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Women's Construction Collective (WCC), Kingston. Skills and employment for Jamaican women.

Building Community: a third world case book, Ed. Bertha Turner, Building Community Books, London, 1988

Skills and employment for Jamaican women

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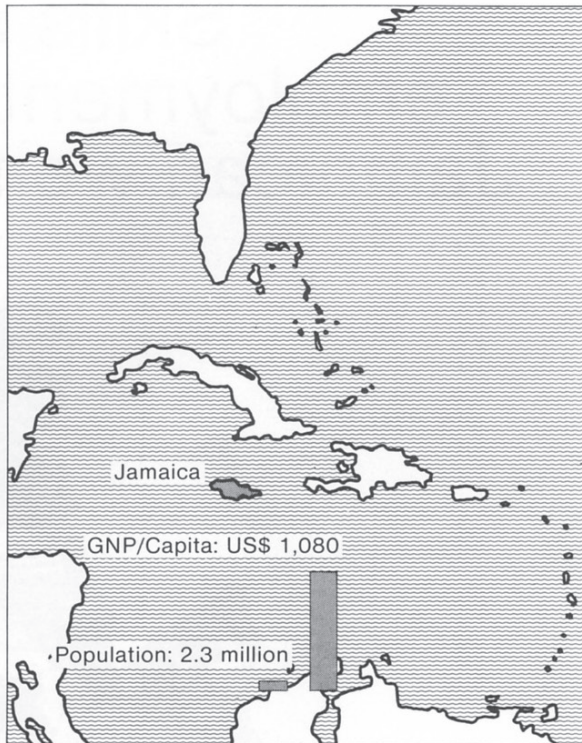
Women's Construction Collective

Sponsor:
Planning Committee for
NGO Activities:
World Conference on UN
Decade for Women, USA.

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Population Jamaica (1985) 2.3 million
Population Kingston (1982): 524,638



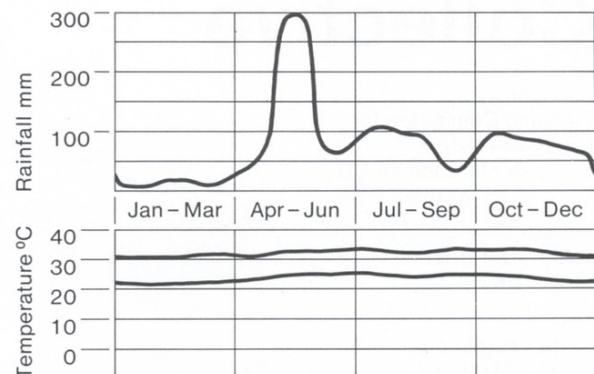
Jamaica

- Kingston
- Feeder Communities
- Places of Work (Project Areas)
- Main Traffic Routes

Minimum weekly wage in Jamaica is J\$56 (US\$10). Typical weekly pay for female workers employed as domestic help is J\$50 (US\$9). Subsistence minimum for food only is J\$30 (US\$5.45) per person. Most Kingston households headed by women contain at least one child, and are often several generations: an extended family.

Abbreviations

CRDC	Construction Resource and Development Centre.
JLP	Jamaican Labour Party
VDI	Vocational Training Development Institute
WCC	Women's Construction Collective



Climate Graph Kingston (12m)



The Women's Construction Collective (WCC) started in October 1983, with ten women from Tivoli Gardens - an inner city area of Kingston, Jamaica. The original aims were to help women to find employment at trade level in the building industry and to provide a mutual support group for on-going training. WCC is affiliated to the Working Group on Women's Low-Income Households and Urban Services in Latin America and the Caribbean, as are other groups in Peru and Mexico. WCC, a project of the Construction Resource and Development Centre, a non-governmental organization, is now a registered, non-profit company, managing its own day-to-day affairs and funds. WCC activities have evolved and developed. Adjusting to a slump in the construction industry, it expanded into other communities and took on new tasks, such as small-scale building and repair work.

Women excluded from training and jobs

The collective began as a response to four main factors:

1. the construction industry was booming and trade workers were in demand;
2. several contractors were willing to employ skilled female labour if it was available;
3. unemployment for young women in western Kingston was around 75 per cent;
4. government vocational training policy had changed to exclude women from building trade training programmes.

Low-income women would be trained by the collective in basic building skills and in carpentry. The tools necessary to start work were provided through a revolving loan fund. Contractors initially employed the women as labourers. But because they were highly trained and had their own tools, most were soon promoted to being trade helpers, earning much more than they could earn in conventional women's jobs.

Violence decreases and productivity increases

The building industry has responded positively to the WCC project. Contractors find that with women on site, violence goes down and productivity goes up. Another achievement of the collective is its ability to move women across political borders. Women from communities associated with one political party were placed on sites identified with the opposition party with no serious problems. Contractors who have employed WCC members now have confidence in employing women and are employing others. In its three



PHOTOS: RUTH MCLEOD, WCC, KINGSTON

WCC



year existence, the collective has demonstrated how mutual support amongst local women can work: creating earning opportunities for low-income women in the male-dominated building industry; breaking down rigid political divisions; changing established structures and building up confidence and ability.

Sophistication and squatters

Jamaica is the third largest of the Caribbean Islands, with an area of about 4,000 square miles and a population of about 2 million. The population of Kingston, the island's capital, has grown rapidly from 202,000 in 1943 to 472,321 in 1970.

The high-rise buildings of Kingston's financial centre and the luxury hotels of the north coast are evidence of the island's modernity and sophistication. Kingston's squatter settlements and urban ghettos present the

underside of Jamaica's identity. Characterized by high unemployment, political partisanship and poor living standards, these densely populated areas suffer from a complexity of social, economic and political problems.

In Kingston, 5.6 per cent of the urban population live in spacious splendour on 41 per cent of the residential land, at an average density of 0.1 persons per room. Meanwhile, 74 per cent of the urban population are crowded into 33 per cent of the residential area, living at average densities of 2 persons per room.

Unemployment and teenage pregnancy

Over one-third of Jamaica's households are headed by women, rising to nearly half in urban areas. Women's unemployment is nearly double that of men, reaching 75 per cent in areas of western Kingston. Teenage pregnancy is very common amongst unemployed females, given that becoming a 'baby mother' gives them adult status in the community. Yet most teenage mothers continue to live in the homes of their own mothers, who are the female heads of low-income households.

Women excluded from the building industry

In 1982, the Jamaican building industry was booming. However, of 32,000 people employed, only 800 were women, none of whom had the status of trade workers. Very few of the estimated 1,000 women trained in building skills between 1976 and 1980 had found jobs. Moreover, women had recently been excluded from the government's building and construction training programme at the trade level. The Working Group on Women's Low-Income Households planned to attack the problem simultaneously at both industry and community levels.

Male dominance and political partisanship

There were difficulties to overcome before women could enter the construction industry. Most trade work was carried out by subcontractors hired on a task basis and working with informal trade gangs. Entry into these gangs occurred through a male network of friends, relatives and workers who had met on previous jobs. Territorial political rivalries presented additional complications. Building sites in areas with party political affiliations are expected to give party followers exclusive rights to jobs. Those from other parties enter at their peril, unless they have a scarce skill or a strong tie to the main contractor.



WCC



PHOTOS: RUTH MCLEOD, WCC, KINGSTON



A community-based programme

In May 1983, the Working Group on Women's Low-Income Households received a grant to select and train 10 unemployed women from western Kingston, to place them in jobs and to monitor and document their experiences. The women were chosen by a community liaison officer, with help from local youth leaders, based on literacy and numeracy tests. They were from Tivoli Gardens, an area of four-storey apartment blocks and terraced houses which provide homes for 1,000 households. This community was developed during the 1960s as part of an upgrading scheme, when the Jamaican Labour Party (JLP) was in power. In addition to being highly politicized, it also has high levels of teenage unemployment and teenage pregnancy.

Locating a training agency

A first step was to locate an agency to provide training. CRDC often develops experimental training programmes for adult construction workers. It also had previous experience of working in co-operation with the Vocational Training Development Institute. VTDI trains vocational instructors for Jamaica and other islands in the Caribbean. It also provides short-term courses to upgrade skills in a wide variety of industrial fields. The WCC was able to work with both organizations, and the staff of VTDI provided technical and moral support on an informal but ongoing basis.

Starting training

Trainees began with a basic five-week masonry and carpentry course. Each woman had to build a concrete wall, rendered correctly and finished neatly, in between sawing wood to make building formwork and making a correctly jointed stool. When the women first arrived, some fashionably dressed in nylon stockings and high heeled shoes, they resembled anything but a potential gang of construction workers. Five weeks later, they were prepared to start work as trade helpers on large construction sites.

Job auditions

Originally, an agreement had been reached with contractors to place the women on a market upgrading project being funded by the government. It was located in an area sharing the same political allegiance as Tivoli Gardens. This project was postponed indefinitely. Faced with a prospect of no job placements, the collective developed a strategy of 'job auditions' - offering to work on site on a trial basis, at no cost to the employer. Soon the first contractor responded, taking two women on trial. One week later, they became part of the workforce. Before long, all the women were in regular work, earning two times the minimum wage and more.

Rising demand leads to expansion

Soon the rising demand from contractors justified expansion of the collective. Building on its existing base in Tivoli would have tied the collective into being politically identified with the Jamaican Labour Party. Instead, it was decided to work with two new communities: Nannyville, a housing settlement built within Kingston city limits in the 1970s by the PNP government; and Glengoffe, a rural community some 15 miles outside Kingston. The collective now held its monthly meetings on politically neutral ground at the CRDC offices, rather than as previously, at Tivoli's community centre. Suggestions that each community should form their own, separate collectives were firmly rejected by members, who wished to avoid being divided by local politics.

Project hit by building slump

Thirty-four women had been trained by June 1984. However, there were clear signs of a slump in the building industry. The collective faced the problem of no job placements for its members. However, there was a market

WCC



for some small-scale building repair and extension work and the women decided to explore the market further. By June 1985, the collective had launched itself as a small business.

Training continues through repairs and maintenance

Their first job was to build a wooden house for Jamaican potter, Ma Lou, in Spanish Town. With the small profit from that job, the women built a lean-to workshop at the back of the CRDC offices and began to offer carpentry services to the general public. Outside funding allowed the collective to buy tools and two vehicles to take on jobs in other parts of Kingston and surrounding areas. A local carpenter was hired as instructor for the workshop. Women, now unemployed as a result of the slow-down in the building sector, continued their training, upgrading their building skills in the workshop, and learning administrative skills by taking an active part in the day-to-day planning and running of the project.

New developments: education and extension

New developments of the collective include research on traditional building techniques, such as thatch, masonry and carpentry. In May 1986, they signed their first major contract for work on a primary health clinic. Within two weeks, two further contracts were signed. Linkages were established with a new community and a batch of new trainees entered the collective. An education campaign was launched to strengthen wooden houses in three communities. The work of the collective is having widespread effects, as they help to set up similar groups in other parts of the island - a recognition of its success.

Self-confidence and independence

Community base brings mutual support

The high placement rate achieved by the collective is largely due to its focus on skills. But the human concerns were equally important, laying the foundation for confidence and cohesion among the women who joined the group. The transition from unemployment to non-traditional employment in the male-dominated field of construction required mutual support. Since family support was necessary, but not always forthcoming, the collective itself took on this role. Women were able to share their experiences and to build up confidence together.

From dependence to independence

Expansion led to a redefined role for the collective and to the creation of a new organizational structure. The goal was to increase the collective's ability to govern itself by increasing each woman's ability to take on responsibility. The collective has gradually moved toward independence from its parent non-governmental organization, the CRDC. Originally, most of the key policy decisions (selection, training content, job placement, etc.) were made by CRDC. Later, two trainee managers were selected from the collective's women to take over the book-keeping, placement, site monitoring and other organizational tasks, assisted by a newly appointed Executive Committee. Finally, the collective became formally registered as a company limited by guarantee. They moved into their own offices and adopted a new organizational structure. The collective has evolved toward creating its own work opportunities, repairing and maintaining wooden houses. This move has given experience in self management, significantly increasing the collective's independence.

Supporting people building

Over thirty competent young women entered the building industry at trade level. This had an impact on the industry, when it began to recognize that woman could play an important role. Decreasing violence, increasing productivity and overcoming the traditional political boundaries and conflicts were some of the side effects of the collective's work. However, the importance of WCC goes beyond obtaining placements on building sites. In the collective, the women can come together to discuss their problems and develop solutions through mutual support. Women have become conscious of their own capabilities and have an opportunity to put them to use. WCC builds at several different levels simultaneously: it builds skills, buildings and people in their local communities.

A mediating role

The collective plays a mediating role. It helps women to realize their full potential and brings changes to the structures which surround them: in the building industry; in political relations; in perceptions of women's roles and in income distribution. By building community among women, WCC is creating a capacity for change far beyond its original objectives.