Threading Communities for Change:  
The Way Forward for the Caribbean Feminist Movement  

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Whispers in a crowded room; that’s what comes to my mind when I think of the voices of women, LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalized communities in the Caribbean. When I think of the reality of living in this region, I think of the needs of vulnerable communities going unmet, the cries of sexual assault and domestic violence victims being ignored, sexual and reproductive rights and agency being brushed aside, and the recognition of sexuality and personhood being outrightly denied. However, for as long as the inequalities have persisted, the whispers and hushed tones of these voices in the crowd have been growing into boisterous shouts for change.

Growing up in the village of Liberta in Antigua and Barbuda, I have seen around me strong examples of women who have embodied feminist ideals, but who have never really known what the term “feminist” really meant. My own mother has always sought to instill in me the need to understand my agency over myself and was keen to ensure that I knew that my value as a woman was not linked to any man. It was these ideals instilled in me by my mother that made me identify with the ideals and politics of feminism.

The conversation in the Caribbean regarding feminist activism has evolved from the need for women to have autonomy from men, to a conversation that is inclusive of topics such as sustainable development, political participation, reproductive justice, sexuality, and gender violence. In a region that is shaped by a collective history of oppression and colonialism and is characterized by diversity and difference, feminists from all backgrounds and identities, unified by these similar issues, have been building bridges to collectively advocate for change in their communities.

From women’s involvement in the trade union movements at the end of the colonial era, to the surge in grassroots organizing by women to tackle issues brushed aside by men in parliament, women across the region have been coming together to amplify their voices.
Caribbean feminism has been shaped by women and non-binary persons who have embraced diversity, difference, and development, and have sought to ensure that the voices and issues of every Caribbean woman on the spectrum are amplified. The 27 grantee organizations that have partnered with the Equality Fund and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice have each shown that Caribbean feminism is a dynamic and developing movement about embracing diversity and difference, building community, and uplifting the voices of every woman—like myself—in the region and effecting change.

I have always understood that change cannot happen in isolation; it requires the threading of communities and ideas together as a united force for progress. This is exactly what Red Thread has been doing in Guyana over the last 34 years, inspiring people and peer organizations across the region. They have seen the socio-economic disadvantages on the ground faced by women across all racial backgrounds and have sewn together a rich tapestry of grassroots women working against domestic and sexual violence, child abuse and poverty, while at the same time strengthening the political visibility, voice, and influence of grassroots women. In neighbouring Suriname, Stichting Projekta has been threading gender justice issues together in the fight against political exclusion, poverty, gender-based violence, and environmental exploitation. Creating change in our communities begins with a single stitch, and by threading the needle, the work has begun. They have stitched together a network of women’s rights organizations across Suriname, amplifying the voices of women and strengthening women-led grassroots organizing. Change is a needle and activism is the thread working hand in hand.

It is clear to me that while activism is a thread, it is also a drop of water, and the ripples it makes are change building its way into a powerful wave of progress. The Sweet Water Foundation: Research and Treatment Institute has been the drop of water changing the landscape for women and trans people in Grenada and across the Caribbean region. They have embodied the idea of embracing diversity and building community in the Caribbean feminist movement. As the only organization focused on sexual violence research and treatment planning for women, girls, trans and other marginalized people who are survivors of sexual violence, they have set in motion the ripples of change and have redefined the landscape for support, treatment, and in-depth research into areas not previously explored and prioritized. Water, like activism, is intrinsically linked to survival. EVE for Life has played a fundamental role when it comes to survival, providing key support to adolescent girls and young women affected by HIV and AIDS in Jamaica, and ultimately giving them a second chance in life. They have also provided much needed support to victims of sexual and physical abuse through advocacy and research, in an effort to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights for many young women fighting to survive.
In this fight for the amplification of women’s voices in the Caribbean, it is important to note that our daughters’ needs are connected with our economic development and empowerment as well. Helen’s Daughters has been fighting for the economic empowerment of rural women in Saint Lucia, linking agriculture to sustainable development. They have seen that as women’s opportunities expand through sustainable sectors such as agriculture, their lives and that of their families are improved. The gender justice movement in the region has adapted its advocacy and approach to take into account sustainability and the environment, issues which on the surface seem far apart but are actually intrinsically linked to the advancement of women’s rights and gender equality in the region. Women’s Resource and Outreach Centre (WROC) in Jamaica and Integrated Health Outreach (IHO) in Antigua and Barbuda have both been focusing on the intersection of climate justice and sustainable development, taking into account the needs of women, girls, and vulnerable communities. Every major issue impacting us as a region has a heavier impact on the most vulnerable populations and, in our case, it will most certainly be women who are most affected.

To me, activism is more than just advocating for change, it is about giving women and girls the “POWA” to have a say in what shape that activism takes and what issues need to be addressed in order to sustain change. Born from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Productive Organization for Women in Action (POWA) in Belize has evolved into a group that also tackles gender-based violence and sexual health rights, letting women and girls take the lead by empowering and uplifting the voices of those who speak out against abuse, exploitation, and violence. Their model of training and resourcing women and girls to know their rights is crucial in ensuring that the voices of women are not drowned out in the crowded room. Women who are empowered inspire younger women and girls to aspire to what they have attained, just like my mother, an empowered woman who inspired me. These “girls of a feather” flock together as they inspire and mentor young women to create opportunities for themselves where society offers none. Based in Saint Lucia, Girls of a Feather, founded by young women for young women, has been advocating for the rights of adolescent girls,
particularly those in state care, and mentoring them on leadership, education, relationship-building, and self-esteem.

Apart from threading community amongst women and empowering them to advocate for change, it is also important that we equip women and girls with education regarding their sexual and reproductive rights, which are constantly under attack. The Dominica Planned Parenthood Association (DPPA) has been ensuring that the unmet sexual health needs of women and girls are addressed and that sexual health education and support are provided. I see sexual and reproductive health rights as being at the core of Caribbean feminist campaigning. Throughout the region, even on my own island of Antigua and Barbuda, women’s voices are still being ignored when it comes to accessing sexual and reproductive health advice and resources.

To ensure that women’s voices are heard and changes are made, women must be in positions of power in order to make those changes effective. As women claim their spaces in leadership and politics—spaces dominated by men since the independence of our countries—, it is crucial to understand that the advancement of women and nation-building go hand in hand. Women have played a background role in politics in the region for years but have been excluded from representation and leadership. For 15 years, the Caribbean Institute of Women in Leadership (CIWIL) has been supporting women who are pushing to claim their spaces in political participation and leadership in the Caribbean. They have been stitching together activism and politics, ensuring that women are involved in weaving the decisions that impact their lives.

I believe that during the transformation from a ripple of change to a wave of progress, it is important that everyone along the path gets caught up. Activism, change, and progress are intersectional processes. The needs of women, non-binary persons, trans persons, and LGBTQ+ persons intersect beyond race, class, disability, and sexuality. Intersectional feminist groups such as Intersect in Antigua and Barbuda and Women's Wednesday Guyana (WWG) in Guyana have been threading together these diverse communities and advocating for their rights and empowerment. Both organizations have been using technology to ensure that everyone is riding the wave of progress by working towards the decriminalization of abortion and LGBTQ+ personhood through digital activism, and fostering web-based and media conversation on womanhood, politics, economics, and the environment, respectively.

Caribbean feminism has grown to embrace difference and diversity and women who have been systematically looked down upon in society have been included in the conversation. The wave of progress must carry everyone. From the Jamaica SW Coalition in the North
to the **Suriname Coalition of Sex Workers** in the South, these groups have understood that sexual health rights and recognition belongs to everyone. These groups led by sex-workers for the advancement of sex-workers’ rights, seek to dismantle the barriers against their livelihood and enable safe environments.

The **Wapichan Women’s Movement (WWM)**, **Makushi Research Unit (MRU)**, and the **Toledo Maya Women’s Council** have also been weaving community amongst indigenous women in Guyana and Belize, ensuring that they aren’t left behind. They have been pushing for the empowerment and political inclusion of indigenous women, as well as promoting rights-based awareness so that their voices are no longer whispers in the crowd. Threading community is inclusive of ALL women.

The people whose voices are being drowned out in the crowded room are the ones who have taken up the mantle for change. When women’s voices are raised and women are empowered to make changes, only then can progress be made. **Women’s Empowerment for Change (WE-Change)**, **Raise Your Voice Saint Lucia**, and the **Caribbean Forum for Liberation & Acceptance of Gender & Sexualities (CariFLAGS)** have all been advocating for social change for vulnerable populations. WE-Change has been shifting the conversation on LGBT advocacy in Jamaica so that it is inclusive of the needs of lesbian, bi-sexual, and trans women, and not solely centered on men, so that they too are riding the wave of change. Raise Your Voice Saint Lucia has been amplifying the voices of women and LGBT persons who have been victims of gender-based violence in Saint Lucia so that their needs for counselling, legal support, and shelter are met. CariFLAGS has been building community across the region to advance a collective Caribbean LGBTQ agenda and response amongst activists who have all been campaigning for the recognition of LGBTQ+ human rights in the region.

Women in the Caribbean have been threading community across many diverse lines, ensuring that every issue regarding gender and sexuality is part of the Caribbean feminist agenda. **Our Circle** and **Promoting Empowerment Through Awareness for Lesbian & Bisexual Women (PETAL)** have been ensuring that women in the LGBTQ+ community are included in the conversation regarding social, economic, and gender equity. They have embraced diversity and difference by building community and driving policy change in Belize. Similarly, **Guyana Trans United** and **Guyana Rainbow Foundation (GuyBow)** have been ensuring that the issues of trans women, trans people and the LGBTQ+ community are included when we have conversations about gender justice in the Caribbean. Guyana Trans United, through successfully challenging Guyana’s colonial Cross-Dressing Law, has inspired others throughout the region to revamp their efforts to combat anti-LGBTQ+ legislation with renewed vigor.
Across the region, women have been inspired by other grassroots organizers and have connected with the work being done to ensure that things can be done a woman's way. **LEZ Connect** in Saint Lucia and **Women's Way Foundation** in Suriname have each been threading community among LGBTQ women whose issues often times appear subsidiary in the overall LGBTQ+ movement, which is still largely associated with gay men in the region. They have amplified the voices of women in the community so that their issues are prioritized as well.

While I still think of women's voices as whispers in a crowded room, I see that through the work of these grassroots women-led organizations, their voices have been growing louder and louder. This gives me hope as a young Caribbean woman who sees the effort being made by organizations across the length and breadth of the region to ensure that I can live in a place where gender justice is a reality, sexual and reproductive health rights are protected, and gender and sexual violence are eradicated. It inspires me to take up the mantle and join the effort to ensure that not only my rights are protected, but the rights of other vulnerable people in the region are protected as well. Women's voices may still be overlooked, but women are putting in the work. Women are penetrating under-served communities, threading networks, weaving policy, demanding justice, and amplifying their voices to bring about the change that they seek for themselves and those around them. It is important that as women and allies, we work to amplify the voices of all women and vulnerable persons so that they are no longer whispers in a crowded room but a resounding shout capturing the attention of the audience.