are ‘living in community — day to day,
hour to hour — then the group will keep together. If you’re not living in the community, people don’t know enough about you to make it work’ (qtd in Di Cenzo & Bennett 92). Sistren members’ personal testimonies, which at first underpinned their performances, have lost their currency and no longer reflect the position of poor women in Jamaican society. Interestingly, Rebecca Knowles is the only member of Sistren to have established a spin-off group. Teens-in-Action was formed following the gang rape and murder of a teenage girl in Knowles’ community, Seaview Gardens, and, as a result, addresses the needs of teenage girls in ghetto areas:

Teens-in-Action offers the young women of Seaview a chance to deal with their problem creatively. In internal workshops they discuss the issues like sexual abuse, and communication between parents and children. Later they share their views with the Seaview community and other groups around Jamaica. Teens-in-Action are known for their drama representations in radio shows, and for their letters to the media.

(Ford-Smith 1991 12)

However, what appears to be a highly appropriate community in which Sistren members’ skills and experiences could make an enormous difference is at risk of being co-opted by development agencies. Green notes that in 1996 development agencies were particularly interested in funding projects with a focus on youth (1999 180). Although Sistren has suffered many setbacks since its inception in 1977, the group is still surviving; in fact, it has recently moved to a new facility and has also launched its own website. It seems that Sistren, with the help of its funding bodies, has managed to change direction in order to make itself sustainable in Jamaican society. It is interesting in light of Green’s remarks that Sistren’s new ‘objective’ is ‘to reduce and prevent inter-communal violence, specifically targeting youths and adolescents’ (2007).

Sistren’s dilemmas are not, of course, uncommon among self-help groups and popular/political theatre companies throughout the world. Those that have sought funding, whether it is from development agencies, corporate sponsors or even arts funding agencies, have had to compromise their ideals for the sake of financial support. Canadian popular theatre worker and academic Richard Paul Knowles describes his experience of writing a script for Mulgrave Road Theatre Company that included criticism of the corporate take-over of the local fish plant. On the first day of rehearsals for the show, From Fogarty’s Cove, Knowles’ criticisms were omitted from the script because the new owners of the fish plant had become the play’s major corporate sponsors (110). Yolanda Brayles-Gonzales (1994) describes the impact of funding or ‘mainstreaming’ on El Teatro Campesino which, in the late 1960s, was a political theatre collective comprised of striking Mexican farm workers with Luis Valdez as its Artistic Director. As Brayles-Gonzales explains, by the late 1970s El Teatro Campesino’s play Zoot Suit was adapted, first as a Broadway musical and then, for film, which was an attempt to widen its audience but ended up re-orienting the company’s work towards the
mainstream. This led to the collapse of the collective as the prospect of individual stardom undermined the importance of group solidarity (173). Cobham and Ford-Smith, reflecting on the situation for Caribbean cultural workers, point out, with some sadness, that the ‘benign neglect or active hostility’ shown towards their work has led to ‘a profound sense of alienation that manifests itself in’, among other things, ‘a sycophantic dependency on the approval of audiences and critical establishments beyond the Caribbean’ (x).

In the 1980s, Sistren fought outside forces in order to remain active in Jamaican society by forming itself into a ‘feminist democracy’ that could resist (through feminist allegiances) the forms of oppression that became synonymous with the era of globalisation. Sistren’s dependency on development agencies, however, has been the main factor in the group’s decline over the last two decades. This is a situation that is particularly contradictory given that the company explores the affects of re-colonisation on Jamaican society in its theatre productions and workshops. Sistren’s haste to secure financial support resulted in the company’s failure to assess the potential damage of this type of assistance. While all forms of funding have strings attached and should be regarded with suspicion, it could be argued that financial assistance of any kind is worth pursuing as long as the goals for its use are absolutely clear. Otherwise funding bodies can apply pressure on the recipient group that has the potential to skew its initial aims and objectives. In the case of Sistren, funding dilemmas caused a ‘cancer’ to grow within the company which undermined its efforts to resist the ‘silencing’ forces in the wider society.

NOTES
1 The ‘aesthetic space’ is a designated space for performance in which the personal becomes political within the frameworks of the theatrical. See The Rainbow of Desire, 1995.
2 The term ‘cultural agents’ was used by the Manley government to describe cultural workers who would use their artistic or theatrical training with communities throughout Jamaica. See Rex Nettleford, Caribbean Cultural Identity The Case of Jamaica: An Essay in Cultural Dynamics.

WORKS CITED


——— 1997a, ‘Re: Sistren Theatre Collective’, e-mail to Karina Smith, 16th September.


