

What is morally wrong is always wrong

by Andaiye

Posted September 25th. 2004

This column is being written on Wednesday, April 14, so cannot take account of whatever else may be said on the subject of women's equality in the intervening days.

Last Monday night the President was shown on a TV interview. A question was put to her based on recent incidents of police brutality against women - one, sometime in March, involved the beating of women in Charlotte Street; the second, later on, involved the beating - apparently to unconsciousness - of a woman by city constables. In the interview, the President was reported as not knowing of the two incidents, so she was not responding to the facts of those incidents.

Being a cautious person, I asked a friend to go to check the tape at the TV station which carried the interview, to find the full text of the statement. This is what it said: "We are all against police brutality. I have been a proponent of equality for women all the time, and I believe that my work and those of my colleagues have had an input in the status of equality, and that is what we have. But at the same time, if women want to agitate and cause problems, they have to face the same police the men face. We have attained equal fights, and that's what it's all about."

To which a friend of mine said, "Equal licks."

I want to talk about the content, context, and possible effects of the President's statement. Although they are obviously connected, dealing with them separately might help me to be clear.

The President's statement is about equalising downwards, equality at the lowest common denominator. It is perfectly true that if police beat women as much as they beat men, that would be an example of equal treatment. So would dropping men's wages so they are as low as women's. Or getting more women to beat more men so there could be as much female violence against males as male violence against females. The issue is whether men and women are getting equally good or equally bad treatment. In relation to the use of police force, the issue is whether it is justifiable whether its victims are male or female.

And that's the problem. I have read recent letters to the press which argue that given the rise in crime and violence, whatever force the police use is necessary. Sometimes this force is said to be necessary because the victim was a suspect or a wanted man who resisted arrest. Often people believe this even when eyewitnesses say that the victim offered no resistance. The reason for this let's face it, is that the victims fit a certain profile.

The President's statement is about equalising downwards, equality at the lowest common denominator

All profiling is inherently biased and unjust. Travelling in the Caribbean during the seventies and eighties I was often badly treated at the airports of other Caribbean countries; at ours too, but that was not because of profiling, it was because the government could not tolerate dissent or dissenters. What happened at other Caribbean airports was that I fit a profile; I was a Guyanese and that made me suspect. There was another level of profiling. While I made no formal study of it, the evidence of my eyes was that although most Guyanese were badly treated, some were treated worse, especially young Indo-Guyanese and Rastafarians of any age. A little probing at airports would elicit arguments like this. More young Indo-Guyanese were arriving at these airports, so more were assumed to have the intention of staying in the various countries illegally. More Rastafarians smoke ganja, so more were assumed to be trying to smuggle it in. What was really

happening was that possible fact mixed with definite prejudice made possible fiction.

New York is a place where people believe they can identify criminals by their looks, and where, right now, there is a rising protest against it, fuelled by the police shooting of an unarmed Guinean immigrant street vendor whose name was Amadou Diallo. In March, Diallo was killed when four members of the New York Street Crimes Unit fired forty-one shots at him, hitting him nineteen times. The shooting took place in the hallway of his apartment building, and it happened because he fit a profile. Studies show that the profile of the criminal in New York is African-American and Latino. Members of the street Crimes Unit are largely white.

The profile of the criminal for many Guyanese is young Afro-Guyanese, male and poor, to the extent that there are people who say they know that this profile fits the perpetrators of violence against mainly Indo-Guyanese businessmen. But since we are all suffering from the poor police investigating, they can only know this, at the moment, through assumption and prejudice. How many inquests have we held, how many arrests have we made, how many trials have we had in all these cases of violence, beginning, in recent times, with Monica Reis?

The profile of the violent agitator is a little different. It is still Afro-Guyanese, but this time, male or female. Maybe this profile always existed, although it has not always and everywhere matched the truth of our history. But it has become more firmly entrenched by the fact that those responsible for physical violence and verbal abuse, mainly of Indo-Guyanese, during the protests of January 12, 1997 and after, were Afro-Guyanese, male and female. And this fact, coupled with the failure of anyone involved in the protests to apologise for the violence they at least facilitated, feeds a sense of injustice that is used to justify injustice to people who fit the profile. The civilians who used physical or verbal violence against innocent people on the street during these protests were targeting them by profile. Police force against anyone who looks like them may feel like payback.

There is the question of proportionate force. The Minister of Home affairs has said that the women beaten in Charlotte Street attacked the police with pots, pans and other implements. The public should be given more information on this if it is being suggested that the women made the police beating necessary. I know of no report on what the woman beaten by city constables had done to deserve her blows. And what are we to say to the beating of a group of men and five women in Wellington Street by blackclothes police where, according to the victims and to eyewitnesses, the only offence was commenting that the glass on the police vehicle was tinted?

What is morally wrong is always wrong. Police brutality against women is not new, and it would carry us all forward if those who were in the government during the 1970s and 1980s (I am referring to the period I know about by personal experience) admired this. I remember September 17, 1981. Sometimes the violence took a more serious turn than beating, for example, the shooting of Rose Ann Barrow outside a Ministry on Homestretch Avenue.

What is morally wrong is always wrong. In 1975, I remember reading, the whole opposition of the day, including the PPP, protested police brutality against a militant woman sugar worker, Halima, who was "causing problems". Whatever the President's intention, her statement can be used to give shelter to police who abuse their power against women who are causing or not causing problems.

All those who condemn the wrongs of others without admiring their own wrongs lessen their own moral authority.