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Red Thread's Research: An Interview with Andaiye

Kamala Kempadoo

Abstract

In January 2013, on a visit to Georgetown Guyana, I had a special opportunity to interview Andaiye about research by the women's organization Red Thread. Andaiye is a co-founder and organizer of Red Thread, as well as an internationally renowned activist for working women's rights. While aspects of her work with Red Thread have been covered in various media, I hoped through the interview to hone in on her perspective of the roles and meanings of research in the organization's activities and to add to the documentation of Red Thread's unique experience with research. During the interview, Andaiye repeatedly stressed that she did not have all the information and that certain details needed verifying by other members of Red Thread. After the interview she filled in and elaborated on the transcript as much as possible. The following, then, is an example of a mixed method for documenting history and practice, incorporating a great deal of reflection and some dialogue, and bringing to light yet another dimension of the Red Thread story.ⁱ

Red Thread has remarkable experience in doing its own research. You mentioned before there were three different phases in the development of the research. What name do you give those phases, how do you identify them, and what characterizes them?

I think what I really meant was that there've been three phases in the development of Red Thread, and that the kind of research we've done, our reasons for doing it, and how much it's been part of our organizing are inseparable from those phases. The identification of the phases can't be via the research in the first place. Because I believe that our research changed fundamentally in our third phase, and that doing it changed us, I want to focus on that phase after briefly describing the other two.

The first phase was the income-generating phase... From 1986, when we were formed, all the way through to about 1992–93, our main aim wasn't building an organization; it was to build an income-generation project which could provide reasonable income for a few hundred women. That's what women we were in contact with asked us to do; they said they weren't interested in "politics" (we were all then associated with a political movement, the Working People's Alliance [WPA]);ⁱⁱ they needed income. But the notion of doing an income-generation project alone drove us crazy... Later on all of us came to have a lot of respect for the income-generating part of our work, but in the beginning some of us were very mortified that we were doing this. We had some clear political ideas that we took with us into Red Thread. Since we were all committed to working with women across race, we based ourselves in urban and rural communities that were Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, or Indigenous. Also, we all believed that women should not be organized into arms of political parties; that if we organized that way our interests would never be central. Red Thread was therefore independent of the WPA; we never reported to the party on what we were doing. We also never asked any woman what party she supported or if she supported any party at all.

What Red Thread did from the very beginning always tended to be creative and innovative. This stage was led, I would say, by four of the founders: Jocelyn Dow, Bonita Harris, Vanda Radzik and Danuta Radzik.ⁱⁱⁱ Many women who joined already had embroidery skills, but I remember Red Thread bringing in artists we knew to talk about design and colour. We used the embroidery the women made to sell, and for them to tell the stories of their work and culture. This process was a kind of research which opened up conversations across race/cultural divides; they were what Jocelyn calls "trigger-points". The other research we did in this period, three oral histories of Indo-Guyanese sugar workers—Rookmin, Etwaria and Indra—were recorded in booklets by Danuta and then "translated" into a slideshow by Karen de Souza, another founder and later, coordinator of Red Thread, who had the same aim. These were to be followed by stories of other women. So we never did "only" the income generation, but our perspective on what more we had to do could be described as "consciousness raising", which is the opposite of our perspective now.

Phase 2 began in about 1992–93, and what had brought Phase 1 to an end was that we stopped the income-generating. It wasn't economically sustainable. This changed us in many ways. Naturally, a large number of women moved away [from the organization] since their primary interest had been income, and what remained in Red Thread was a

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small, hard core of women, one of whom recently told me that she stayed (and she thought the others did too) because she couldn't bear for Red Thread not to exist for two reasons. One was that she'd learned something that she wanted to tell other women, and the second was that when she wasn't at Red Thread she felt she was missing something: Red Thread was a place where you could express what you were thinking and feeling, a place which said you didn't have to follow the tradition of what women were supposed to do and be, and a place where you discussed the why of events and developments in the country that you didn't fully understand, the why of your experience—the overwork, the violence, the no money, the family stress and conflict—which she'd never heard explained before except from a religious point of view.

By Phase 2, of the seven co-founders only Karen and Vanda were still active, Vanda running a Red Thread press we'd started. Another founder had migrated, I was away ill for a long time, and the others were doing other work. Each one followed her particular passion, for example, Bonita worked almost completely on ending violence against children. The bond the core developed with Karen in this phase was fundamental to their commitment to Red Thread's survival for years.

In Phase 2, Red Thread did research on domestic violence and reproductive health (two issues but one questionnaire) and sex work, which you (Kamala) were in some way involved in as well. It seems to me that in that phase, the impetus for research came from Karen, or sometimes from somebody else—Linda [Peake], or you—*with* Karen.^{iv} Linda was doing her own research when she first trained Red Thread and other grassroots women to do fieldwork; the Red Thread women included Karen, Joycelyn Bacchus, Halima Khan, Vanessa Ross, Chandradai Persaud and Nichola Marcus. They then did some more training and research before embarking on the domestic violence research, which was a Red Thread project. Although it was initiated by Karen it was pushed by the other women, not least because it contributed to an incredible and far-reaching initiative they'd started—led by one woman, Cora Belle^v—to buy our own centre. Women gave up their stipends for a year to achieve this! The payment for the domestic violence project was donated to that fund. Linda donated the fee that the funding agency allocated to her as chief researcher, and others gave most of the much smaller amounts which the agency allocated to them. The connection with our other work was that we'd done numerous community workshops on domestic violence and had written, recorded and aired a radio serial on domestic violence. With the sex workers, we did three pieces of research: one was a sero-prevalence survey which we did for the Caribbean Epidemiology Center, CAREC (which I don't think we should have done), and another was a needs assessment—what problems they were facing from police harassment, robbery and rape, physical and verbal abuse from clients, and pressure from families and religious bodies, and how they could address these problems; out of this we proposed to them that they form a group, and they did form a group which worked with G+ (Guyanese People Living with HIV and AIDS). But I don't think that we had worked out at that stage how to use research in order to strengthen organizing—women's self-organizing. It's at Phase 3 that it seems to me to change.

I think we can see a line of continuity between the research in Phases 1 and 3—both were about women telling stories about their lives, but in spite of the similarities, there's also a

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big difference. It's at Phase 3 that we begin to go for information on "what life is really like for us down here"^{vi} for grassroots women.

Phase 3 is to me, then, the interesting phase—the phase at which research becomes organizing. But I'm getting ahead of myself, so let me do the politics first. I've heard it suggested that the relation between Red Thread and the Global Women's Strike, which came out of the Wages for Housework Campaign, is limited to me. The reality is quite different. I had met them [the Campaign] ever since. I went on a church occupation in London with them^{vii}, and we worked together in Beijing^{viii}. What happened first with Red Thread was that when I told the working-class women—I used the phrase that came from [Selma] James—that housework was the production and reproduction of labour power, I was about to explain what that meant when their faces lit up. And the thing that came to my mind was Walter Rodney once telling me that over and over again he had taught students at university level the Marxist principle that workers produce surplus value, and they would take one month, two months, three months, four to understand this. Then he went to Linden [the bauxite mining town in Guyana] and he said basically, "Yuh'all does produce surplus value" and he said the response was "Yes, right. Next"—meaning that what he had done was to uncover a fundamental truth about their lives, which they therefore "knew" at some deep level—and that's the response I got from Red Thread when I said that they produced and reproduced labour power. They really understood it.

A piece of it was pride that somebody feels that all that stuff which you do is actually work and is not being dismissed. But the thought that this "thing"—I mean capitalism is not a word that Red Thread working-class women would use, but it's thrown around in front of them—the thought that capitalism has at its foundation their work was "empowering"; they liked it. Let me just say that: they liked it. Later they said that it was one of the things they remembered from Phase 1, that occasionally I talked about counting women's work. And at that stage it wasn't connected to a Red Thread politics and we weren't in touch with the strike. We just talked about counting women's work, which of course I'd got from the strike.

This was in the income-generating phase?

Yes, and in that phase, another of the founders, Jocelyn (Dow) often did discussions with the women on valuing their labour, although she and I never even talked about where her head was going with that, I just knew it was something she talked about a lot—valuing labour, valuing the resources around you, was her phrase, "the resources around and in you" —the resources in the environment and the resources in your own labour. She was very concerned that when people were pricing things they always started with the point at which something was being produced; for example, in Indigenous communities the women would never count the labour of gathering the materials that were going to be turned into a product. She wanted them to know that they had to put a price on these "free" resources and this "free" labour. So that had been there from the very beginning, but not put forward as "this is going to be THE politics" or anything. Maybe the best way to put it is that the whole question of invisible and unwaged work was a thread in what we were doing and saying but not yet fundamental to it.

But in Phase 3, the time-use survey was seminal; although, of course, we didn't fully understand in advance what we would find and where it would take us. It was seminal, but at the same time, they [Red Thread women] couldn't bear the process of doing it. The four women who did it were all working class, two Indo-Guyanese, two Afro-Guyanese: Nicola, Halima, Jocelyn and Chandradai. It was hard to do...They did the most painstaking thing, which is diaries. First, they did their own for practice, and then they went to other women. In some cases they felt that the women were able to make their own records, and in other cases they felt they had to make the record. One of the reasons for them sometimes doing the record, apart from the obvious ones like literacy and women forgetting the details of their work, and so on, was that by then we had talked about things such as simultaneous activities—what people call multi-tasking—and “ordinary women” don't know that they do that. So that when they looked back at a diary recorded by somebody who was recording herself, it would not be there—the fact that at the same time she was cooking she was also doing whatever else, minding the child, and so forth. That was one reason. And the other thing they had been very attracted by, which other people were not looking at, was what Selma called emotional housework. And none of that would be recorded by women normally. The Red Thread women were very excited at the notion that one was supposed to count all that worry, they would say, “all dat worrying because de money cyan' do”—all of that—the placating of the man, if there was a man, care of the child, holding the relationship together, and so forth.

They were counting emotional labour too?

Yes. Everything in life that had most burdened them, and they thought burdened just them, was now to be counted. So it was a pain in the ass...

How was it counted, in terms of hours, minutes?

The duration of each task was counted by the minute or by the hour and minute, depending on the task. I know nothing about scientific research. I doubt that we had the skills to do what people would call a scientific piece of research, although all of the core except me had been trained to do research during Phase 2. But there's a woman in the International Women Count network, of which I'm a member— Solveig Francis—who has long been the person that would deal with statistics, and so on, who was becoming experienced in the methods of counting women's work. Along with Selma, she helped design the time-use survey and as it was being administered she helped whenever asked. But this was, without any question, their baby—Jocelyn's, Chandra's, Halima's, Nicola's. You know, Solveig is not here (in Guyana), and this was pre-Skype, 2000 to 2001. Then, they were often out of town, far from where Karen and I were. So they worked problems out as they came up. Until that moment it's theory.

So, the women were very engaged and completely wrapped up in doing this.

I want to be fair to what happened. They got completely wrapped up in and fed up with the entire process, which they found really, really, really hard. Really hard. I mean let's face it, it was a very burdensome thing that they were doing...They were in tears some days, because of all kinds of things: having to babysit and do housework for women

whose time use they were doing so the women could be partly freed to do the diary, having to go back to the same house four or five times only to be told in the end that the woman wouldn't do the diary, usually because the man had objected, having to do the diaries hiding from husbands and partners who didn't want the women to do them, the men who shouted at them—I can't remember the stories, they all tended to be so dreadful—having nowhere to sleep, being bitten by swarms of mosquitoes, being bitten by centipedes, they found the thing awful to the point where it was often clear that they had lost sight of what it was about. In some Indo-Guyanese communities people were afraid of the Afro-Guyanese women and even if they did the diaries they were tense and fearful. Who else but grassroots women would have persevered through this whole process!

Who designed this method of doing research?

There were two or three methods that people were developing of how to do time use, and diaries was the one we chose. That's the one that we, not Red Thread alone, but with Solveig and Selma, chose, as making sense. It was also the one that made most sense for grassroots women—both those doing the research and the women whose time use they were researching. When the diaries were finished, they sent what they had to Solveig, who was beside herself with excitement...

They had recorded everything!

(Laugh) It just became “we did this thing!” Then you're hearing what you had hoped to be hearing all the time, about what it is that they were learning, what they were seeing, how much they were seeing the samenesses of women's lives, how much they were also seeing differences in women's lives depending upon race, depending upon which part of the country you came from, depending upon whether they had electricity or running water—what some might call obvious things. But the point is that nobody told them, they uncovered it for themselves. And they uncovered more than what was already known because they were grassroots women engaging grassroots women.

One of the striking things in the first phase of Red Thread was how little the women knew of each other. I had not realised that Guyana had grown quite that divided. The difference I'm drawing here between “them” and “me” is generational. I grew up in a Guyana which had not been physically divided by the violence of the early 1960s^{ix}. I don't mean that there was no racial conflict between Indians and Africans; I mean that we were not ignorant about each other—though we were very ignorant, most of us, about Indigenous peoples. I remember when Red Thread had our first Encounter, which was our notion of an annual general meeting, all the women came in dressed to the nines, the Afro-Guyanese women looking like they were going to a party. And I remember a stiffness on both sides. And later, when there were food shortages and some relationship had grown sufficient for women to be collaborating—“I could buy so and so in Linden if you buy so and so on the West Coast”—the women were shopping for each other in that kind of way, and they were beginning to hobnob with each other. I remember the total amazement of Indo-Guyanese women from the West Coast when they went up to Linden. They came back and said “They poor!” People had told them that Black people weren't

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poor, and Black people didn't behave as if they were poor... The Afro-Guyanese women had the same response when they went to the homes of Indo-Guyanese women. So they were always full of these discoveries about each other, of what seemed to me to be perfectly normal things. I remember another day that was totally mind-blowing to them was when Sistren brought a video in which the sugar workers were Afro-Jamaican.^x Oh, they were beside themselves. Never in their life had sugar workers been Afro, anywhere^{xi}.

So the discoveries via the time-use survey included things of which I would have said "everybody knows that", but everybody didn't know that. I remember when Cora went to the Pomeroun and saw Indigenous people who were in fact bonded labourers. She came back and said to Black people in town, "Do not ever let me hear you say again that you are the poorest people on the face of the earth. I just see the poorest people on the face of the earth. Just shut up yuh mout' in future." They didn't know that there were so many Amerindian people who had no running water. That they were walking to creeks for water, and so forth. And those who knew never told them. So as I've said, with the survey they saw both the absolute sameness of the housework and the ways in which the intensity of the housework varied because of race, geographic location, and so on. It was a real process of discovery for them, for the women who were the researchers. And, to me, it really changed them. One of them told me that in spite of the frustration they felt doing the survey, even at the time "it brought to life everything about our lives", adding, "Even when we used to have the discussions about counting unwaged work, it was never as real as with the time use." Since they counted everything, including emotional work, they were really—literally—counting "everything about our lives".

Clearly the RT women were looking both at their own lives and looking at and helping to document the work and lives of other women. Were those other women who were being researched expressing the same kind of enthusiasm, or curiosity, or awareness? I mean, was there any way to see what kind of impact the time-use survey had on the larger population that was interviewed?

As I remember it, they got different responses from different women. The survey involved 101 women. There were clearly women who were doing it only because we were asking them to do it. But there were others, as I remember from the reports at the time—with whom there were moments of recognition, there were moments of surprise, there were responses from the women in relation to their own lives, as if they were looking at these lives from inside/outside, for the first time. And what certainly happened across the years is that one of the women who'd administered the time use would tell us, "Let's ask so-and-so to do that", and we would ask, "Who is so-and-so?" And they would say "Time use". So that's where they know the woman from and had made sufficient contact with the woman, who was still there to be called on. I think some of those women went into Grassroots Women Across Race.

That's another organization?

We're now thinking for the first time of expanding Red Thread, but we weren't [doing that before] because the one absolute qualification for being in Red Thread from early on

was anti-racism. This is not in plentiful supply in Guyana. Not. There would be people who would say publicly they were Red Thread, and then we'd be climbing under a table because they would go somewhere and say, "Oh those *** coolie people" or "These *** blackman" or "These *** buck people..." I'm not saying that everyone else is a racist; I'm saying that not many people are anti-racist. So the first way that we dealt with that after the income-generating phase was over was by keeping Red Thread like it was, a very small but solid and reliable core, and having networks. The first network was Grassroots Women Across Race (GWAR)—across race means that you are willing to work across race. It doesn't mean that your head has reached where it should reach in relation to anti-racism, but that you're open to others. And then we expanded what we wanted—nobody ever discussed anybody's sexuality but I watched the whole of the Red Thread core become, in addition to being anti-racist, anti-homophobic and anti-violence. Those three. Of course, we also support the rights of people with disabilities (which is why our centre is wheelchair-accessible) but we're less active on that.

But now we're beginning—just beginning—to say in relation to Red Thread itself, you can be a member if you are either already anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-violent, or really open to these principles, because it's too incestuous just to keep the core—you know, as if "we're the pure ones." I think we've come to this stage because we're all so much more confident in who we are. But GWAR was the first network we created, which at one stage...it had 60-something, 70-something women. Not all over the country—we've always been weak in Berbice^{xii}—but in parts of the interior, and other parts of Guyana.

And that in part also came out because of the survey?

Yes. So a lot of the other "research", which we in all honesty never thought of as research at all, in Phase 3, was directly connected to the time use...More than once we were planning an action, and it would seem sensible to say "Go do a diary. Let's see what that is." Sometimes it was "Go do a diary for a day", "Go do a diary for a half-day"—it tells you something that you want to know. It became a method that came to make sense to us, as a way of finding out what you couldn't find out any other way. So, directly connected to counting work and the valuing of work, would be, after the time-use survey, the flood research; we counted what the work of coping with the flood was for women. One reason we did it was the amount of racial tension we saw at a post-flood meeting of about 300 Afro- and Indo-women at the centre; the time use uncovered for us and for those women the amount and kind of work they were all doing, across race, for their families and communities to survive.

Another kind of "research" we did after the time-use survey was the price research around the introduction of VAT, showing the effect of VAT on our budgets. We did "case for" research to argue for increases for pensioners and women on public assistance, based on careful recording of their budgets... We could never get a whole large group to do it, right. But we didn't even care about that because by then —we're talking about two or three years ago—by then we knew what it was that we were seeing. We knew what it was we thought. We knew, and we wanted to bring it alive. And in a sense some of the "research" was not to find out anything at all, it was to demonstrate.

After collecting the diaries—the women do the diaries for these various purposes of documenting, making public statements, etc.—how is that information analysed? For the time-use survey, for example—did Solveig analyse it and then bring it back to the organization? And the organization was to carry it forward?

Yes, Solveig analysed it, always consulting us. It was a long back-and-forth process which started with all of us reading all the diaries and Solveig proposing a chart which we worked on and then entered the information into and sent back to her. It went back and forth. But we never really did anything with it outside of using it ourselves. It's down on our work plan every year to publish it, but it never felt like it was important outside of ... hm ... OK, yes, it's important. It's important from the point of view that it was grassroots women who surveyed the time use of other grassroots women, and did it for themselves and other women; it's also important for the findings. As far as we know, it's the first-time use of grassroots women by grassroots women. So it would be valuable to publish it

But publish how? When I look at the research we did in Phase 2 what I see are reports, and the reports could not have been intended for them [the women who did the research]. So for example, when I look at the bibliography for those reports I laugh out loud, because I don't know what many of the titles mean, so why would anybody else? I'm not saying there was an active hostility to publishing the time-use survey—it's just that we've used it over and over again in all kinds of ways. I wish I could find all the ways in which it's been used. But we're always alluding to it, we're always pulling from it.

It provides a knowledge base for RT?

Yes. I mean we and the women we work with are very happy when [we make things] like leaflets... We really did get into doing things like that, because they would be so accessible to the people whose lives you were talking about, and the other forms like reports were so inaccessible. I'm not saying there's no way of publishing findings in an accessible way but I don't know what it is. We don't know.

Do the women in RT, who conducted the time-use survey and these other projects around the floods and VAT, and so forth, consider themselves researchers?

They used to. And if they don't now, that would be my "fault". When I came back to Red Thread in about 1992 after I'd been ill the first time, I was pissed because they would describe themselves to me as community facilitators. And it very much expressed an us-and-them relationship with the community that I didn't think was a good relationship...

I don't know if I could put a word to what they are—but they certainly think of themselves now as, and are capable of, finding out whatever they want to find out, and of being able to increasingly record it in some form that can then be taken and made some use of, and so on. So it's a skill and competence they feel good about. They feel what we all feel when we master work, especially work which we're told is beyond us. That feeling had begun with the Phase 2 research and grew with the time-use survey.

Was there any particular kind of training that happened within the organization before doing any of the research?

As I mentioned earlier, in Phase 2 they'd been trained in participatory research methods, qualitative and quantitative research methods, but the main focus was qualitative research. Both before the survey and after, a lot of the work that had to do with counting the work and then counting other things about grassroots women's lives had been done with me... From counting time use we went to counting what money women got or didn't get for their work. Before Red Thread went to other women we would talk about what we wanted, we would talk about where we thought we might get it from, we would talk about how we thought we might get it. Often enough the women doing the research knew more than I did. And often there was a degree of trial and error. They would go and come back and say, well, that didn't work, and so on.

Whoever you are talking about—pensioners, domestic workers—in however small a number, we were always testing to see what is the way we would get it out of them, the “it” being what you had gone to retrieve, because you already knew it was there.

I remember in particular, when they were talking to other women about how they managed their budgets—that was a trip. They were talking to other women just like themselves, and if you are talking to women just like yourself you both know more and you know less. So, you know more because that's your life as well, but you know less because things don't seem surprising. I remember the biggest thing we had to go back and forth on was this: they thought it was completely normal to come back with findings that said that “So-and-so earned or was paid a total of G\$30,000 and spent G\$100,000.” They thought there was nothing weird about that because that's just how they lived themselves. So they would come back to me and I would say, “Wherey it (the rest of money) come from?” and we'd play with that and they'd go back and they'd see something else, and so on. And in fact in the process we all learned a lot watching them look at themselves, look at all kinds of things, including that when that's the kind of budget you have what slips is food, that's what you spend less on.

So you had a very instrumental role in asking the questions and setting up the time-use survey?

I was a kind of conduit between the women here and Solveig—at the time, I was the person who knew both. So the to-and-fro is, they tell me the piece that they know, which is usually more than I know, and something then occurs to me that I put to them, and so on, so it's a conversation. A conversation which can take a long time, but which I never thought of for one moment as training, except insofar as you hope that you wouldn't have to do that all over again. They do very well for themselves now.

A question in my mind, as I'm listening to you is, how does an organization like RT build upon this experience? I'm seeing the information being collected by “grassroots” women, the analysis happening elsewhere and some of the probing coming from another group of people.

First, the three groups you identify: grassroots women, which you put in quotes but we don't; Solveig, the "elsewhere" where the analysis happened; and me, where "some of the probing [was] coming from ...". Of course we have different skills—but they're not a hierarchy of skills. I have the skill of probing but I couldn't have collected the information that Halima, Joycelyn, Nicola and Chandra did and I couldn't analyse the information as Solveig did in consultation with us. All of it was a collaboration. More generally, the only thing I can tell you is that on the research and analysis skills the need for external help becomes less and less. And that is really just literally true. When we've done the mini time-use and other surveys I mentioned, we analyse them ourselves. So that leads into my response to your question, "how does an organization like Red Thread build upon this experience [of doing the time-use survey]?" The time-use survey changed all of us. It opened the way to what came after. I could show this better if we were better at documenting what we do. That's one of the main things I would like us to do. And it can't be us in Red Thread doing it. We've obviously made a mess of it so far, because we are not a writing unit and we haven't used video systematically either. And we're very pressed for time to get things done.

You mean documenting the organization's work?

Yes, and within the organization's work, very crucially the research. Documenting what we do. Every time I write project proposals, although that's beginning to be done by others as well, every single time, as I'm writing about work we've done, I have to sit people down and say "and then what", "and then what"?, and so on.

That's why I am curious about the role that you have, in probing, and asking those questions, and perhaps guiding.

Sometimes I'm only probing for information about what we've all worked on. Sometimes I'm probing for ideas. I am older than all the others, and there is a different experience I have, including more formal education, and I do that—the probing and the sorting and the documenting—better than others in the core do, up to now, yes. That's true. But it's a constantly evolving relationship, and we all are very conscious of that. I don't mean that I am making it evolve. But the way other Red Thread members talk to me now is utterly different from how they spoke to me even two years ago, and what they know and what they're sure they know is different. It's different, and it's good. Not only in relation to research, but generally, I am what you call the prober, I would call it the pusher. As I said, that's in relation to the living income issues. For violence it's Karen, and there, too, the relationship is changing. The they/us is changing. We operate as a collective.

But organizations can sometimes be so determined by the persons within that organization that continuity is hard. People sometimes step out of an organization, and it moves into something completely different, or doesn't have the ability to carry forward what it had before. And, with your role being so central in such a process...?

All of us are central. And all of us are very conscious that we intend to survive. When I got sick last year another of the Red Thread members said that in view of the fact that they have two "sickly" co-ordinators (Karen was also ill), she thought it was time to step

up to the plate. And they would survive. If the “sickly co-ordinators” went under, they would survive. This is not a one- or two-woman organization.

...The region is full of what we thought were organizations that disappeared because one person left. Peggy Antrobus left WAND^{xiii} and there’s no WAND, and so on. That’s an oversimplification of what happened, but it’s not an oversimplification to say that Peggy’s retirement meant that most of what was good in the old WAND died. But Red Thread will make it, and I think some of the things we will do this year will underscore that. We will make it because of internal strengths but also because we are part of an international network that has made and continues to make a lot of difference to our organizing, as we do to the whole network’s.

Before we get into the future plans, I want to ask about lessons learned. Is there anything you think you may have done differently—any other way of collecting information, any other kind of method? The diary method is an important one, but is there anything you tried that didn’t work so well?

Well, there are some things I can’t answer because I literally just don’t know. One of the things I do know about is that we tried to do political report cards (that is, reports on what action political parties had taken, planned, or tried to take in relation to their manifesto promises), which were a failure...It was something that we wanted to do, it didn’t come up because we wanted to go somewhere for funds, we wanted to do it. But I think by the time we tailored it to suit what we could go to a funder with, we were in trouble.

...As the main person designing the project, I had made a fairly fundamental error to start with, which was not seeing that the (political) parties that would respond to us were the parties that felt weak enough to need friends—that the ruling People’s Progressive Party (PPP) certainly wouldn’t feel that, but that the main opposition People’s National Congress (PNC) would, but only in a half-ass way, and so on.^{xiv} There were ways of getting past that, there were things that we could do, if we were not busy trying to follow step 1, step 2, step3, and so on, as we’d designed it. Because one of the things about funders, most of them, is that if you tell them in advance that you are going to do 20 steps, then you have to do those 20 steps, regardless of what happens... Funders don’t have any room for trial and error, even when they’re funding a pilot. So the rigidities of their evaluation, monitoring and reporting requirements, and so forth, throw you out totally...

So that is one project that I think was a failure, beginning with the failure of judgement on our part to start with, but very much because the project was never doable in the way that a funder would want. And so in the end it became not doable at all.

Some of the things we did in Phase 3 as far as I remember were unfunded. And those were the best we did. I don’t remember reporting to anybody... except ourselves and other women we organize with. Except for a very few, funders constrain you.

I want to ask you about funding priorities or research priorities from funding organizations. How has RT responded to that?

I come out of a long, left-wing tradition which says be wary of certain institutions—I'm afraid of certain institutions. I no longer belong to the same tradition but I'm very conscious of what's been called the "NGO-isation" of the region: a use of NGOs to carry forward the neo-liberal project. And I'm not always sure that, however good you think you are, you have the capacity to turn their help into your self-interest or the self-interest of the people that you're working with. So, those people frighten me. But it really has not been many [that have funded RT research]—it's been CAREC, the IOM^{xv}, and UNICEF.

Now with UNICEF—we didn't do the actual research, we facilitated it—it was to get children's experience of violence. And as I remember, that one made sense to me. This was a period not long after Karen did a vigil.^{xvi} She was absolutely hysterical over the state of children, deeply, deeply upset. There was a time when she came and stood up next to me and stared into space, and I said, "What is it this time?" And she said that a mother had just come [to RT] because she thought that her three-month-old child had thrush. And what it was, was dried semen in the child's mouth because some blasted man had worked out that a child's instincts to suck could work to his advantage. She was going berserk. So in a sense, her going on the road with a vigil in 2003, or doing the UNICEF research in 2004/2005 all became part of, "what can I, what can we do about this"? So, responding to a request from a UN agency then made sense for us. The point of the research, like the point of the vigil, was to find a way to force attention to the traumas that were being inflicted on children and demand that government and all of us address them.

Is there anything that RT is thinking about doing at the moment? Any new projects?

We've designed a project, which is the closest we've ever come to designing a project exactly as we would like to do it. Whether anyone will give us the money or not...the project is ours. Now, there's one big piece of research that we did not build into the project because we don't have the capacity to do it—and didn't want to get diverted by it—a profile of domestic workers in Guyana. A group that we're really interested in organizing with is domestic workers. We're on the steering committee of the Caribbean Domestic Workers' Network (CDWN) and through the ILO, they're going to do a profile of domestic workers in Guyana and Antigua.^{xvii} The idea started because I said at a CDWN meeting that I did not recognize the domestic workers of Guyana in anything that we were saying, and that we had to acknowledge that domestic work is not the same thing all over the region: it depends on your economy, it depends on all kinds of things. There's also going to be a difference between domestic workers in what they call sending and receiving countries for migrant domestic workers, and Guyana is one of the sending countries. Another possible difference is that we can find very few domestic workers who only do domestic work. They are sex workers, they are vendors, they are all kinds of workers—they run outside their house and sell two sweeties, come inside and sell beauty services, and so on. They have to do all this for their children to be able to eat and go to school.

We think that is a good thing to know, not for the sake of knowing, but for the sake of understanding what it is we're doing, because there are things people want us to do that

Kempadoo, Kamala. 2013. Red Thread's Research: An Interview with Andaiye. *CRGS*, no. 7, ed. Kamala Kempadoo, Halimah DeShong, and Charmaine Crawford, pp. 1-17.

sound wrong. But we have to prove them wrong. For example, under the CARICOM Single Market and Economy Free Movement of Persons, to exercise their right to travel around the region for domestic work, women will have to do a Caribbean regional vocational qualification. And we think that this is about policing domestic workers, and not anything to do with facilitating their movement in the region to do domestic work. But we have to show that. Because the women are doing quite a fine job at the moment traveling up and down this region without anybody's permission, and now they want them to show a piece of paper which many will find it difficult or impossible to get. Few domestic workers here can do the kind of course we hear people talking about—they would have to pay for it, take time off work, maybe have pre-qualifications they don't have and show no signs of needing—we need to show that.

Anyhow, that's not built into the proposal but what would be built in would be—and again, we don't think about this as research in the first place—a drop-in centre for domestic workers, because women who are domestic workers don't know if they have any labour rights. All these women are just “unorganized” and the unions don't care about them. So obviously in the process of giving them advice, you yourself are making records out of which you discover things, in the same way as we did and do out of the violence drop-in centre.

The method that we're trying to use with the violence drop-in centre is that you provide a service, that as far as possible you train women so that the service becomes, at least partially, self-help, so people understand the law, and so on. One woman told us one day that she went to court and “The lawyer din come and I just come there and talk for myself because I did know what I was talking”. So you do the self-help. But you also are trying in the process to identify, along with the women, changes that we all want and need in policy and law...So that drop-in centre is on violence, and we're going to do a drop-in centre principally for domestic workers. But since there is, as we say, no such thing as a pure domestic worker, it's really for everybody.

It is preferably documentation, as distinct from what you store in your head—documentation from the service—that becomes the source of your advocacy and campaigning...In terms of dissemination, we're going to do a TV talk show and stop the vain attempt to write. We are going to do a TV talk show, and the talk show in part should be fed by that documentation.

We haven't yet talked about the race research, which I don't know if we'll be able to finish, but we could not have done that without Alissa.^{xviii} This is how that research came about. In 2001, when post-electoral violence escalated following a jailbreak of five men who went on a rampage [and] whose motives were at once political, racial and criminal—Alissa wanted to research that with Red Thread.^{xix} And we could not get people to talk. We found one person who would talk, and then he died in an accident—one person who was prepared to tell us something that was not widely known, what those men were doing to women in Buxton,^{xx} which is rape with guns...And, of course, Black people around us were getting nervous because you know “We always put our dirty linen outside.” But we say “Whether your linen is dirty or not, you have to put it out”—and what we have to try

to ensure is that all dirty linen comes out. We have to stop hiding these truths which fester and fester.

The one thing that kept on coming up during discussions about 2001 was something I think we all know, but it was nonetheless startling. It was how alive 1964, which was the height of the violence of the 1960s, is in everybody's consciousness, even if they weren't alive at the time. They might not know the exact year, but they would tell you something about it. And so, eventually, we decided to research 1964, and essentially she (Alissa) is doing the interviews with Joycelyn [Bacchus]. We're in a total dilemma over how to use it, and are in a conversation with a friend about whether there's a way that film can do it. So we haven't dropped it, it's been going on for ages, but I mention it because it's a good example of something where you do need the other skills that you don't have, and it would be stupid to pretend you have them or to try to build them. We don't have them here and we can't have all skills ourselves. But the aspects of interviewing skills that can be passed on, Alissa is passing on to Joycelyn, while at the same time relying on Joycelyn's greater knowledge of Linden, which is where some of the worst violence was in 1964.

To wrap up, RT doesn't really do research as something distinct, although it's an integral part of what it does. Is there a name for what you do?

No. You know when CAFRA^{xxi} started—the very name was research and action—the notion was, you do research and then you do action. That one-step, two-step kind of notion. No. I don't know any kind of name for all we've done, because it is such a gamut. One of the reasons I did the phase explanation is because what we did with sex work or with domestic violence is not similar to what we do now. What we do now are all various forms of organizing at the grassroots, using all the various methods of other sectors. What we do now is far more under our control, in terms of deciding to do it, designing it, and using methods that are manageable by more and more of us. And now the search is for methods for publicizing that are also manageable by us. If that has a name other than organizing, I don't know what it is...It's really that there is a politics which drives your campaigning, and your campaigning includes your research.

Notes

ⁱ There are several publications by and about Red Thread. One of the more comprehensive was written by Andaiye and published as “Red Thread: the Red Thread story.” in Brown, Suzanne Francis, ed. *Spitting in the Wind: Lessons in Empowerment from the Caribbean* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000).

ⁱⁱ The Working People’s Alliance (WPA) was a political party—which always functioned more like a movement—launched in 1979 in opposition to an authoritarian regime. It was pro-working class and, in a country with deep racial divisions, especially between Guyanese of Indian and African descent, it was multi-racial. It had a collective leadership, but its popular leader was Walter Rodney until his assassination on June 13, 1980.

ⁱⁱⁱ The other three were Diana Matthews who migrated soon after Red Thread started, Karen de Souza and Andaiye

^{iv} Linda Peake teaches at York University. The studies referred to here were published as Red Thread Women’s Development Programme, “Givin’ Lil’ Bit Fuh Lil Bit’: Women and Sex Work in Guyana,” in Kempadoo, Kamala, ed., *Sun, Sex and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) and Red Thread’s *Study on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Domestic Violence: Issues of Women in Guyana*, Guyana, 2000.

^v Cora was a founding member of Red Thread in 1986 and remained an active member and a point of reference in Red Thread until her death in 2012 at the age of 62.

^{vi} This is Selma James’ explanation of what Marx tried to find out with his 100 Questions.

^{vii} In 1982, the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP), an autonomous group in the Wages for Housework Campaign, carried out a 12-day occupation of a church in London to demand support for prostitutes in their conflict with the police. The ECP was backed by Women against Rape and Black Women for Wages for Housework, two other groups in the Campaign. In London, as International Secretary of the WPA, Andaiye actively worked in support of the occupation.

^{viii} Before and during Beijing, where Andaiye was a Guyana delegate and a CARICOM-employed adviser to the CARICOM Ministers responsible for Women’s Affairs attending the Conference, she worked to get support for the Campaign’s lobby to win agreement on the inclusion of counting unwaged work in the Beijing Platform for Action.

^{ix} The early 1960s witnessed some of the worst racial violence in Guyana’s history. By the end of it, Guyanese of Indian and African descent had fled and been chased out of their communities and came to live in communities that were racially homogeneous.

^x Sistren Theatre Collective, formed in 1977, is a Jamaican women’s organization. The video, *Sweet Sugar Rage* (1985), documents conditions of female sugar workers, including their experiences of sexism in the trade union.

^{xi} In Guyana, after Indian indentured labourers replaced enslaved Africans on the sugar plantations following Emancipation, field workers in sugar have been so overwhelmingly Indo-Guyanese that Guyanese people think of cane cutting as an “Indian” occupation everywhere.

^{xii} Red Thread has done a fair amount of work on the West Coast of Berbice, so this is in reference to the Corentyne, which is the section of Berbice to the east of the Berbice river, stretching all the way to Guyana’s border with Suriname. Both the sex work research and the trafficking in persons research was done on the Corentyne, but the main impediment to doing more work there was the same as for other parts of the country—not enough money.

^{xiii} The Women and Development Unit of the School of Continuing Studies at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus, Barbados.

^{xiv} The People’s Progressive Party (PPP) is, since 1992, the ruling party. The People’s National Congress (PNC) is the main opposition party.

^{xv} IOM is the International Organization for Migration.

^{xvi} In 2003, Karen de Souza led a Red Thread 24-hour vigil from April 17 to April 30 for a schoolboy, Joshua Bell, who was kidnapped and murdered.

^{xvii} Since the interview was done, the Government of Antigua and Barbuda decided to do a profile of domestic workers there, so the ILO research is on Guyana alone.

^{xviii} Alissa Trotz, who teaches at the University of Toronto, is an overseas member of Red Thread.

^{xix} It became known as the Mash Day jailbreak, given that the escape occurred around the time of the annual Mashramani celebrations in Guyana, a national holiday.

^{xx} The residents of Buxton, like the five men, are Afro-Guyanese. Most of the victims in the post-election violence in 1997 and 2001, as well as during the 2002 rampage were Indo-Guyanese. In what was said to be retaliation, a group that came to be called the Phantom Squad, allegedly financed by businessmen (including those with connections to the transnational drug trafficking trade) and supported from within the highest echelons of government, targeted and executed large numbers (estimated to be in the hundreds) of predominantly Afro-Guyanese men.

^{xxi} Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action