

No

SISTERS

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Mexican Garment Workers Fighting For Justice

The scene is Mexico City in the aftermath of the September 19, 1985 earthquake that rocked the city. Between 600 and 1,000 garment workers are estimated to have died in the over 500 factories toppled by the earthquakes. Another 40,000 have been made jobless. At the Free Zone site, female garment workers, many weeping with anger and frustration, watch with revulsion as factory owners salvage equipment and materials, without making any attempt to rescue trapped workers, or remove the bodies of the dead.

A new consciousness begins to stir amongst these workers. Ninety-eight percent of them are women and before the earthquake they had never been politically involved despite their exploitative working conditions. But, talking to each other in this moment of disaster, they realise they share many common problems, including the fact that a large percentage of them are single parents, and the sole money-earner for their families.

They decide to fight for justice.

One month after the quakes, the September 19 Union was born. The Union's headquarters are modest — a series of tents and ramshackle offices in the heart of Mexico City's garment district — but its goals are not. September 19's aim is to bring an end to sweatshop conditions in the garment industry, and the work is going forward despite legal challenges to its existence (Currently the Robert S.A. firm and the Mexican Regional Workers Confederation (CROM) is challenging the union's registration by the Labour Secretariat).

Union leader, Evangelina Corona, backed by 4,500 affiliates, says with confidence, "The Union now has life. It's not just a union of earthquake victims. There is a change in the consciousness of the workers. We no longer see the owner as the second father (or

good just because he provides us with a job. And we cannot be gotten rid of easily"

The Union's first struggle was to get compensation for the workers who lost their jobs.

With the help of the Labour Secretariat, the first 60 percent of the com-

pensation owed was paid, and the Union on its own has since ensured that 90 percent has been paid over. Six collective contracts have been signed with companies and five more are to be signed soon. Seven legal suits are being processed. In addition, although it only

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PNP Women's Movement Demands Work, Justice and Dignity: Members of the PNP Women's Movement led by their President, Portia Simpson (inset) recently demonstrated at the Free Zone compound against slave-like working conditions. Their demands included the establishment of a Joint Industrial Council for the garment industry and a broad-based investigative Committee to examine the present conditions at the Free Zone Factories. Several early shift workers joining the rush for lunch, joined the demonstration but others who did not come out until after the demonstration claimed they'd been locked in. Said one woman from Buguta "Dem lock we up inside deh, and we haffi gwaan bad fe dem give we we lunch time".

TO OUR READERS

ALL THE BEST FOR 1987

Well, a new year is upon us once again. While we are a little late, we wish you all the very best for 1987. We at SISTREN are pledged to give you our best in the issues planned for this year, and we're encouraging you to help us with this task.

You'll note that in this issue, contributions have come from Dr. Wynant, Patterson, Director of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI) at the UWI, Mona campus, and Carol Lawes of the Graduate Theatre Company (GTC). We've also started to use the Women's Feature Service of Inter-Press Service courtesy of Kingston Bureau Chief, Fitzroy Nation and veteran journalist Cynthia Wilmot while on her yearly Mexican sojourn, sniffed out information for us on Mexican garment workers. These contributions are welcomed by us, and we hope more of you will seek to share information and experiences with other readers. We want you to feel the magazine is yours in the truest sense of the word. So let us hear from you, and be warned all of you ladies who have given us verbal promises of articles on many and varied topics related to women's issues, that we'll be seeking you out in '87.

Editor



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IN THE FOCUS



NUFF NUFF LOVE AND WHOLE HEAP A JOLLIFICATION: Love and jollification marked Sistren's house opening in December when several hundred guests joined popular theatre groups in costume and the Panoridim Steel Band for a rousing jump up around Kensington Crescent (bottom) following a brief presentation ceremony. Top picture shows Beverley Holding representing long-time Friends of Sistren (left) and Lucille Mair, former U.N. Assistant General Secretary and currently the University of the West Indies' Womens' Studies Co-ordinator, assisted by Ayana (daughter of designer Beti Campbell) as they cut the ribbon to officially open the house.

PERSONAL NOTES

- Congratulations to Sistren Co-ordinator, Lana Finikin, on the birth of her first daughter - sister to Craig, Hopper and Nicky, and Janet Burnet Sistren Research Typist, who had a boy.
- Tying the knot in December were Ingrid Kirkwood, Acting Co-ordinator of the Organisation of Women for Progress with Dr. Trevor Munroe, General Secretary, Workers Party of Jamaica; and Maxine Henry of the UWI Women's Studies Group with

Gladstone Wilson, President, Press Association of Jamaica. Our congratulations to all.

- Wishing speedy recoveries for Friends of Sistren, Valerie Mullings and Betty MacDonald, both of whom were hospitalised in December.
- Wishing speedy recovery for Friend of Sistren, Valerie Mullings in hospital in New York.
- Condolences to the family of Betty MacDonald, former PNP KSAC Councillor, who died in early January.

THEATRE AND POPULAR EDUCATION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

by Joan French

Missis, we nah gwaan wid nutten. Yuh shoulda see how much popular education group dem have inna di Dominican Republic! Is like dem have a group fi everyting.

Some work wid farmers, some wid woman, some wid young people. Some specialise inna health education. Dem also have group weh produce book weh people can use inna dem organisation fi educate demself.

Some a dem have community program fi bring di people together fi tek action bout dem problem. Some use culture to deal wid tings weh affec poor people. But di ting dat impress me mos bout di popular education group dem inna di Dominican Republic is dat all a dem gettin people to do someting bout dem situation. Dem doan jus show di problem an discuss it; dem help di people to do someting about it.

Ah goin to tell yuh bout di group dat me work wid mos of di time. Dem is called EPCA and dem really special. Is a group a eight young people who decide dem waan fi work inna di community dem fi help di people do someting bout dem condition. Some a dem studying an some unemployed. Only one doan live inna di community weh im work.

Dem work inna two poor community weh di people dem doan even have water. Who have light is mostly tief dem tief it, for mos a di people dem doan have no work, so dem caan pay light bill. All dem live off is hustling, a sell cigarette an sweetie jus like happenin in Jamaica right now.

All EPCA have is one desk (which dem borrow), a typewriter an one motorbike. Mos a di time dem use minibus an public transportation fi go weh dem haffe go. Dem share di one bike between dem ascorden to who need it mos, for di bike is fi emergency, like when someting urgent come up an dem haffe reach somewhere quick. Di desk an di typewriter inna one a dem house an is deh so dem have meetin an plan dem work an do trainin session an so on. When dem havin seminar dem use di church hall.

Di odder interesting ting bout di group is how dem help fi organise di people.

A goin give you one example: EPCA do a show inna one part a one community (it was a street show, for more people come when di show is on di street corner). Out a dat show a group a women decide dem goin form a group. Dem decide to work on di main problem in di community, which is garbage. No garbage truck doan come into di area. Di people dem throw garbage all over di place. Dem decide dem want to get di people to see how dis can bring disease an how dem can put out di garbage better. Dem also want to go to di Parish Council to get di garbage truck to come. Somebody from EPCA work wid dem to show dem how to run dem meetin for everybody to tek part, how to mek sure when dem decide a ting everybody behin it, how to write down what dem plan to do an what dem need to do it, how to decide how dem goin

get di tings an who goin do what. When dem dun do what dem plan to do, EPCA help dem to look into di action an see where dem do good an where dem fall down an why, so dat dem can learn from it an do better nex time.

Dat group do all kinda tings. Dem do door to door campaign, dem mek poster, dem organise di people fi collect dem garbage in a better way, dem organise march to di Parish Council an dem get garbage truck fi come.

At di same time one a di women tek dat experience and get other people together an form a children's group, because di children dem inna di area did really need someting. Later on one a di people goan start another children's group in anodder part a di community. So you see, what EPCA start, create three groups instead a one, an EPCA doan even work directly wid two a di groups.

Now I think dis way of training new leaders is a good idea. Dem call it di "multiplying" effect. Yuh tink it could work inna Jamaica?

AWARD FOR WOMEN ON THE STREETS



Our Editor, Joan Ross-Frankson (left), was awarded a Certificate of Merit in the Category of Human Interest for the SISTREN articles on beggars and prostitutes (Vol. 8, Issue 1 and Vol. 7, Issue 3) by the Press Association of Jamaica at its annual awards function in December. At right is public relations specialist, Jean Lowrie-Chin, who made the presentation.

Free Zone!

● FREE ZONE FACTS AT A GLANCE

1. World Trade in Garments is now about US\$50 billion and growing.
2. The industry employs some 20 million workers in the Third World. Between 90-95% is female labour.
3. There are about 100 free zones in the world with the largest concentration in Asia and the Pacific. The first one was established in Ireland in 1959. Puerto Rico was the first developing country to establish a Free Zone (1962).
4. Leaders in the field are South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Phillipines, Indonesia and Malaysia in Asia, and Colombia, Brazil and Mexico in Latin America.
5. All offer the same attractions — cheap labour, duty-free provisions, tax holidays, convenient air and sea shipment, cheap rates for power, water and factories.
6. Only about 25% of the value of the exports stays in the country and this is mainly labour costs.
7. Capital investment is very small, often below half a million US dollars which contributes to the "footloose" nature of the invest-

tors. For example, in Antigua, one large firm cut its work force from 400 to 100 in the space of only a few weeks. As one manager is quoted as saying: "We are opening and closing down factories in the Third World every week".

8. They all have industries with relatively simple processes.

(Source: "The International Division of Labour and Free Trade Zones", by Dr. Norman Girvan)

● MYTHS ABOUT WOMEN'S WORK IN THE FREE ZONE

"A man just won't stay in this tedious kind of work; he would walk out in a couple of hours..."

Government Official, Bermuda.

"We have plants in Mexico and other countries. Based upon experience, it seems that women are more agreeable to repetitive work."

Manager, Electronics firm, Barbados.

"Men do not adapt to sewing anywhere in the world".

North American owner of company operating in St. Vincent.

"Women have more manual dexterity. This seems to come from related activities at home, like sewing"

Manager, Barbados.

The promotion agencies responsible for bringing these businesses to the developing countries actively utilise these myths about female workers:

"The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over; her hands are small and she works fast and with extreme care. Who therefore could be better qualified by nature and by inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of an assembly production line than the oriental girl. No need for a zero defects programme here; by nature they qualify themselves".

Asian promotion Company.

MEXICAN GARMENT WORKERS FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

(Continued from page 1)

represents 0.5 percent of Mexico's 700,000 garment workers, the Union has found that by merely being active in areas close to the factories, the non-unionised companies have begun boosting pay or offering benefits to their workers as a way of stopping the union from entering. Aside from defending workers on the job site, the union also offers training programmes.

Chief problems for the workers are similar to those of Jamaican Free Zone workers: low wages, often below the national minimum; violations of labour rights such as denial of vocational and compulsory bonuses, and arbitrary firing.

At Union headquarters, the women talk openly of mistreatment and gross injustices by employers but deny they are against foreign companies, investment

and industry in Mexico. What they do demand is respect for Mexican labour laws. "The Government cannot be allowed to offer the flesh of workers", said union legal advisor Cecilia Soto Blanco. "In Mexico, we are living in a situation of political power games. Our great inspiration is for our rights to be upheld".

The Union is financed totally by donations. Corona and other executive members don't draw a salary. National and international feminist groups and church, worker and charity organisations, have been generous in giving aid, but the Government's aid has been limited to granting the Union's licence and building the corrugated iron shelter it uses for its offices.

The Clothing Industry Chamber has offered no help at all, saying it cannot be involved in employer/labour conflicts. While some other small unions have been helpful, the well-established

● FREE ZONE EXPOSE

SISTREN commends the expose on the Free Zone by journalist Phyllis Thomas, serialised recently in three parts in the STAR. Phyllis' action in seeking a job in a Free Zone factory and 'living' through the conditions faced on a daily basis by the women workers, is one that should be emulated by her colleagues in the media. Write On, Phyllis!

Government unions have contracts which protect the factory owners and don't take the workers into consideration.

The Union intends to press on in a truly principled way. Says Corona, "The garment workers need their jobs and they must have fair treatment. Our strategy is to provide employers with an analysis of the situation in their factories, (to show) that personal problems do affect production and that workers who are treated well and properly paid, produce more than those who are mistreated. The Union is not outrageous in its demands, but only calls for the law to be followed. Even though unfair tactics have seemed to work for the owners at times, I believe that only through good can good be obtained". ●

(Re-written from a report in the Mexico City News. Thanks to journalist Cynthia Wilnot for bringing the item to our attention. Ed.)

CANCER OF THE CERVIX

(NECK OF THE WOMB)*

* Prepared by Dr. A.W. Patterson, October 1986.

The neck of the womb is that part of the womb which you can feel at the top of your vagina. In the middle of it is a small opening which leads into the womb. It is through this opening that menstrual blood flows out during your period and sperm and semen enter during sexual intercourse. It is a very special organ as is the entire womb. You know that when you are pregnant your womb grows to accommodate the baby as it grows. During labour, the neck of the womb completely flattens out and the tiny canal is stretched open to the size of the baby's head to allow the child to be born. After delivery, the neck

of the womb or cervix gradually resumes its shape, but remains with scars caused by internal tearing which it suffers as the baby passes through. By six weeks after birth, the cervix is usually healed but scarred. This happens everytime you have a baby.

It is not clear exactly what causes cancer of the neck of the womb, but certain sexual habits have a high association with this life-threatening disease. Some studies done in Jamaica have shown that women who start having sexual intercourse before age 20 years are more likely to get the disease than

those whose first sexual act is after 20 years. Girls having sex between ages 13 and 18 years are most at-risk.

A study of Jamaican women done at the University Hospital of the West Indies also shows that women who have had more than three sexual partners are at-risk of getting the disease. About one in three of the women afflicted by this disease had previous histories of having had syphilis, gonorrhoea or a yellow vaginal discharge for several years.

While we do not know the cause of the disease, the associated findings seem to point to certain sexual habits, which should be avoided in the interest of a woman's life and health.

Also, it has been found that the ages when the disease is most often found are 35 years to 55 years, and that this is some 20-40 years after the first

(Continued on page 13)



MILITANT POSTER: The Militant garment worker uses a giant needle for her sword. Her battle-cry "Against the Offensive of the Owners – People to the Defence of the Legal Registration of the Garment Makers Union, September 19".



SISTREN members accompanied by the Works of Women (WOW) band express appreciation to the audience at the end of the Lionheart Gal launch at the Africa Centre in Covent Gardens, London.

SISTREN IN THE U.K. ON TOUR

Plenty people have a funny idea about tours. It's like they think if you're in the entertainment business and you go to Europe or North America on a tour, you must come back rich. And if they hear you're performing to full houses, it's worse. They think you turn millionaires. I wish it was so easy. Unfortunately, it's not. You see, in England they have two touring circuits. One is commercial and pays well. The other is Fringe and pays badly. SISTREN is definitely Fringe. Not only Fringe, but Foreign

Fringe. So, our wages are lower than those of British performers, since we aren't affected by their union legislation and the tour organiser has to find plane fares, accommodation and some food.

When I came back from London this time, someone I know visited me in my rented apartment. At one point I showed him how the roof is leaking and how it's spoiling up the furniture. He looked at it and then turned to me and said "Well, now you're so rich and famous and your book is on a best seller list, you don't need this old place at all anymore". I had to bite my tongue, for if I told him that the money I saved from the tour wasn't enough to pay one month's rent, he would've called me a bare faced liar.

He made me so vexed that I started to remember all the bad things that went with the tour. Like how Burrell tumbled down backstage after the last show in Birmingham because she was hungry and couldn't get anything to eat.

And it was Mikey Dyke the other

night who reminded me how that old hotel in High Street Kensington nearly caused plenty people fi dead fi hungry. For when you finish your show, at eleven o'clock at night the hotel restaurant lock up long time. Everything else on High Street Kensington — EXPENSIVE. Toddy family used to carry up food for her and more time is that save we life. At breakfast is one cup of tea and a slice of bread. If you want more, you pay for it out of your little per diem, so people used to buy a box of corn flakes and carry it down to the dining room.

One morning at breakfast the Manager drapes me up. "There is a matter I must make a complaint to you about Ms. Ford-Smith", he says, staring at me out of glasses that magnify his eyes to three times their normal size. "We just cannot allow the members of the group to bring large boxes of corn flakes to the restaurant to eat. I mean its just not done! We have our image to maintain and our standards to keep up". I had to try hard not to laugh and promise to bring it to the group's attention. That was the first in a series of "discussions," with the hotel about our eating habits.

Then there was the **Media** – the television, the radio, the newspaper and the million-and-one magazines they have of every shade and variety of political opinion. Well, last tour they were discovering us and there is nothing Europe likes better than a new product to be consumed. This time we were not a new product and so we had to be brought down to size, or to use their lingo “made controversial” (for controversial read “riddled-with-contradictions”, “politically incorrect”, “chip on shoulder” or “with an axe to grind”.) 7:00 a.m. or midnight there was always a reporter lurking. Few of the interviewers were interested in helping to forward our work or in understanding how it fits into our context. They were far more interested in seeing how we fail to conform to standards which they had predetermined for us.

In one interview on a “mainstream” programme we were asked if we couldn’t sing to drums in the studio for a programme to be broadcast live at 9:00 in the morning. I bet they never ask Elton John to sing in the studio, but I suppose “live” singing to drums is considered O.K. for **ETHNIC** or **EXOTIC** groups neither of which we wanted to be, so we declined.

We offered them a reading of **Lionheart Gal** and they finally agreed that Pauline could read if she agreed to shut up for the rest of the programme I was to speak, having been awarded the dubious honour of being considered understandable by BBC standards (inspite of my accent, they said). “Go” said the publishers “you need the publicity! Its **MAINSTREAM! MILLIONS** will be listening!” So we went. We found ourselves keeping company on the programme with Mandy Rice Davies (remember the Profumo Scandal that brought down the British Government in the Sixties? No, not Christine Keeler, the blonde one. She writes thrillers now), a woman who’s won an award for having a business that runs down people by phone to convince them to buy things they don’t need, and an American smart-ass comedian who thought the height of sophistication was to promote drag queens and pornography. “What” we wondered, “are we doing here?” But it was too late. The interview had begun. “Why do you use patwah in your plays?” one of them asked. The other one forgot Pauline’s name. “Isn’t the introduction to **Lionheart Gal** rather turgid feminist theory?” asked the one who cut Pauline off in her reading. Then we understood they were hoping for a fight that we



would lose by trying to look self righteous.

Then there were the reporters who insisted that people were most concerned because “Muffet” was directed by a man, had a male Musical Director and a male Choreographer. Others were concerned that **Sistren** was doing “too many things”. “Why should a group of former street cleaners” they asked (causing me to wonder if **Sistren** will ever be remembered for anything other than being former street cleaners), “want to produce plays, a news magazine, run a textile project and now produce a book? Could it be that **Sistren** have been taken over by a group of middle-class professionals who manipulate them and have robbed them of their grassrootsness. Surely once a theatre collective

*TRENCHTOWN STYLEE: Bev Hanson shares a joke with the audience at the launching of **Lionheart Gal** in London, as she describes the tale of growing up in Trenchtown, depicted in the **Sistren** screen prints she designed from her story.*

always a theatre collective? Furthermore how can a black women’s group have a white artistic director? And a white drummer?” Isn’t this a contradiction? How come the names are always the same in the programme? Why don’t you have any new members? Aren’t the old ones getting stagnant?

We tried to explain that it is a privilege we are against. Not genetics. Try as



hard as we might, we alone cannot change all the contradictions of the last three hundred years in our context unless we can build alliances and share skills while developing internally. We know that we reflect the contradictions of race, class and sex in Jamaican society. That's a problem we try to fight out within our internal democracy; struggling with those among us who try to maintain special privileges; attacking the relationships which perpetuate racism and sexism internationally and locally in our work and in our lives. We said, "Assess us as what we are – the producers of creative products. Assess the relationships we project and those we create in trying to produce that work".

In the end, there was a patronising tendency to ignore our organisational progress – to de-emphasise the creative work we have done, and to regard us as a piece of experimental social welfare.

A comment overheard one night summed it up, "It's nice to see them" said one audience member at interval "cause then you realise what anybody can do". I wondered how "anybody" would have managed Bev. Hanson's role combining song and dance with rapid character and gender switches or how "anybody" would have designed and printed 15 screen prints.

After all the arguments and the mix-ups were over and done with though what really sticks out in our minds is the kindness of the people who had us to meals, took us shopping, helped to

"Sistren a mi madda, mi auntie, mi sista, mi grannie", said poet and drama teacher, Jean Breeze (right), as she underlined the social importance of Sistren's work to black women in Jamaica and the U.K. The large audience, including Sistren members (left), listen attentively.

sell our products, lent us winter clothes and gave words of encouragement. People to whom the work meant something. The black British communities impressed us with the degree of organisation that has been built up in five years (in London) in spite of the continued deep seated racism in Thatcher's England. Seeing black people in Britain

is like seeing elements of a culture you sometimes question while struggling to build here, reflected back in stark mirror image – strong and proud. That was the most heart-warming thing about London in November and for that we give thanks and praises.

Honor Ford-Smith

MUFFET REVIEWED

"Sistren's style is rich and surprisingly familiar: circus, pantomime and revue all play their part . . . The show is at its best when at its most physical. The quick fire Jamaican patois makes few compromises to unaccustomed ears, but the burlesque of male behaviour – all gas and gun butts – finds a universal language of strutting and posturing. As does the music from the band Works of Women, whose range extends from modern keyboards and guitars to traditional drumming and, in one memorable scene, a vivid vocal evocation of a tropical nightscape".

Claire Armitstead, FINANCIAL TIMES

"An exciting and engaging piece of theatre . . . Holding the audience transfixed, the performers led us through a growing awareness of the social, educational, political and violent acts against women and their economic and racial basis. A wonderful and challenging performance".

Maud Sulter, SPARE RIB

"Sistren continue to display a range and artistry that will always keep Jamaican language and image at the forefront of understanding the real nature of things".

Tony Sewell, THE VOICE

THEATRE RINGE

Deadline for this
theatre
with Institute 8.00
Thurs mats 2.00
Wed 12.50, Thurs
13.50, Creche
Oct 5, Slade: to
Wed 'Jubilee'
Basement Youth
See New Reviews
(7.00) £3, unwaived
£3.50 (unwaived
Oct 11)
Almeida St, H1 (359)

Staff Pub, 38 Charing X Rd,
night Wed, 10pm, £3.
Spend! Chickens, 10pm, £3.
£2.50.
Odeon Theatre, Garsford St,
Marylebone, NW8 (402 5081)
From Thurs: 'Ankara' directed
by Raj Patel, presented by
British Asian Theatre, 7.50.
£2.50, concert 1.50.
Commonwealth Institute
Kenington High St W8 (603)
45.30-221). From

African Times Friday 24th October 1986

Edited by Jonzuma Mahorish

SISTREN DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Sistren are not just another woman's theatre group - they are a unique example of what can be achieved when women literally get their act together, showing a contempt for adversity. Three of the founder member - Lorna Burrell Haslam, Pauline Crawford and Beverly Hanson - relate some of their experience to Wynette Scott

MUSIC, ARTS & Dance

Sistren - educating through entertainment

Sistren Alla we a muffett



Sistren in a jovial mood indicative of

Lionhearted Women

ARTIST AT WORK

The Journal, October 11 - October 18 1986

BY THE U.K. PRESS

"Sistren is symbolic theatre in full flow embracing the roots of women's strength embodied in African ritual; the humiliation of slavery in all its forms; and the catalyst energy of music from reggae through traditional drumming to commercial pop. No-body does it quite like Sistren"

Carole Woddis, CITY LIMITS

"In the end it's the five performers . . . who make this such a memorable show, skillfully switching from powerful song and dance numbers to scenes of exploitation and injustice which make frequent and effective use of broad comedy"

Malcolm Hay, TIME OUT

"These women know what is going on and can sing, act, play instruments, cajole, preach and tell you all you need to know about menacing oppression women face . . . One significant feature is that these sisters have shattered the myth about actresses. Actresses, especially black actresses, don't have to pile on the make-up and look like something out of Hollywood . . . I left the theatre with just one sentiment: Sistren - me love them. Me really love them."

Judette N. Bulgin, THE JOURNAL

LIONHEART GAL is available at bookstores islandwide and at Sistren's Headquarters. Local distributor is Heinemann's. (Tel: 927-5659).

SISTREN
with Honor Ford Smith

LIONHEART GAL

Life Stories of Jamaican Women



SISTREN

with Honor Ford Smith

LIONHEART GAL

I haven't read many books as powerful as 'Lionheart Gal', a collection of the life stories of Jamaica's Sistren Theatre Collective. It is based on tapes made over the years by members of the Collective which have now been edited by Honor Ford Smith into rivetting testimonies of the lives of working women.

Their power lies in the wealth of personal and political ground they cover while retaining the particular qualities of

each narrator. Predominantly of working class origin, the women are tough, resourceful and energetic. With sensitivity and humour, they tell us of their experiences of parental abuse, sexual exploitation, migration, colour and class in Jamaica. They draw lessons from these experiences in a way which can only make us admire their spirit for survival and self-improvement. Their personal experiences are linked to the political

permutations in Jamaican society with a straightforwardness which exposes the need for theoretical deliberation as a myth. The book is well presented, emotionally charged and politically challenging.

An aspect of 'Lionheart Gal' with which I was uncomfortable to begin with but now I think is a major source of its triumph is the use of Jamaican 'patwah' as the language for its text. I found the first two life stories difficult to take in because I enjoy reading quickly and thought the language cumbersome. But once I became accustomed to the rhythms of 'patwah' and managed to grasp some of its nuances, I found it accentuated the book's authority. 'Lionheart Gal' is firmly rooted in an oral tradition of storytelling, which enhances it by projecting the voices of its narrators with dramatic clarity.

Honor Ford Smith must be congratulated on her skill in editing the book. Her introduction is useful and it must be largely due to her effort that the vibrancy of Sistren Theatre Collective has been retained. 'Lionheart Gal' will be an inspiration for women throughout the world. (Yaba Badoe).

City Limits Magazine
November 13-20.

LIONHEART GAL

'HILARIOUS'

Review by Carol Lawes

At last! SISTREN's book LIONHEART GAL is here, with its stories of the lives of 15 Jamaican women. After reading its 298 pages of stories, notes and glossary in two sittings, as well as its 31 pages of introduction, I still could not put it down, and found myself reentering its world, on any page, so as not to have to be separated from the experience.

Several words can be used to describe it — important, classic, revealing, frank, startling, touching. But in addition to all of these things, I also found sections of LIONHEART GAL hilarious.

"Me did have one man friend dat was me good good friend till him go a England wid me eighty pounds . . . Him write di most love letters, but him never send back di eighty pound. Him write and tell me bout every single ting dat

me a do a Jamaica, but him never send back di eighty pounds".

The situation was obviously quite a serious matter in the life of Miss G, the storyteller; but the dryness of hindsight, after the bitterness has shrivelled, allows us to laugh with Miss G as we consider comparable situations in our own lives.

But even in those situations with which we may not be able to identify, there is humour in the language ("When me in labour now, de baby did hitch inna me leg so him couldn't did born"); in the way in which values are passed on ("Member seh man a green lizard. Man is a ting weh change"); in the gullibility of people ("One woman name Miss Silvie used to come to (the preacher) regular. Her husband did drown in the sea and she have dis big belly before her. Him say her husband get her pregnant after him dead . . . A dat him always deh pon.

Den him charge dem a certain amount. Miss Silvie go deh fi seven years and she never get better till she dead!"; and in the sketches drawn of some of the characters ("Grandma . . . lived propped up on five or six pillows in an ex-fourposter bed which she had 'improved' by chopping off the carved posts . . . She suffered from an illness she called 'the bad feeling'").

Of the fifteen stories, only two are told by women from a background other than the working class. And though they all touch on the question of man/woman relations in some form, that does not come across as the main focus of the book. The main issues are probably best identified as self-discovery and survival. Survival as children growing up in poor rural conditions; as young women faced with unemployment or dreadful working conditions; terrible and/or unstable housing, single parenthood, dashed ambitions, political tribalism and political growth. And self-discovery within this context, while coming to terms with questions of class, colour and sexuality.

(Continued on page 16)

'ME NICE' IN BOTSWANA

WOMEN'S FEATURE SERVICE, Inter Press Service (IPS)

Mpho is fashionably dressed in a satin shirt and tight jeans. She paces slowly up and down a main street in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, looking for 'a lift home'. A big car driven by an elderly white man draws up. There is discussion, then Mpho beckons to her friend Grace. They both get in the car, which drives off.

Mpho is 15 and Grace is 14. Both are "ME NICE" (Me have no disease) as prostitutes are known in the Botswana capital. The diagnosis of AIDS (Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome) cases in this Southern African nation in March has put the spotlight on prostitution. However, it has not cut down on the number of women in the business, described as 'staggering' by social workers. Some of these 'women' are as young as 12, but 14 or 15 is an average age for Botswana "ME NICE".

Prostitution was not a matter of

choice for Mpho, she says. "I left school in standard six (just before the final year of primary school) because I was pregnant. I had a baby girl. We call her Teboga (which means "Thanks")."

Mpho went to live with her widowed mother in a rural area, but found it impossible to make ends meet. Her family have no cattle — the main source of livelihood in this semi-arid nation — and the little arable land they own has been rendered useless by a fifth year of drought. Traditionally, men have gone off to work in South African mines, while women are left to make do in a tight labour market. With up to 25,000 men away at the mines at any given time, Botswana social workers say family structures and traditional morality have been disrupted.

A further influence towards prostitution comes in the form of white South Africans, who began to visit Botswana

in droves in the early 1950's, after the passage of the Immorality Act, to patronise black prostitutes. The habit did not die out with the repeal of the act last year.

Like many others Mpho made her way to the capital city. "I thought I should come to Gaborone to find a job, then I could send money back for the baby".

But, like so many others like herself, Mpho found the streets of Gaborone rocky. "I walked and walked around town, and everywhere there was no work. . . maybe some little domestic work at 40 Pula (about US\$23.00) a month, which is not enough to even pay my rent".

For Mpho, it was a disco that opened the door to the world of "ME NICE". "I was staying with another girl and we went to a disco. We went home with these men. In the morning they gave me money. Well I didn't have any money so that was better". Now, she earns the equivalent of about US\$17 a night.

But she insists, "It's not a job to do for a long time. I want to learn typing and get a proper job sometime soon"

SETTING A FINE EXAMPLE



Our children learn from our example and what could be a better example for the children of flood-stricken Clarendon, especially the little girls, than the workers of the Women's Construction Cooperative (WCC). The traditional idea that women are physically unable to work in construction is unlikely to carry much weight with this little girl (left) who started mixing cement and building a doll's house after watching WCC members (right) get down to constructing houses for flood victims. The WCC is currently providing skills free of charge to re-build the houses. Materials have been donated by the Dutch Government. The WCC has not only recently moved its offices to 9½ Lincoln Avenue (off Brentford Road), but is expanding its training programme. Some 20 women, from Majesty Gardens in Kingston, Port Royal and Port Antonio are currently in training. Projects on stream include furniture making for the island's new Women's Centres and the basic school at Olympic Gardens; construction of three clinics — two in Kingston and one in Port Antonio; refurbishing of the Police Married Quarters at Port Royal and construction of community toilet facilities for Majestic Gardens. Construction of a community centre in Accompong, St. Elizabeth, is in the planning stages.



CARIBBEAN WOMEN ORGANISING

▲ HAITI

When the people of Haiti threw out dictator **Jean Claude Duvalier**, in February of last year, the women were very much involved. What has the dictator's departure meant for the women of Haiti? According to Haitians we have spoken to in recent months, it is the fact that for the first time in Haiti's modern history the women have organised themselves independently. Under the Duvalier Dynasty, no group existed to organise women to struggle for their rights.

Several such women's organisations have now sprung up. Women are being brought together on some issues but, according to our sources, significant class differences do exist. Middle-class women see the main struggle being one for political representation. In other words, getting women into parliament is the main aim. The grass roots women, however, are demanding better social conditions — employment, housing and education for themselves and their families.

The organisations set up by middle-class women are more public and able to get fairly good coverage by all seven radio stations and the three daily and two weekly newspapers. Included amongst these groups is **Femme D'Haiti** (Women of Haiti). With many of its leaders having important links to the powerful Catholic Church **Femme D'Haiti** is able to obtain a high level of support, and organised Haiti's first major women's march and demonstration involving thousands of women from all walks of life. Other similar groupings include the **League for the Defence of Rural Women's Rights**, which has so far confined itself to radio statements criticising government policies, and the **League of Women Against Torture**, a grouping launched by the wives of the leaders of the **Haitian League of Human Rights**.

At the grassroots level, there are efforts by some women towards forming a **Haitian Federation of Women**. The route being taken is to encourage and assist women in communities and at the workplace to form small groups to struggle for their particular interests. Organisers set up a **Women's House** in Port-Au-Prince in May and have started a radio programme for women. The **Women's House** has an on-going educa-

tional programme geared towards the needs of grassroots women and is moving to offer legal, medical and advisory services with the voluntary help of sympathetic professional and technical resource persons.

▲ THE BAHAMAS

DAWN (Developing Alternatives for Women NOW) is a recently formed women's organisation in the Bahamas.

DAWN's main objective is to organise women to counteract the negative effects of their social conditioning. Other objectives include the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experiences and the building of productive relations among women and men. **DAWN** intends to achieve its goals by increasing awareness in the broad society of the social, cultural, legal, religious and political structures which affect the quality of women's lives.

TWO CARIBBEAN TERRITORIES FAVOUR DAUGHTERS

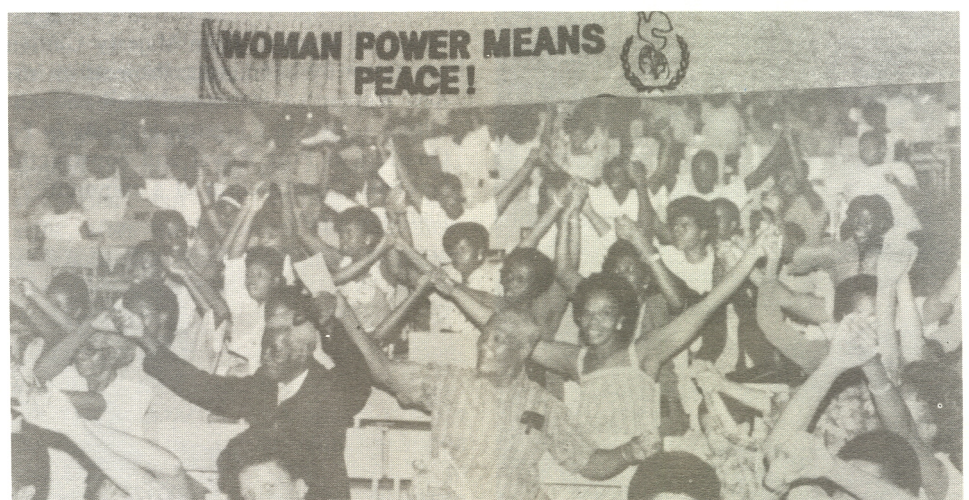
A review done last year (WHO/UNICEF) of the "Scanty" data available on the subject of sexual discrimination in childhood indicates that negative attitudes toward girl children prevail in virtually all societies of the developing world.

Of 40 developing countries surveyed only two, Jamaica and Venezuela show a clear preference for daughters. Bangladesh, Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Syria have the strongest son preference. Boys are preferred for reasons that are cultural, religious and economic. In some societies sons are

expected to bear the prime responsibility for the care of parents.

The review looks at implications for the health of girls. Studies show they are not as well fed as boys, less cared for during illness and that less money is spent on them, particularly for education. "This kind of neglect is not necessarily wilful . . . (but) more a conditioned response to a situation of scarcity". The results in some extreme cases is lower female life expectancy.

(World Health June 1986)



WOMEN AND PEACE: The large crowd at the Women Power Means Peace rally at the Merl Grove High School in October, sing "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand". Cynthia Schloss, Carlene Davis and the PEP Band had the audience rocking earlier in the afternoon. Sistren's children staged a War and Peace fashion show and challenged the adult's homegrown violence which threatens their home lives daily. They ended by handing out white roses to the appreciative crowd. Dr. Alafia Samuels offered staggering statistics to show that arms expenditure by the advanced countries keeps us in the Third World without adequate food, health care and education.

WROC: CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE



Testimonies to the work of the **Women's Resource and Outreach Centre (WROC)**, since its inception three years ago, came thick and fast.

The elderly member of the Seventh Day Adventists praised the assistance and support given by **WROC** when she lost her job and received no compensation. While she hasn't yet come to the end of the legal process, much progress had been made, and in the meantime **WROC** has also helped her to set up her own income-generating project. But, wait, don't her religious beliefs prevent

her from being here on this wet and muddy Saturday afternoon? "Once **WROC** makes the call, I have to go. They are doing what the church should be doing!" she asserts.

Another woman spoke of the patience of the medical doctor during months of illness. Yet another told how **WROC** had helped and supported her through beatings by her husband, and the kill-dead pressure of equipping her daughter with uniform, books and shoes, to take up a scholarship in one of the prestigious high schools.

These women were crammed into the main room of the **WROC** centre on Beechwood Avenue in Kingston, with about 30 others including the **WROC** personnel and representatives of overseas funding agencies. Discussion was centred on the Annual Report covering the work of **WROC** in the 19 months between April 1985 and October 1986. It was a period of intensified pressures in nearly every aspect of life affecting women: in health, education, employment, in the home, but **WROC** not only held its own, it also made progress on behalf of its growing clientele. Just 10 months ago, a fortnightly **Women's**

Clinic was added to the services already offered by **WROC**, the **Legal Clinic** and the **Children's Clinic**, and in the period has seen 110 patients. A small **thrift shop** has also been added, which has organised two jumble sales and assistance to flood victims, re-sold primary and secondary text books, had daily sales at the centre and participated in the **Woman '86 Trade Fair**. Overall the **WROC** services assisted some 2,000 women in the period reviewed.

And **WROC** isn't stopping there. It's organisers in the **Organisation of Women for Progress (OWP)**, have set themselves formidable challenges for the three-year period ahead. These challenges include purchase of the building in which **WROC** is now housed; expansion of the thrift shop; more frequent sessions of the medical clinic and provision of facilities for pap smears; monthly special education sessions for mothers as well as general education sessions incorporating **SISTREN**; the initiation of a radio programme for women; installation of recreational facilities for women, youth and the general community. Funds are being sought through overseas development agencies, the local private sector and special fund-raising activities.

Formidable indeed, but the **OWP** and **WROC** clients are determined to achieve these goals while maintaining a realism which will allow them to scale down if necessary.

CANCER OF THE CERVIX

(Continued from page 5)

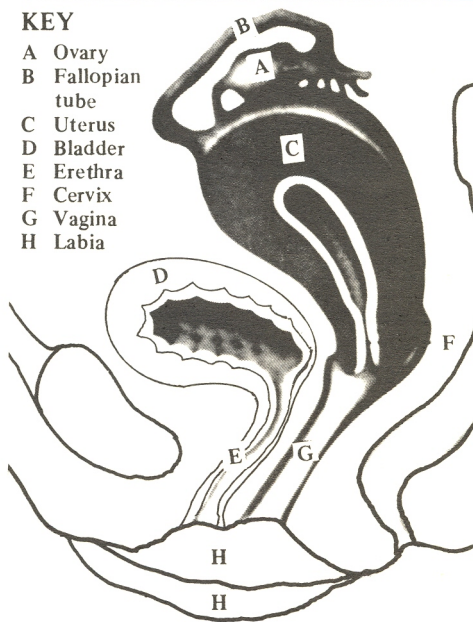
sex act. In many cases, therefore, the disease takes several years to develop and can be diagnosed in its early stages through a pap smear.

A pap smear is a scraping of cells taken from the neck of the womb (the procedure is not painful though you may be a little afraid at first). These cells are put on a glass slide, processed, and looked at under a microscope. A trained cytologist can tell whether the cells are normal or not, and the degree of abnormality. If there is a problem at that stage, treatment is simple and very often completely successful. The womb does not have to be removed at that stage. But when the disease is more developed, it can spread quickly to the whole womb and outside it to other parts of the body. By then, with the best treatment life is often cut down to five more years or less.

Family planning methods are useful, because through their use you can

KEY

- A Ovary
- B Fallopian tube
- C Uterus
- D Bladder
- E Erethra
- F Cervix
- G Vagina
- H Labia



limit the number of children you have, and consequently the amount of tearing of your cervix. In addition, methods

such as the condom or diaphragm reduce the danger of transmitting infection from one partner to the other. Long-lasting infection and frequent trauma to the cervix are often found in women who develop this disease.

Cancer of the cervix is very common in Jamaica, too common in fact. So what can we do to protect ourselves from this danger?

1. Be careful about our sexual habits, our sexual hygiene and that of our male partners.
2. Use family planning methods — although the condom and/or diaphragm are often not liked, they have distinct advantages.
3. Have a pap smear at least every three years particularly between the ages of 30 years and 50 years.

Stay well! As always, prevention is better than cure.

(Dr. Patterson is Director of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI), UWI, Mona.)

SISTREN RESEARCH EXHIBITION

How many of you have seen the exhibition "Dutty Tuff: Women, Work and Organisation in Jamaica, 1900-44". The exhibition was prepared from the research by the same name recently completed by Joan French and Honor Ford-Smith. Whether you live in the country or in Kingston, you will now be able to see this exhibition. It started being displayed at Parish Libraries throughout Jamaica in November 1986 and will continue through to June 1987 (see details below). It was on display at the Sistren House opening on December 18th and the Library of the University of the West Indies has also requested it for display.

So what can you see in this exhibition? You will see what kind of society women lived in around the time of the 1938 rebellion. You will see "old-time" pictures of every kind of Jamaican woman — domestics, higglers, field workers, middle and upper-class women, factory workers. You will see "de old-time fashions" and how they varied according to class. You will see how women struggled against their hardships, what organisations they formed, what they asked for, and what they achieved. Most of all, you will be able to compare the situation then with what it is today. Has it really changed? If you want to know about all this, do not miss this exhibition when it comes your way.

Sistren and friends wish to thank the Jamaica Library Service for making this wide exposure of the exhibition possible.

- *Trelawny Parish Library*
19th – 28th January, 1987
- *Hanover Parish Library*
2nd – 13th February, 1987
- *Westmoreland Parish Library*
16th – 25th February, 1987
- *Manchester Parish Library*
9th – 20th March, 1987
- *St. Elizabeth Parish Library*
6th – 17th April, 1987
- *St. Thomas Parish Library*
8th – 12th June, 1987

SISTREN PROFILE



Hi there. I'm Lilian Foster, founding member, actress and part of the Finance Team of Sistren Theatre Collective. I'm a single parent with three grown children, 34-year-old Anthony, 31-year-old Michael and 18-year-old Grace, and one grandchild, 15-year-old Malah.

Between Sistren work and family life, there's not much time for hobbies, but when there is any spare time, I enjoy

singing and dancing. Working with Sistren has given me an extended family and allowed me to get to know a broader set of people in the society. For the future, I want to improve my acting skills and explore many different characters. I'm also interested in music and want to learn to play the guitar or keyboard.

DON'T LET DRUG PRICES KILL YOU: CHECK YOUR GENERICS

We had a recent experience we thought other women should know about. It started with a particularly bad case of cystitis — deadly uncomfortable, and very familiar to the vast majority of women.

A very sympathetic female doctor wrote out a prescription.

Now understand when we say the particular doctor is sympathetic, we mean in practical terms — she always checks out the cheapest alternative drug. So imagine our dismay when the pharmacist quoted us a price of \$119.00! Straight back to the doctor, who explained the difference between brand-

name drugs and GENERIC drugs. GENERIC drugs are sold in plain containers and bear the CHEMICAL name of the drug — which in this case is NITRO FURAN TOIN. NITRO FURAN TOIN comes in tablet form and costs \$5.45 for the required course, as compared to the \$119.00 quoted us for a course of brand name (MACRO DANTIN) capsules. Both contain the same ingredients.

So ladies, check your generics! Make sure you ask your doctor for available generic drugs whenever you're having a prescription written up. Sometimes the difference in price is not as sharp as in our particular experience, but it's always a significant saving.

WOMEN ARTISTS COLLECTIVE REACHING OUT

The Women Artists Collective has been expanding and strengthening its links with women holding similar views. At a recent meeting, ten women attended for the first time. They had become aware of the group either by word of mouth or flyers circulated by the group at the WOMAN '86 exposition and trade fair in September 1986.

The Collective now boasts a wider variety of skills than before including sewing, financial management, jewellery making, art education, graphic arts, sculpture and painting.

The members aim at fostering an awareness in the Jamaican society of the importance of art, and particularly to reinforce a creative vision among children. During last summer, for example, the Collective worked with children from Queen's Prep School in painting a wall mural which reflected the children's concerns for living peacefully and caring for the trees and animals around them. The possibility for an



Corrine Wakeland, Women Artists Collective member, is seen working with Children from Queen's Prep School on a wall mural which reflects the children's concerns about Peace.

expanded Art and Environment Programme to reach more schools and communities nationwide has been proposed by the Collective to various organisations for support.

Other objectives of the group include development of income earning projects through which support can be given to artists in developing their careers; docu-

menting the works of member artists, providing a voice on issues affecting artists and women, and helping to advance the status of women.

The Collective welcomes all comers interested in achieving these objectives. Contact the group at the following telephone numbers: 927-9090, 926-2850 or 0942-2008.

MIKEY LIVES ON — STILL FIGHTING



Race Today Publications has published a volume of works by Mikey Smith which is soon to be available in Jamaica. When the book was launched in the U.K. late last year, his mother Mrs. Nerissa Smith, spoke these words in tribute to him.

"Mikey came from a poor family

and when he began his writing we thought he was wasting his time. We did not see that he could earn a living from writing. I used to watch him get up every day and write. I used to find his paper all over the house and think nothing could come of it. He would tell me to read his writings and when I did I saw how much he cared for people like ourselves. I saw that it was important to tell of our experiences and to speak out against injustices".

"I have seen many of Mikey's words come to pass and I believe we shall all see many more. He dreamed of having his own family. I thought when he died that was the end of his dream. I now believe he has left a family of another kind. I believe many of you are his own family. I believe many others of his own family will read his thoughts in this book".

"He prophesied that he would not die naturally but that he would die fighting. In one way that prophecy was fulfilled. In another way he was wrong. Through his writings he still lives and is still fighting".



Mother and Child, Rastafarians and the Elderly are the themes used by artist Judith Salmon for her recently produced set of linoleum prints. The edition size of these striking offerings from Judith is 30 and sale price is in the region of \$180.00 each. Seen above 'The Blessing'. Phone 0942-2008 for information on availability.



SKIRTING THE ISSUE: The young lady shown in this poster has a bare bottom. However, some bright person in the shop where the poster was being displayed had gone to quite a bit of trouble to 'clothe' her in a neatly cut-out white mini-skirt. Commendable we thought, if somewhat contradictory! We would urge the owners of the shop (and other similar outlets) to go a step further and stop selling these pornographic posters all together. They do our women and our country no justice at all.

LIONHEART GAL 'HILARIOUS'

(Continued from page 10)

None of the stories however, are presented as if all the answers have been found. It seems that the episodes which have been related are those with which the authors have now come to terms, and through the support which they get from each other in *SISTREN*, they now seem able to address other issues, or develop new perspectives on other aspects of their lives.

"Me do waitress work, bar work and factory. All kind a work. Me live all kind a place till after a time me settle down wid Sistren . . . Me determine no fi live how me madda live".

Honor Ford-Smith has done an excellent job in capturing the different speech patterns of the other members of *SISTREN*, so that even though the majority of stories are told in Jamaican, the differences in style and rhythms of

speech are clear. A lot of care was also obviously put into making this very readable, and it is an important step in the continuing efforts to standardise the writing of the Jamaican language.

Though there are criticisms which one could make of *LIONHEART GAL*, I for one am still too euphoric and secondly think that these are far too

minor, to open that discussion at this stage. Quite frankly, my one concern is that the binding of the book will survive the several readings to which it presently has to be subjected. Congrats, *SISTREN*.

(Carol Lawes is a member of the Graduate Theatre Company at the Jamaica School of Drama. Ed.)

"*Lionheart Gal* is a collection of *Sistren* life stories that tell of suffering, exploitation and oppression, of domestic work, sexual violence, unemployment and teenage pregnancy, but are streaked with the vein of humour and determination that has ensured the bouyancy and survival of these women".

"Women's groups in the Western World are predominantly middle-class and white but seem quite happy to speak for the working class and black people. *Sistren's* emergence as a group working from, with and for working class women drives a refreshing blast through such cosy and benevolent attitudes".

Jo Shinner, *BATTLEAXE*

"(The stories in) *Lionheart Gal*, put the struggles of Jamaican working class women on the literary map. They affirm the right of each woman to define herself in her own tongue".

Jackie Kay, *OUTWRITE*