

# Amy Bailey fought for women

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THE EDITOR, Sir:

It is indeed fitting that Miss Amy Bailey should receive the Marcus Garvey Award for excellence. It is sad though, that one of her most valuable contributions to Jamaica is almost always forgotten. Even your front page **Gleaner** report on Sunday, January 31, failed to mention the fact that Miss Bailey was one of the leaders of the struggle for political rights for Jamaican women.

In 1937, Miss Bailey and others including Mary Morris Knibb founded the Women's Liberal Club with the aim of working towards full rights for black Jamaican women. In 1938, when Jamaican society was on the eve of changes following the 1938 uprising, Miss Bailey and others organized the first Jamaican Women's Conference which called for full political rights for women and end to discrimination against women in employment. Later, Miss Bailey, along with her sister Ina, Mae Farquharson, Mary Morris Knibb and others, led a delegation of women to the governor to demand the right to vote on equal terms with men. They won their demand and later that year, Miss Bailey and other members of the Women's Liberal Club organized the campaign of Mary Morris Knibb for election to the KSAC. They were not only the first women's organization to support and organise an electoral campaign, they were also the first to be victorious.

Many remember Miss Bailey's campaign for the right of black women to hold clerical jobs at a time when only white and fair skinned women were employed in banks and "better" stores. Many also remember her struggle not merely to train young women as domestic helpers but to win recognition for the importance of women's work which is almost always underpaid and often not even considered work.

She must wonder how far her struggles have taken women. Today, female unemployment remains twice that of men. The average weekly wage for a woman is \$68.30 as against \$86.00 for men. Between eighty-five and ninety percent of the female work force have received no formal training. Women's choices are further severely limited as only three occupational categories account for three-quarters of the experienced female labour force. It is not surprising then, the women are the hardest hit by the dramatic increase in the cost of living over the last few years.

Rape and sexual violence are on the increase. The police report a 6.1 percent increase for the past year. The figure is deceptively low as most rape victims are afraid to report the crime to the police. The number of crimes involving sadistic torture and murder of young girls is also on the rise. Slack songs which feature the abuse of women, are among the most popular musical entertainment. Perhaps these, among other media forms which combine sex and violence, have helped to desensitize our society to the seriousness of violence against women.

We cannot help but wonder why it is that in this situation, Miss Bailey's historic contributions to the political rights of fifty-one percent of Jamaica's population has been so obscured that it is almost completely forgotten. We are sure that many women struggling to make their lives in the midst of poverty, violence and abuse would find Miss Bailey's full history an inspiration. The issues Miss Bailey fought for are still as hot as ever. If most women knew how old our struggle is and how much courage there is in our history, we might be less cautious in claiming our rights today.

I am, etc..

HONOR FORD-SMITH  
Sistren Theatre Collection.  
February 3, 1988.