

History this week

Women in the sugar industry: The pre-independence period

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By Cecilia McAlmont

International Women's Day was celebrated earlier this month under the theme 'Women in Decision Making'. The underlying message of all the symposia, seminars and discussions organized to celebrate the day was that while Guyanese women have made some strides in this all important arena, by and large, our presence in the halls of power and decision making, given the many conventions our government has signed and ratified, remains unacceptably low. Part of the reason for this is that women's contribution in almost every aspect of the development process is often half-heartedly documented, sometimes by women themselves, hence their achievements remain unheard and compared to men, poorly remunerated. One of the many areas where the silence continues to be quite deafening is in our contribution in the sugar industry which after nearly two centuries to some extent still remains the lifeblood of our country. This article is intended to make a contribution to filling that lacuna.

The sugar industry in British Guiana really began to take off in the first decades of the 19th century after its final acquisition by Britain. English planters who had begun investing in the sugar industry during the latter part of the 18th century now poured more financial and human resources into the newly acquired colonies.

This increased investment in the industry coincided with Britain's decision to bring an end to the trade in African slaves. This created a problem for the acquisition of labour and the planters looked first to Europe and then Asia, settling on India, which at the time was also a British colony. Soon, ships began to sail from India taking mostly men, but also women and children to fill the labour gaps in the sugar plantations left by the dawn of emancipation.

The gender bias in the writing of history in the past has severely underestimated the role and contribution of women to the sugar industry and gives the impression that the work of sugar production was only men's work.

During the period of indenture, women participated just as actively in the sugar industry.

Immigrant women were also in short supply but unlike enslaved women they did have a few choices. They tended to work at the less backbreaking tasks in the field and factory like weeding and manuring of the canes. No doubt in writing the story of the sugar industry, the overwhelmingly male writers, influenced by the perceptions of the role of women and what was accepted as suitable occupations for women, deliberately downplayed and understated the contribution of women in

those areas that were regarded as men's rather than women's work. In fact we are made aware of women's continued involvement in the industry up to the middle of the 20th century because of their active participation in protest against the deplorable working conditions.

Walter Rodney (1981) showed that sometimes disturbances on the estate began in the female-dominated weeding gang and cited the example of Salema, who urged the 'coolies' to fight.

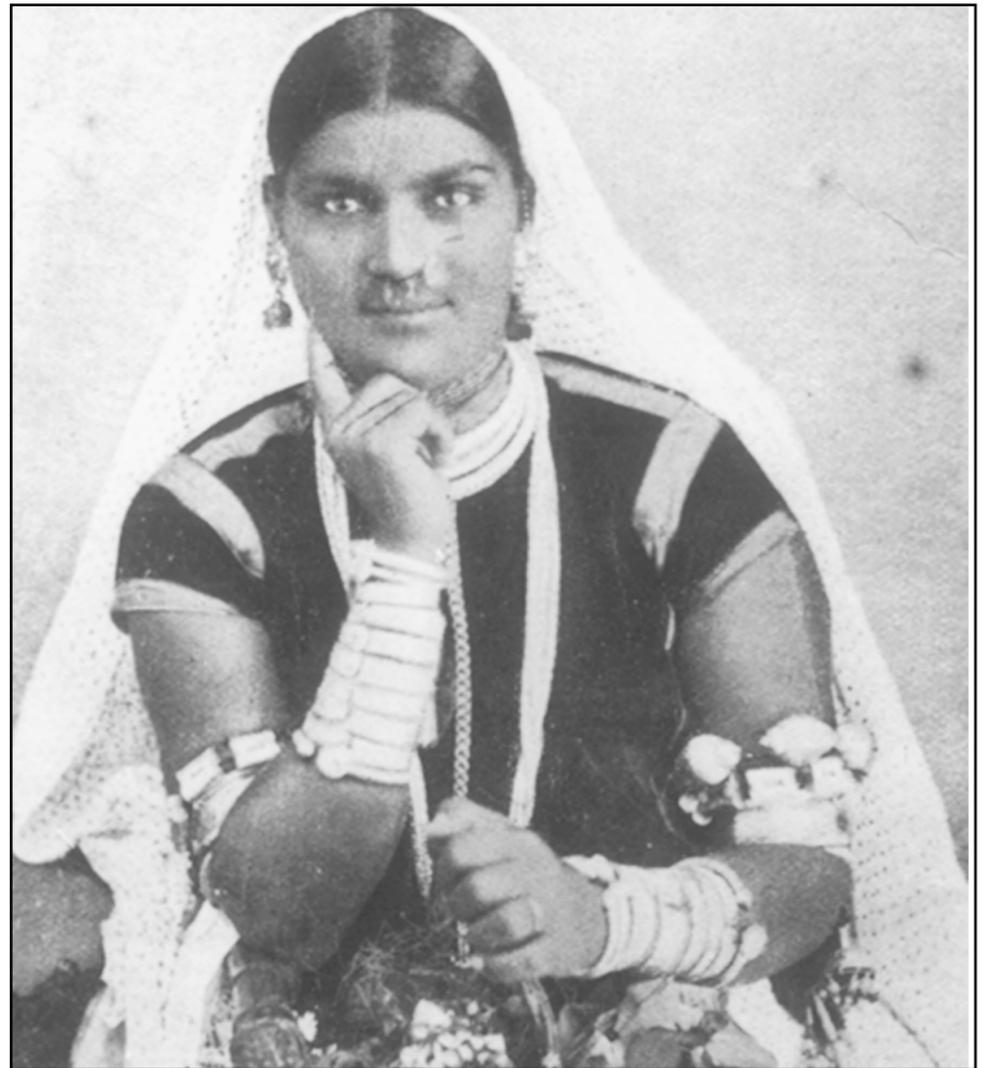
Women fieldworkers participated in the unrest on the sugar estates in 1924 and joined with Creole and Indian men to walk to Georgetown from the East Bank Demerara to see Hubert Critchlow.

The Venn Commission Report of 1948 was one of the few occasions when women were openly recognised as an integral part of the estate labour force. It was called after the 1946 'Enmore

Incident' to enquire into the condition of the sugar industry in British Guiana.

According to Ashton Chase (1964), this commission paid special attention to the situation of women in the sugar industry.

It stated that during 1939, 1946 and 1949, women made up 30.6%, 30.1% and 27.8% respectively of the total labour force in the sugar industry. It commented on the harshness of some of the tasks women were called upon to perform in



Indian Girl circa 1897

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Indian family group circa 1890