

ABSTRACT

Voluntary Women's Associations in Jamaica:
The Jamaica Federation of Women 1944-1962.

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Voluntary women's associations have a long history which is only now being researched to reveal the multiple ways in which women have participated in national development.

In the case of Jamaica, the Jamaica Federation of Women (JFW) which was founded in 1944 by Lady Molly Huggins wife of the colonial governor is the subject of this study. The JFW drew mainly on the legacy of the pro-imperial white dominated conservative women's associations which were active in the country from the late 19th century. It neutralised the more nationalist-reformist and Afro-centric tendency among women which had raised a women's rights agenda from the 1930s and developed as a large organisation which attracted membership from rural poor women. Through their branches these women tried to respond to the varied needs of their communities and to influence changes in national life.

Using the extensive manuscript collection of the JFW which is located at the National Library of Jamaica and at the organisation's headquarters, government documents, oral testimony and observing the JFW at close hand and consulting varied but related secondary sources, the study examines the politics, ideology and programmes of the organisation to 1962.

The research reveals that the JFW taught women important life skills, stimulated their leadership capability, coordinated a significant level of contribution to social welfare development. However because the organisation was more influenced by the political agenda of British imperialism than by women's expressed interests it weakened women's thrust for social change at a critical stage in the nation's development.