

Visiting "Home" as a Researcher

by Charmaine Crawford

L'auteure explique ses attentes et expériences personnelles dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche au Trinidad

When I returned to Trinidad in the summer, I was like a fish out a water. Visiting "home" for a vacation was one thing but coming to do research and a little field work was another.

portant sur la violence faite aux femmes, les rôles et rapports des hommes et des femmes, les politiques d'harmonisation structurelle et les activités criminelles.

Writing my MA major research paper was both a personal and academic challenge. I knew that I wanted to do some kind of research on the women's movement in Trinidad and Tobago but my physical distance from Trinidad (I am an African-Trinidadian born woman who was raised in Canada) and my limited knowledge on the subject phased me somewhat. Given the chance to go to Trinidad for Carnival 1995, I saw an opportunity to familiarize myself again with the country (my last visit was two years prior), to observe the social conditions first hand, and to speak to women from women's organizations about their activism, before I committed myself to any kind of project. After speaking to representatives from the Rape Crisis Centre and Women Working for Social Progress, attending a forum on "Women and Poverty" hosted by the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA), and quickly reading through Rhoda Reddock's book *Women, Labour, and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago*, I was impressed by the rich and diverse

aspects of women's organizing within Trinidad and Tobago both past and present.

Upon returning to Canada, I was determined to do research around the subject of feminism and politics in

Trinidad and Tobago in the broadest sense. In an ambitious state of mind, I submitted a working proposal and planned to spend seven weeks in Trinidad during the summer doing research. I was

advised however, by my supervisor, Linda Peake, that I had to narrow my focus and there was a possibility that once I started researching my focus might shift slightly or change altogether.

When I returned to Trinidad in the summer, I was like a fish out a water. Visiting "home" for a vacation was one thing but coming to do research and a little field work was another. I was thrown into an emotional frenzy. How was I supposed to observe Trinidadian society and "my" people objectively when most of my lived experiences in the area was enveloped in nostalgia? Could I critically analyze the behaviours and attitudes of the people around me without dismissing them as a "cultural thing; and if I could, did I really have the "authority" to do just that? I also felt very insecure about my "outsider" position in relation to other women activists and academics doing research in this area. I felt like a voyeur. I had not made any contributions to the society or to the struggles launched by Trinidadian women to fight gender inequality yet in some way, I wanted to know about their experiences and collect data for "my" research.

By the time I decided to focus on the issue of violence against women,

I realized that my fears of not being accepted or fitting in had limited me more than the people around me. Understanding the importance of the subject matter and the need for viable solutions to help resolve it, mostly all the women I spoke to about my research were supportive and receptive. Female friends and family members confided in me about their experiences with male violence. I was invited to activities, forums, and workshops around the issue. At this time, I also found out that the Rape Crisis Centre of Trinidad and Tobago was awarded a project grant from Match International (a Canadian international development women's organization). On my last visit in February 1995, I had contacted a representative from Match International about funding possibilities for the Rape Crisis Centre. There was a project grant available for grassroots organizations within the Caribbean region. On several occasions, I had corresponded with the administrator of the Centre about the outline of the proposal and the submission deadline. I was pleased by the organization's recent success and proud of myself for being a part of the process.

As I resolved my insecurities and became more comfortable with my "inside-outsider" position, I saw my research as a modest yet worthwhile attempt to address one form of gender inequality within Trinidadian society. The links made by Caribbean women in North America with those living in the Caribbean region are crucial in the exchange of information, knowledge, and resources to help with efforts to alleviate both gender and socio-economic inequalities within this region.

I chose to focus on violence against women for my MA major research paper because I wanted to address how changes to the political economy, during the period of structural ad-

justment, resulted in the rise in male unemployment and crime which, in turn, exacerbated male violence against women. I also saw the opportunity to connect various discourses on the issue in a more interdisciplinary fashion. Too often African-Caribbean women have been wrongfully typified as "emasculating matriarchs" who have secured their liberation. This view has marred the fact that women are still highly under-represented in the top decision-making portfolios in corporations, government, and other social institutions. In addition to this, on average, women still earn less than men: they are burdened with most of the child care and domestic responsibilities, and they face the potential threat of being abused by their husbands/partners.

On a personal level, through writing my research paper, I was able to unleash my frustrations in having experienced and seen the public abuse that women put up with by men. Throughout my seven-week stay, men spewed sexual comments at me which

I would have only imagined in my worst nightmares. I was conscious at all times of the threat to my personal safety. My family was in fact against me going out in the evenings without a male chaperon. During the day, I had to prepare myself to be "suited" or hissed at by men whenever I went out. My personal space was invaded and I was angered by the fact that I was unable to move around freely without being on the defensive.

I would like to emphasize that violence against women is not solely a gender inequality issue but is very much a human rights and social development issue. Women's inalienable rights to the freedom of movement and security of person are curtailed by them living in constant fear of male aggression. Moreover, viable social development is jeopardized if half of society's population—women—are prevented from recognizing and expressing their true potential because of male violence.

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