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# Women's Role in Third World Liberation Struggles

## Wits Women's Movement

"And if they were to ask what the most revolutionary aspect of this revolution is, we'd tell them that it is precisely this: that it is the revolution that is taking place among the women in our country."

So said Fidel Castro in 1966. We have tried to examine the extent to which this has been true of the revolutions in the countries under discussion.

Although this paper was supposed to deal with women in Southern Africa, it was felt that the problems encountered in this area were common to all third world countries. We therefore extended our paper to include discussions of Cuba and China, as well as Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Although there are certainly differences in the historical revolutionary processes of these countries, the similarities are overwhelming. Our paper is divided historically rather than geographically, and looks at the position of women before, during and after the revolution.

The general trend in all the countries is that prior to the armed struggle women were severely oppressed socially, politically and economically. And after the completion of the revolutions, the story is depressingly similar. Women were largely demobilized, and people reverted back to traditional sex roles. This is not to say that changes were not implemented - great strides were made in some areas, and we will look at those too.

Unfortunately though, those changes that did take place were often implemented only when they correlated to the needs of the state, and this meant that they could be, and in fact were, often withdrawn when different needs arose.

We have tried to provide not only a chronicle of the role of women in revolutionary struggles, but also to discuss some theoretical questions arising out of the empirical evidence. There are general lessons to be drawn from the empirical data we provide and these lessons apply not only to all the countries under discussion, but to South Africa itself.

Prior to revolution, all the countries under discussion were characterized by a system of patriarchy, which promoted an ethic of male superiority and female inferiority and inferiority. A woman was expected to provide three services to her husband - sexual pleasure on demand; children, especially sons, to bring wealth in the future; and unpaid domestic (and even agricultural) labour.

In China, a woman was not accepted into her husband's lineage until she produced a son. But the birth of daughters was greeted with disappointment and dismay and the rate of female infanticide was disproportionately high.

The labour performed by women was separated from that of men not by the manual exertion required, but by the status accorded the work. In Zimbabwe, women not only performed house-care and child-care duties, but also sowed, weeded and harvested crops and in fact formed the bulk of the labour force. But in all the countries their work was afforded no status, and the surplus they produced was appropriated by the men. The tribal chiefs and elders usually married several wives in order that they had more labour in the form of women and children to produce more surplus.

In more industrialized areas such as Cuba, women's exploitation was extended to the wage-earning domain. The large majority of women were domestic servants expected to be on call 24 hours a day. Others performed hard manual labour and worked under sub-human conditions in the tobacco industry. Their wages were paltry in relation to the labour they performed and in relation to wages received by men.

The arrival of western peoples' ideologies and technologies in the third world countries was frequently disastrous. In Zimbabwe the best land was appropriated by the white settlers. As men were pushed into the cash economy they were forced to leave the rural areas to seek employment. The women who remained behind had to look after children, the elderly and the infirm but had only the most barren land at their disposal so that malnutrition and disease increased and spread rapidly. Women were thus forced to depend on men in a new way, as they awaited the rare and pitiful remittances from their husbands in the compounds.

With the impact of colonialism, Cuba became a holiday island for Americans with money to spend. The acute poverty in the countryside forced many young girls and women to Havana

where their only possibilities for survival were as maids or prostitutes, and Havana became the centre of gambling, prostitution and crime rings. One Cuban prostitute, Alicia, was asked to describe her life as a prostitute:

"It was a dog's life; I had to go to bed with twenty men I didn't know to earn enough to raise my children and help my mother out. I felt twenty bitternesses, twenty torments, never anything you could call happiness. There were times I went someplace with a man and I'd hang my head because anyone who's got an ounce of shame feels ashamed of doing that - going through all kinds of things and not even knowing the man. But that was the sacrifice you had to make because woman's life was very hard here before. Now there's no reason why a woman has to sell herself for a peso."

The westernising influence of the Americans brought new forms of subordination in the form of night clubs and brothels but also presented Cuban women with images of 'liberated' western women to which they might aspire. But the general situation in Cuba was one in which women suffered a triple oppression:

- they were subject to class oppression as peasants or workers and as an exploited labour reserve in the preservation of colonial capitalism.
- they were subject to sexual oppression in an economic system in which machismo and the traditional mores were a bolster to the status quo.
- they were subject to colour oppression in a system where racism was an integral part of maintaining the balance of power.

Under pre-colonial conditions, women did little to expose and oppose their own oppression which was maintained by social mores. In China, confucian values dominated social behaviour and codified societal attitudes. Women had three obediences - to their fathers before marriage - to their husbands after marriage - to their sons if they were widowed. Four womanly virtues were also expounded. These were propriety in behaviour, in speech, in demeanour and in employment. Thus voicing protest of even independence meant compromising one's womanliness and femininity.

The oppression of women was such that they could not develop the confidence in their own work necessary to take a stand against oppression. The patriarchal system undermined women's very consciousness. The marriage laws resulted in women being sold off or exchanged like commodities, and there was no choice as to marriage partners. In China, as has been mentioned, women were not considered part of their husbands lineage till they produced sons. At the

same time, women were not acknowledged by their own families after marriage. Thus at certain times women were entirely rootless, unaccepted by anyone.

In Zimbabwe, as in all third world countries, men wanted wives to bear them sons to carry on the male lineage. Women who did not bear sons were therefore likely to become outcasts. Marriages were arranged between the elders of the extended families who determined which alliances were most advantageous for their families. Marital and familial mores thus removed any choices from women and undermined any feelings of self-worth or competence.

Western settlers frequently co-opted traditions of the third world countries. In Zimbabwe for example, women's status and rights particularly with regard to marriage and family which were previously governed by customary law, became victim to the interpretation of settler officials. Though men were regarded as majors in the eyes of the judicial system, women were seen as minors in perpetual tutelage to their guardians.

A common thread running through the histories of third world countries prior to revolution is the rapid increase of prostitution. In Cuba poverty-stricken women prostituted themselves to American men. In Zimbabwe, many women were forced to seek wage-labour as the reserves could not support them. They flocked to farms and mines and were frequently driven to prostitution to supplement their incomes.

Like Cuba, Mozambique was regarded as a rich tourist haven. Hence Bob Dylan's song:

"I'd like to spend some time in Mozambique  
Under sunny skies and aqua-blue  
And all the people dancing cheek to cheek ...  
Magic in a magical land!"

Prostitution in Mozambique was a booming trade.

Having discussed women's position in society prior to freedom struggles we will now look at what role women played in the actual revolutions. It is important to note in what way women were or were not incorporated into the broader struggle, for the form a revolution takes, predicts and reflects the form of the new state that arises out of the liberation struggle. In the same way, women's participation in the struggle and society's attitude to that participation predicts the nature and extent of women's oppression or liberation in the new society.

In China, in Mozambique, in Zimbabwe, in Cuba women were drawn into the struggle for liberation. However, women's

# SATURDAY 10th JULY

6pm Opening Address by Helen Joseph  
Play: Everywoman... In Search of Feminism  
BAR and MUSIC Box Theatre Foyer

# SUNDAY 11th JULY

9 - 10.30 am "The Personal and the Political"  
Questions and Discussion SHB2  
by UCT Womens Movement

TEA  
10.45 - 12.30 "The History of Feminism"  
by Anine Dawber SHB2  
Discussion: Is there a South African Feminism?

LUNCH  
2 - 3.30 pm Movie: Is there life after marriage?  
Women and Violence  
Discussion

TEA  
3.45 - 6pm Women and Psychology Workshop SHB2  
by Jill Eagle

SUPPER  
7.30 pm Movie: Diary of a Mad Housewife SHB2  
BAR and MUSIC Box Theatre Foyer

# MONDAY 12th JULY

9 - 10.30 am "Men and Feminism"  
by Lloyd Vogelmann SHB2  
Group discussions

TEA  
10.45 - 12.30 Drama Workshop Box Theatre Foyer

LUNCH  
2 - 3.30 pm Video: Union Maids SHB2

TEA  
3.45 - 6pm "Women and work"  
by Belinda Bozzoli and Ann Mullins SHB2

SUPPER  
7.30 pm Slide tape show: Woman warden in a hospital SHB2  
"Organising Women in Trade Unions"  
Speakers: Francis Baard

Song Workshop: Jessica Sherman Box Theatre Foyer

## TUESDAY 13th JULY

- 9-10.30 am 'Women in Southern Africa - Their Role in SHB2  
Liberation"  
by Wits Womens Movement
- TEA  
10.45 - 12.30 Video on Womens Resistance SHB2  
Speakers Amina Cachalia  
Virginia Mngoma
- LUNCH  
2 - 3.30 pm "The History of Womens Organisation in SHB2  
South Africa"  
by Jenny Schreiner
- TEA  
3.45 - 6pm Movie: Rosie the Riveter SHB2
- SUPPER  
7.30 pm Video on Womens Organisation SHB2  
Speaker: Amanda Kwadi
- BAR and MUSIC Box Theatre Foyer

## WEDNESDAY 14th JULY

- 9-10.30am "Women and Health" SHB2  
by Jacky Cook
- Tea
- 10.45 - 12.30 Contraception workshop Box Theatre Foyer  
by Joanne Xawitch  
Movie: A Scream from Silence SHB2
- LUNCH
- 2 - 3.30 pm "Women and the Law" SHB2  
by Durban Womens Movement
- TEA
- 3.45 - 6pm Evaluation of the Conference  
Ideas for future seminars/conferences  
Discussion about National Womens Day (August 9)
- SUPPER
- 8pm PARTY Box Theatre Foyer

involvement did not arise directly out of a feminist consciousness. In a guerilla war there was no 'front'. Battles took place wherever there were people. One horrific example is the massacre which took place in Domboshawe in Zimbabwe. Domboshawe was attacked by security forces on the 10th of June 1978. Of the 22 villagers who were killed, 20 were women and children. Of these, nine were burned to death inside a hut which had been deliberately set alight and eleven were shot dead inside a kitchen. There was no cross-fire at all, and only one guerilla was killed. As this example illustrates, women could frequently hardly avoid their involvement in the armed struggle. But the forms of their involvement obviously differed in some respects in the different countries. Attitudes to what women's involvement signified also differed.

Samora Machel had the following to say:

"The main objective of the revolution is to destroy the system of exploitation and build a new society which releases the potentialities of human beings. Generally speaking women are the most oppressed, humiliated and exploited beings in society. How can the revolution triumph without the liberation of women? Will it be possible to get rid of the system of exploitation while keeping one part of the society exploited? If it is to be victorious, the revolution must eliminate the whole system of exploitation and oppression, liberating all the exploited and oppressed."

Machel sees women's oppression suffered by all colonised peoples. "Colonisation" does not mean simply the unjust appropriation of another peoples' land; it is the psychological and cultural undermining of a people's self-concept - it reduces a nation to passivity and makes people accept their exploitation and oppression as a natural phenomenon.

Machel defined women's role within this colonialist structure. He said:

"As soon as the process of exploitation was unleashed, women as a whole - like men - were subjected to the domination of the privileged strata. Women are also producers and workers, but with specific characteristics. To possess women is to possess workers, unpaid workers, workers whose entire labour power can be appropriated without resistance by the husband. In an agrarian economy, marrying many women is a sure way of accumulating a great deal of wealth. The husband is assured of free labour which neither complains nor rebels against exploitation.

Let us be clear on this point. The antagonistic contradiction is not between women and men, but between women and the social order, between all exploited

people, both women and men, and the social order. This contradiction can only be solved by revolution, because only revolution destroys the foundations of exploitative society and rebuilds society on new foundations, freeing the initiative of women, integrating them in society as responsible members and involving them in decision-making.

Therefore, just as there can be no revolution without the liberation of women, the struggle for women's emancipation cannot succeed without the victory of the revolution."

Frelimo's attitudes were to a large extent reflected in women's practical involvement in the struggle. Women provided food and initiated schools and rudimentary health schemes. Increasingly, women took a more active role in the struggle. They transported military equipment, spied, and were involved in clandestine military operations. In China, Mao had said, "When women all over the country rise up, that will be the day of victory for the Chinese revolution".

In Zimbabwe, the Zanu Women's League expressed the same concerns with identifying the women's struggle with the broader anti-colonialist struggle. The League stated:

"We are fighting for socialism. We women of Zanu know that there will be no complete emancipation of women in any society, other than a socialist society. We women, workers and peasants of Zimbabwe, are not going to tolerate any more oppression and exploitation of man by man. It must be done away with by relentlessly waging this war of liberation to the bitter end. Total liberation can only be brought about when there is social ownership of the means of production and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Zimbabwean women played a vital and active role in the armed struggle for freedom. They were involved in providing food, concealing the cadres, and transporting weapons. The transportation of weapons was originally undertaken with male escorts, but later on women defended themselves. Those women who were fit underwent military training, usually together with the men. Women participated in military combat on the battlefield and many were prosecuted, imprisoned, tortured and killed.

One woman, Comrade Nhonga, the Minister of Youth, Sport and Recreation was still commanding the forces only two days before her child was born. She commented on the armed struggle:

"Our participation in the struggle for liberation was also the participation for liberation of all women,



within and without the struggle. We fought so that our voice could carry as good a weight as anybody else's... Our struggle yielded results because in the ZANU (PF) hierarchy there are women. There are women in the General Staff, High Command, Central Committee and the National Executive Committee. We feel we are on to a good start."

In Cuba too women were fully involved in the struggle. Although the major incorporation of women during the insurrectional war was often in the areas of medical aid, sewing uniforms, cooking and caring for the troops, education and liaison and organisational work, there were numerous women who engaged in battle and were fully and militarily integrated into the guerilla army. Batista's prisons were filled with women who were tortured along with the men. It is alleged that there was not a single case of a woman who weakened and gave out names and other secrets under torture.

In China there was a tendency for women to organise separately even within the Kuomintang as it was felt that women were fighting a specific oppression. Also, while men in other countries did begin accepting women's participation in the struggle, Chinese women encountered a considerably more severe opposition and repression by men. Women were frequently beaten, and even murdered, by husbands and fathers for proclaiming their new rights. And even after the revolution cadres of women who were sent into villages were often felled by the village headmen.

Despite opposition, though, women set up Local Women's Unions which were separate from the Kuomintang and which organised women to struggle against their special oppression while also mobilising them to fight feudal and reactionary Warlords. One woman described women's activities in 1927:

"We travel behind the Army, but we take no part in fighting. We are attached to the political department of the Army which organises the first provisional civil government in the new territory. Our work is to organise the women. For this we go into the homes and markets, wherever women are to be found and talk with them. When we have talked enough, we organise a local women's union and leave it to handle affairs in that district. Then we move to another district... We explain that men and women are now equal. Even though you are a woman, you are still a person. We say they have a duty to society, and not only to husbands. It is a good thing to ask the advice of parents about your marriage but not to let the parents decide everything concerning it. We explain the new doctrine of free choice in marriage. That young folks have the right to select their own life-partners. We also explain that, by the new law, women may inherit

property. And we say that the feet of young girls must not be bound."

But within the very organisation of women in the armed struggle there were considerable problems. Common to all the liberation struggles we have examined was a situation in which there was no grass roots mass mobilisation of women demanding their inclusion in the struggle, and demanding the specific emancipation of women. The recognition of the place of women and their struggle within the broader struggle was understood by leaders. But without a groundswell movement, the concepts could not filter down into the consciousness of the masses. Ideas were imparted by men in leadership - for example, in Zimbabwe male soldiers went to various villages attempting to educate and politicise rural women.

This lack of a mass revolutionary consciousness may account for the problems besetting the now post-revolutionary countries.

Because women's emancipation remained largely, but not solely, the preserve of top leadership, the question of women's rights, and the priority accorded women's issues after the revolution remained, and remains in the hands of the few who determine state policy. Thus, it is entirely possible for post-revolutionary leaders to subjugate the women question to the economic imperatives of the state.

To emphasize the point: since there is no group of militant people actively concerned with the implementation of women's rights, women remain in a vulnerable position, dependant on the priorities of the government presently in power. This situation is even more serious in the light of the fact that women are usually excluded from high positions in government, even in post-revolutionary societies. For example, there is still not a single woman on the Frelimo Central Executive. In China, the percentage of women involved in government since the revolution is small. China in fact, provides a clear example of the way in which the implementation of women's rights is entirely dependant on the policies of the government in power.

Immediately after the revolution, the China Democratic Women's Federation was set up, with the dual responsibility of implementing government policy toward women and of bringing to the government's attention complaints by women. Women were given the right to vote and prostitution was abolished. The new marriage laws gave women their rights to property, inheritance and free choice in marriage, divorce and custody of children.

Response to the law was immediate, and women particularly took advantage of the divorce provisions and nearly 91% of the divorce cases in 1950 were implemented by women.

But women met deep resistance to their fight for equality. Old traditions clung tenaciously and laws were often opposed or subverted not only by husbands, fathers and mothers but also by party cadres themselves. There are even cases of male cadres using imprisonment and torturing to handle marriage cases, to enforce the traditional marriage against women opponents.

The campaign against traditional marriages, together with the establishment of communal child care centres did make significant inroads on the old patriarchal family.

But, in 1953, it became necessary for the Chinese Communist party to initiate a new, five year plan, marking the break with capitalism. The Chinese Communist party sought stability and saw a militant women's movement as disruptive of this goal. The new line adopted in 1953 was that women's liberation was completed and no longer required independent struggles by women. Women's political role was downplayed, and an increasing emphasis placed on mobilising women for economic production, combined with appeals to women to perform their family duties well. To quote from a 1955 issue of a Peking magazine:

"The New Constitution has guaranteed women's equality with men in the political, economic, cultural, social, and family interests. Henceforth, women need no longer initiate a militant struggle for such things."

The struggle for production quotas became primary over the struggle for the realisation of feminist demands. Increasingly, the old, oppressive patterns reasserted themselves. There was a revival of arranged marriages. After 1953, divorce became extremely difficult to obtain, family mediation being stressed.

One observer summed up the new trend in 1957: "Party propaganda today is heavily weighed with dedication to family unity, discipline and loyalty."

Then, with the Great Leap Forward in 1958, it became imperative to draw women into the productive process. So, what we would see as emancipating measures were established: collective kitchens, child-care centres and laundries. These progressive steps were not entirely maintained however, because of the inadequate resources donated to them.

The extent to which these measures were based on expediency, rather than a commitment to the liberation of women, is illustrated by what ensued. In 1959, a new head of state was appointed, who relied on material incentives and social conservatism to increase production rather than political introduction and party discipline, as Mao had done. These policies also involved a strengthening of

the hold of the family as a stabilising influence. We have already discussed the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who took advantage of the divorce laws were women: thus the gradual undermining of the divorce laws hit women hardest. To quote a Swedish journalist, Jan Myrdal, who questioned some villagers in 1962. He was told:

"But divorce is a thing of the past ...If people want a divorce, the various organisations, the party, the League of Youth, the women's group try to instruct them and explain what is the decent thing to do, and the one consistent with socialist moralists... No divorces have been heard of in many years, for it is a long time now since women were granted equality, and marriages have been entered into equally."

Recent visitors to China report that a similar attitude towards divorce prevails today. This overwhelming social pressure against divorce hits women more severely than men, because many women are caught in oppressive relationships with husbands who are still steeped in the patriarchal tradition. The Cultural Revolution, with its upheaval within the bureaucracy, brought some renewed criticism of the continuing patriarchal structure of the family. But its only lasting impact appears to have been in an improvement of women's pay scales in relation to men. The organised opposition to divorce remains.

Post-revolutionary euphoria ignores the fact that liberation is far from complete. There has been a tendency for women and men to revert back to their previous sex-determined roles. But there was also much change in the right direction.

In Cuba, considerable strides were made. After liberation in 1959, the American crime syndicates lost control and thousands of prostitutes and pimps returned to New York and Miami. But many stayed, and for those women who had turned to prostitution as their only survival, the revolution had to provide new possibilities. Twenty thousand maids enrolled in schools for the Advancement of Domestic Servants. There women indicated their participation in the class struggle in the newly-won revolution when they suddenly demanded the right to leave their 'master's' houses every night at eight in order to attend these schools. Revolutionary instruction was also a part of this education process, not on a theoretical level so much as on a practical level which enabled these women to deal with the counter-revolution in the houses where they were employed.

There were also schools for peasant girls where they learnt dress-making and other skills as well as raising their educational level. One Cuban man made the following

statement after the revolution:

"Experience has shown me that women produce just as much as men and sometimes more in those jobs for which history has conditioned her, while in others where strength is of prime importance she isn't able to keep up with men. Now I don't think this spells inferiority and it's just the effect of established customs. What actually happened in Cuba is that women were relegated to lighter work. In the factories where the work was not exceptionally taxing physically, men taught the women the necessary skills and then themselves moved on to other skills. Soon whole factories were being taken over by women."

In 1960, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) invited all existing women's groups into one organisation. Its stated objectives were to raise the ideological, political, cultural and scientific level of women in order to incorporate them into tasks assigned by the revolution and so to allow them the role they are entitled to play in the new society. In 1974, the FMC had over a million members. Through the FMC, hundreds of women took worker's advancement courses, courses in agriculture, cattle-raising, tractor-driving, farming techniques, electrical work for machine and crane operators etc.

It is also alleged that the purpose of the FMC is "more that of representing government policy to women than of representing women to government". It appears that while practices have been modified, they have not been revolutionised and frequently remain oppressive to women. And women's and men's consciousness too, has failed to break out of traditional ways of perceiving women's roles.

Even the previously quoted Comrade Nhonga of Zimbabwe who fought and commanded on the battlefields, came out with the following statement after the revolution:

"The purpose of the war was to eliminate a system. Now that it has been eliminated, there is no need for people to be divided. Women have a great role to play in uniting the nation because they are the household builders, mothers of the future generations and wives to rulers. The more women co-operate, the more prosperous will be our nation. After war and after elections there should be a period when the dust settles down. It takes time for people with different attitudes to accept changes. The process of acceptance can be accelerated by the attitude that women assume."

The sentiments expressed in that speech propose that women return to home-building, to being passive or 'co-operating' - in short that women should revert to their traditional

roles. The idea of "waiting for the dust to settle" is also counter-revolutionary. The post-revolutionary era should not be one in which complacency and euphoria replace an ongoing process of change. That era is one in which, with the revolution out of danger, there is time to implement the ideals for which the revolution was originally fought.

But it is the same story everywhere. Change has taken place and great strides have been made, but the dust has very largely settled on women's issues. Programmes were instituted but failed. The coming freedom that seemed promised by women's active participation in revolutionary insurrection has been severely counter-acted by the re-emergence of the old ethic of femininity. The Cuban woman today drives a tractor, hoes a field and carries an AK-47 as part of militia duty. But she is very likely to do all this with her hair in curlers so that she will look attractive and feminine to her man at night.

In Zimbabwe too, the women who fought in the revolution have not been integrated into society. It is felt that they have lost their femininity and so lost their place as women in post-revolutionary society. In places like Cuba and Russia women have reverted to wearing make-up, thus conforming to pre-revolutionary ideals of what the womanly woman should be and look like. The Zimbabwe Women's Bureau, set up after Independence in 1980, stated in a booklet produced in the same year that, "There is a need for education among women. There is no magazine in Zimbabwe that caters for a 'woman's image'".

In China too, traditionally feminine qualities are praised. "The Chinese woman is glorified for being capable and progressive, yet, praised for being demure and 'self-effecting'".

The ideology of femininity has in fact never been grappled with, in any of the countries under discussion. This is possibly one of the most important failings we must take note of. Women are still denied control over their own bodies, and forced into a male centred sexuality. In Russia and Hungary, abortion is difficult to obtain, because the countries require a large work force. In Mozambique, some women write of being pressured by male guerillas to sleep with them, as part of their 'duty' to their country.

In China, in May 1958, the birth control campaign was abruptly called off, since it was argued that the strength and wealth of China lay in its population. Now of course, contraception and abortion are freely available, but birth control and abortion are not seen as means of freeing women's sexuality. They are strictly used in the context of population planning. The advances made in marriage and property rights were not accompanied by a liberation of

female sexuality.

This is not entirely true of Cuba. There contraceptives are freely available. Doctors favour using the I.U.D. as they feel it is preferable to risking the numerous ill-effects of the Pill. However, no national campaign has been undertaken to promote family-planning, and the old stereotypes of sexuality and femininity continue to propagate the ideal of a large family. Machismo persists, and there is prosecution of homosexuals.

Some of the programmes instituted by the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau did indicate some insight into the nature of the women's struggle. They tended to see women's economic independence as necessary to the total emancipation of women. They promoted measures to integrate women into economic life since it was felt that involvement in income-earning activities would instill a sense of self-reliance and self-confidence among women so that they could fully exploit their resourcefulness. The need for special research on all problems relating to women, particularly unemployment, was felt. In their booklet of 1980, the Bureau set out a programme which included workshops, seminars conferences and income-earning activities such as vegetable co-operative schemes, craft-marketing schemes and skills-training centres.

Unfortunately there is no available written information compiled after 1980, which explores the implementation or success of these schemes. We tried to contact the Bureau itself but were unable to get through.

So what then can we conclude from all this mass of information? Certainly we can conclude that women's emancipation in third world countries is depressingly far from being completed.

Despite legislation to the contrary, sexual inequality still exists. The great revolutionary leaders all pointed to the fact that women's emancipation was a necessary concomitant to national liberation. But post-revolutionary countries have failed to put that relationship into practice, and have attempted to put women's issues aside while trying to ensure positive economic change. Machel had previously pointed out the flaw in this kind of strategising. He wrote, "the idea of waiting until later to emancipate women is erroneous. It means allowing reactionary ideas to gain ground only to fight them when they are strong."

Many of the reactionary ideas of the colonialist state have indeed persisted in third world countries despite certain governmental attempts to implement change. The problem is that ideas have come from the top, while the masses have not been re-educated in new revolutionary ideas. Until such re-education is undertaken,

precolonialist and colonialist ideals of stereotypical sex roles will continue to dominate in the private realm of consciousness and practice, despite legislation pertaining to equalising practice such as sharing labour in the home.

The issue is not as clear-cut as it seems, though. It has been pointed out that past social relations may account for sexual inequality in the newer socialist states, but not in the long-established states of Eastern Europe. It is not simply a matter of past mechanisms dominating - at present there are specific social mechanisms and practices through which the inequalities are reproduced. This may be attributable to the way in which reforms made by post-revolutionary governments were frequently made in accordance with the perceived economic needs of the country, rather than in accordance with the revolutionary ideals of true national liberation.

Thus the failure of the total liberation of the women lies in practice rather than in theory. On the one hand this is a severe indictment of post-revolutionary governments.

On the other hand it points to the fact that the theory is not wrong - it is at our fingertips; we do have the answers; and true democrats may yet put all that in practice and so achieve the long-awaited liberation of women.



# Organizing Women in the Liberation Struggle

**Jenny Schreiner**

The original brief for this paper was "The History of Women's Organisation in South Africa", so let me start with an explanation for why the paper is not about that topic.

A group of us got together to workshop this paper (1) and decided to limit ourselves to looking only at areas where women had organised as women, where women had been active as a group on their own, (or relatively on their own.) But within that we made a further selection and focussed the talk on mass women's organisation during the 1950's - the Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League. The phrase 'history of women's organisation' is ambiguous in that it does not differentiate between different forms of organisation. For example, there is short-term organisation around a particular campaign; long-term organisation, organisation of women into a separate women's organisation, organisation of women into general organisations. In the long-term it is important to consider all aspects of women's political and social existence if one is to fully understand the nature of our subordination. But that is not possible here. The women's organisations and general organisations (2) that address themselves to the question of women's subordination, are young, and the academic work is embryonic. We decided to start somewhere where there were practical lessons to be learnt about how to change women's subordinate position and the entire system of which that is a part.

But by ignoring the organising of women into 'general organisations', we are begging a very important question - 'why form a women's organisation?' We felt it was important to make our position on this question clear at the outset. But it is essential not to confuse our own answer to that question, with the positions adopted by the organ-

isations that we are considering.

There is another danger. In an age when the women's liberation movement - 1970's European style - has raised the women's question to a high throughout the world, it is all too easy to look back on organised and politically militant women of a previous era, and to impute to them, the motives and ideas that we would expect of ourselves if we were undertaking such actions. For example, some people find that it is very easy to see the women active in the 1950's as feminist - to the extent that they broke with a preconceived notion of women as being passive and inactive.

The history of women's involvement in political action in South Africa throws doubt on this epithet. South African women have never been passive. They may not have been active in taking up the cudgels on behalf of the 'sisterhood of women', but they have consistently resisted attacks on their position. We think the notion of 'women's political passivity' is a dangerous one. It may in fact be an inappropriate concept everywhere, but it certainly does not fit the South African reality. We need to draw a distinction between the exclusion of women from institutional political channels, and political inactivity. There are numerous occasions on which particular groups of South African women have created their own alternative platforms from which to oppose inroads on their lifestyle. For example, the 1913 pass campaign in the Orange Free State, and 1940's Women's Food Committees.

To return to the point that I was making - the ideas of the 70's are new and are a product of the material developments of the time - the changing face of production, the freeing of women (in a sense) from the prison of the household by new technology, the increasing possibility of control over women's bodily functions - again in a sense a liberating influence, the changing role of the family under monopoly capitalism all contribute. With apologies to Engels: It is not the consciousness of (wo)men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. We must avoid the kind of statement that: 'They have entered the political arena and must be feminist, even if they didn't realise it.'

Diffenent Roles of South African Women's Organisation in the 1950's.

The organisation of women into a separate organisation also can't be seen as necessarily feminist - the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereeniging is not feminist, the Women's Christian Temperance Union is not feminist, nor in fact was the ANC Women's League feminist. Feminism is the understanding of the specific nature of the subordination of women in order to change it. But there are different types of feminism - I am not going to go into this - it was

the subject of Sunday's discussion. Suffice it to say, that the 'particular brand' of feminism is going to be determined not so much by what one recognises as oppressive but how one analyses these forces and sees them as reinforcing other power relations in society. The lack of concern on the part of the authorities for the families of the working class, and as a part of a much broader problem of why we and black communities do not have adequate housing, schooling, civic amenities etc., depends on one's political perspective. Rape is seen by all women to be oppressive. But whether one understands rape as an action perpetrated by men on women; or as being an act of violence resulting from the contradictions and power relations of our society as a whole and the kind of conditions that the majority of South Africans have to live under, is going to depend on one's political position. Feminism cannot be seen as a shared experience uniting all women - there is no such thing. If feminism is to have any value, it has to be seen as an alignment of women within a particular political movement or way of thinking, based on the political situation in that country.

Not-So  
But if not all women's organisations were feminist, what role did these various organisations play in South Africa? There are a number of different reasons why women organise themselves. The women's organisations in the 50's were all committed to the sanctity of the family and saw women as having a crucial role as wives and mothers. They were committed to changing the position of women in so far as this would serve to make them better mothers.

But these women's organisations are distinguishable in terms of the overall political ideology they adopted and hence the class perspective which shows through in the organisation.

The Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereeniging - Volk, Vaderland en Vroue - stood foursquare inside Afrikaner Nationalist ideology. This commitment overshadowed any potential common experience with organisations like the Women's Institute, Anglican Mother's Union, or the Vrouesendingbond.

The 'non-political' stand of the religious women's organisations, for example, the Catholic Women's League, Sisterbond, created severe limitations on alliances between these organisations and those women's organisations committed to the liberation struggle.

Within the consumer organisations, there was a clear distinction between the Housewives League of South Africa, and an organisation like the Cape Housewives League. The Housewives League of South Africa, set up in 1935, seems to have functioned as a watch-dog for white housewives. It operated by setting up working relationships with control

boards and actually sitting on some. The Cape Housewives League, on the other hand, organised women into mass campaigns to fight the price increases, displaying a high degree of militancy. Its affiliation to the Federation of South African women shows clearly where its political allegiances lay.

The National Council of Women had its origins in the International Council of Women, which started in America in the 1880's. The ICW's principles state that:

"... believing that ... an organised movement will serve to promote the highest good of the family, and of the State, (we) do hereby band ourselves in a federation of all races, nations, creeds and classes to further the application of the Golden Rule to society, custom and law: Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you."

These principles "have formed the basis of evidence to commissions and served as the ground work for detailed memoranda presented to authorities of all kinds throughout the years." (Munro, E.E.; 1981) It began as a non-racial organisation, but in the 1930's the National Council of African Women, the Indian Women's Council, and the Council of Coloured Women were set up as affiliates to the NCW. In 1955 white women joined together to form the Women's League for the Defence of the Constitution. By 1959, they had changed their name to the Black Sash and had broadened their focus to take up problems created by influx control. The Black Sash's participation in CATAPAW - Campaign to Abolish Passes for African Women - in Cape Town had raised the issue of passes for discussion in their white ranks. This led to Advice Offices being set up in various centres. An important point to be made in relation to the NCW and to the Black Sash is that there were women of different political ideologies who found a home there. For example, in the 1950's in Cape Town some ex-C.P. women moved into the NCW to see if they could work there. They found themselves severely limited by the more conservative affiliates and some of the conservative regions. The Cape Town branch of the NCW had to withdraw from CATAPAW - an alliance with the Federation and Women's League amongst others - on instruction from the National President.

Why Should Women Form A Women's Section?

Let's return to the question "Why should women constitute themselves into a separate mass women's section?" and our own answer to this question.

To quote the Chinese slogan - Women hold up half the sky. If we think that social change brought about through mass mass action by the progressive classes, then there can be no doubt that women must be organised. The unity of all

members of these classes is an essential ingredient.

No matter what aspect of the lives of the oppressed we look at, there are organisations taking up the problems of that area. The independent trade union movement is fighting issues in the work place and giving workers the opportunity to experience and develop democratic forms of politics in that context. Alongside these unions are community organisations taking up the problems where people live, and again developing democratic practices. There are student organisations like COSAS, AZASO, NUSAS and SRC's, youth organisation. Throughout South Africa in the last couple of years, progressive women's organisations have been taking up the issues that affect women.

But each of these organisations is doing more than just fighting the power relations that pertain to that sector of the population. Those struggles are part of a broader struggle. People are developing new ways of organising and these organisations are the precursors to the structures of a new democratic society. They are a training ground for citizens of a new South Africa. It is critical that women have as great an opportunity to develop and put into practice these new values as men do.

But in order to build this kind of unity and to ensure the maximum participation by all, one has to overcome the divisions created in our society. One of the barriers that we have to overcome is the fact that because of their subordination women do not participate equally in society and in organisations. It is necessary to organise women as women to overcome these barriers to their full contribution.

No matter which 'group' of women one looks at in South Africa, their position in society and the life experiences are a product of class relations and racism and subordination because of their gender. This means that women experience their structural position differently from their male counterparts. A combination of race, gender and class reaches into every crevice of each woman's life from childhood to the grave. Working class women in South Africa suffer a combination of exploitation, racial oppression and sexual subordination. They experience qualitatively different power relations from those felt by working class men.

In one respect the aspects of women's subordination which act as barriers to our full participation are practical problems which can be overcome on a short-term basis. We can find practical ways of getting around them - by organising play-groups and creches, transport for late night meetings, teaching others how to drive. In organising these kinds of projects, women begin to be involved in and contribute to organisations.

But there is another dimension to the problem of women's unequal participation - a less easily tangible one - women do experience a specific oppression. A women's organisation is where we can learn to work against the way we have been socialised. By being part of an organisation, we are changing ourselves all the time - learning skills, learning to act collectively, learning organisational discipline. But a women's organisation is also the place where we can find long-term solutions to the questions of how to overcome our subordination - how do we organise a society so as not to reproduce these forms of oppression?

A final general comment about the relationship between mass women's organisations and other organisations. A progressive women's organisation cannot be isolated from other progressive organisations. All these organisations have working relationships with one another which in a way limit their autonomy, so we are not arguing for an autonomous women's organisation.

The ANC Women's League and the Federation of South African Women.

The focus of this talk is going to be on the Federation of South African Women and the ANC Women's League in the 1950's (3). In our workshop sessions, we chose to focus on certain aspects of these two organisations. The most entertaining way might be to discuss the 'great events' which these women organised, but that is certainly not the most useful. The emphasis of our discussion is how did the organisations operate, how did the women build up their organisations, and what kinds of issues did they see as within their scope for organising around?

These two organisations formed an integral part of the national liberation struggle during the 1950's. They were committed to a policy of mass action and through organising women into enormous campaigns, played an important role in generating assessment and debate in the Congress Alliance as a whole over organising methods, issues to be taken up and tactics. The Federation and the Women's League organised women as part of the liberation struggle.

They are significant too in that they constitute a break with earlier forms of organisation adopted by women of the oppressed classes. The history of black women's activism before this time is characterised by women's involvement in 'general organisations' like the C.P. and trade unions, or by women engaging in political action around a particular current issue. In some instances such as the Indian women's participation in the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign, there was no 'organisation' as such. In other instances, like the earlier mentioned Food Crisis, the women set up an impressive grassroots organisation. But it had no long-term goals and it ceased to function once the food crisis

had ended. But the Women's League and the Federation provided a long-term structure, and a body of women who could take up a range of current issues and link them into the long-term goal of liberation.

But let's consider the formation of these two organisations. We need to understand how these two organisations came to exist and how the relationship between them was established. We should know how organisation on a national scale emerged and what led up to the formation of these two organisations.

The late 40's and early 50's were characterised by political fluidity - the new awareness of the role of mass action developing at this time, led to a proliferation of organisations. We can't approach the Federation as if the organisations which affiliated to it and from which it drew its membership, were stable, firmly established and well-organised by 1954. There were a number of important processes at work during this period.

Firstly, at a regional level, there was increased political activity among politically involved women around the question of organising women. The conditions under which working class and black women had to live and work in the late 40's and early 50's led to an increased politicisation of women around certain issues. An example here would be the Food Crisis - an issue which throughout South Africa galvanised women into action. During the Second World War, women's position in the manufacturing industry had changed considerably. At the same time, the reserve economy ceased to be able to support people, and labour tenants left the white farms. This changing class structure in the rural areas led to a significant increase in the urbanisation of African women. This process put African women in contact with political organisation in a way that they had not been before.

In 1952, 8 057 superbly disciplined volunteers defied South Africa's unjust laws in the space of six months. The volunteers entered the Defiance Campaign, of which this year is the thirtieth anniversary, by signing a pledge, committing themselves to obey the commands of their leaders, and accepting that it was their 'duty to keep myself physically, mentally and morally fit.' With that they went into battle. For many women who were active in the Women's League in the 1950's, the Defiance Campaign was their first taste of political action. The Defiance Campaign proved to be an excellent training ground for some of our most dynamic leaders - Elizabeth Mafekeng, Lilian Ngoyi, Dora Tamana, and Annie Silinga.

This was one occasion on which women did not retire once the campaign was over - in each region, women continued to be active and helped to build up organisations to take their demands forward.

But these moves took different forms in different regions. The Western Cape saw the Women's Food Committee, the Guardian Christmas Club, the Women's Anti-Pass Committee, progressive women moving into the National Council of Women, the Cape Housewives League, and the Women's Federation (a regional organisation which drew a lot of inspiration from the Women's International Democratic Federation) (4). These organisations had begun in the late 40's and early 50's and the increased militancy among women after the Defiance Campaign led African women to join these organisations.

In the Transvaal, the women directed much of their energy into the ANC Women's League, which at that stage existed in any real sense only in the Transvaal, although the constitution provided for its existence in all regions. There also had been the Transvaal All Women's Union which was set up on C.P. initiative in 1947. Here again, there had been a strong WIDF influence, and one of the TAWU women went to the Second World Congress of Women in Prague in 1947. It appears that by 1952 TAWU was no longer active. HB'

ANC and trade union women in Port Elizabeth met in 1953 to discuss the value of a women's organisation. Through their trade union activities, they had contact with the women's organisations in Cape Town. They decided that the idea of a national women's organisation was a good idea in principle, and agreed to work with the Western Cape women and women of other regions towards a National Conference of Women to discuss ideas and experiences of organising women. During these early discussions, the example of the WIDF was used to generate ideas, and inspiration was drawn from what women of other countries had achieved through the WIDF.

This was a second process at work. In response to the new politicisation of women and the growth of organisation at a regional level, and inspired by the examples of women in other countries, there was a move to form a national women's organisation. But it is important to remember that this was seen as a long-term project, and there was no rigid direction in terms of how that organisation should be structured. The 1954 conference was simply called a National Conference of Women, and the suggestion to form a national organisation was not incorporated into the programme as such, although obviously women had discussed the idea of it in the planning stages.

A third process developing at this time was the re-organisation and re-vitalisation of the ANC Women's League after the National ANC Conference in December 1954. The establishment of the Women's League on a regional basis after this conference was a crucial factor in determining the structure of the national organisation that had been mooted at the April '54 National Conference of Women.



In 1943, the ANC Conference opened the doors of the ANC to African women on an equal footing with men. The conference adopted a policy of universal franchise and changed its constitution to provide for the existence of a Women's League. Women were no longer auxiliary members of the ANC, but had full voting and participation rights. This structure did not mean that women were actively organised into the liberation struggle, from that time forward, and nor that they were organised on a separate basis into the Women's League.

At the December 1954 National ANC Conference, the Women's League was given a few hours to meet as a women's section for the first time ever. The aim was for the women to discuss two issues - firstly, the campaigns which particularly affected them as women members of the ANC, specifically the Bantu Education Campaign; and secondly, the nationalisation of the Women's section. The Women's League was to hold its first entirely separate conference only in September 1959. From 1955 - 1958, the Women's League met as part of the ANC Conference Programme.

This December 1954 meeting decided to work towards a National Conference for the Women's League in 1955 and a committee of 17 was chosen to work in each region towards this end. The 1955 conference saw a Cape based group of women working at building a Women's League. The hope was expressed that other areas would soon follow suit. In 1957 the constitution of the ANC was amended to accommodate the changes that had grown out of the experiences and problems of the preceding couple of years. The relationship between the ANC 'mother-body' and the Youth League and Women's League were carefully detailed.

The Women's League was under the political direction of the ANC and was to recruit and organise women into a strong organisation to act as an auxiliary force to the ANC in the national liberation struggle. One of its functions was to 'take up special problems and issues affecting women'.

The fact that there were no participants from national women's organisations at the April 1954 National Conference of Women, is indicative of the fact that a national women's organisation that was non-racial and overtly political was a novelty. What was discussed in 1954 was a structure that would incorporate regional women's organisations, could encourage the organisation of unorganised women (the door to individual membership was left open at this stage) and could include organised women who were not part of women's organisations.

In the establishing of any organisation, why membership should be open to and how membership should be obtained are burning questions. No less so at the National

Conference of Women, and in fact for the first two years of the Federation of South African Women's life, this issue was in the process of being discussed and decided on. The Transvaal ANC Women's League members fully supported the idea of a national non-racial women's organisation. In 1954 they argued strongly for an affiliate, federation structure with no individual membership. This was based on the prior existence of the Women's League as a mass-based organisation in the Transvaal. They feared that if both organisations were open to individual membership, it would lead to a conflict of interests and weaken the strength of the women. By 1956, the Women's League had been established in all the regions of South Africa, thus generalising this situation to the whole country. The decision at the Second Conference in 1956 to adopt a single affiliate structure was a product of this changed situation. There was no longer a need for membership of the Federation of South African Women to be open to individual membership for African women since they had a home in the Women's League.

It did not solve the problem for the women of other race groups - and throughout the 1950's, these women vacillated between their membership of general organisations and feeble attempts to start women's organisations, like the non-European Women's League in Cape Town. Coloured, Indian and white women were not given a home in a mass women's organisation, since the Federation of South African Women itself did not have regional or branch organisation structures. Regional committees were elected at regional conferences, but these remained committees co-ordinating the campaigns and working through the affiliated organisations in order to mobilise women. While the affiliate structure ensured the unity of African women into one organisation, it didn't provide a home for women of other races who wanted to organise on the basis of their gender. During the course of the 1950's one can see a decline in the activity of these women in the campaigns of the Federation of South African Women. For example, in the Western Cape, whereas in 1953, the women's organisations were predominantly Coloured in membership (the majority racial group in the area), by the late 1950's the campaigns organised reflected the predominance of African women. This tended to eclipse the organisation of Coloured women. The bread price increase campaign in 1953 was a non-racial campaign, with a large contingent of Coloured women taking the lead. Creches were being set up in a number of areas, some of which were Coloured. In 1956, the Federation along with the Coloured People's Congress, took up the issue of the introduction of a racially exclusive Municipal franchise. From late 1956, the focus was on the anti-pass campaigns, on rent problems in the townships, provision of latrines in Nyanga Emergency Camp, and the removal of African squatters.

The question at issue here is how to structure a national organisation which facilitates better organisation in each region, that is sensitive to the specific regional class structure and political alliances. The Federation structure was such that it did not draw on unorganised women, and so its way of organising and the issues chosen to fight were determined by the nature of the major affiliate organisation.

What were the organisations that affiliated to the Federation of South African Women? The ANC Women's League, a national women's organisation; the Coloured People's Congress, South African Indian Congress, and the Congress of Democrats, nationally organised, racially exclusive political organisations; the Cape Housewives League, a regional consumer organisation; the League of Non-European Women, a regional women's organisation; the Federation was an uneven mixture of different types of organisation - in some sense its strength and in other senses a weakness.

Increasingly during the 1950's, the Federation activities became indistinguishable from those of the Women's League. But throughout, the dividing lines between the Federation, its affiliates and the other Congress Alliance organisations were unclear. The reason for this lies to a large extent in the particular way that the affiliate structure worked, and in the 'Unity in Action' policy adopted by the Congress Alliance organisations at this time.

Unlike the National Council of Women, also an affiliate structure, but with provision for individual membership as well, the Federation did not have operative branches. Women were active in their affiliate organisations and activities were co-ordinated through the Federation of South African Women. The NCW branches themselves took up issues in the name of the National Council of Women. It must be remembered though that the NCW never had as its intention, the mass mobilisation of women. The Federation activities were always joint campaigns involving the Federation and one or all of its member organisations.

The Unity in Action policy, a policy of a broad front of action in opposition to the government, was expressed in a number of Congress documents at the time. In 1956, the Women's League adopted the following policy:

"To ensure the defeat of the Nationalist government, we must work for the greater unity amongst the African people and the broadest possible alliance embracing the Congress Movement, the non-Congressites and all those who oppose Apartheid. The Manyano Women, the National Council of African Women, mother's welfare organisations, religious, sporting, political and otherwise, should be invited to enter the campaign against the Nationalist government."

This Unity in Action policy also operated at a less grass-roots level in alliances with other Congress organisations and with non-Congress Alliance organisations. For example, the Campaign to Abolish Passes for African Women, a joint campaign set up in Cape Town in 1957 by the NCW, Black Sash, Anglican Mother's Union, Quaker Service Fund, the Women's League and the Federation of South African Women.

The Federation of South African Women, despite its national structure, in fact only organised one truly national campaign - the Anti-Pass Protest on the 9th of August march in 1956. But the Federation served other functions in keeping communication channels open between the different centres, generalising the lessons and experiences of each group of women to all regions, and most importantly, in stimulating women at a regional level to take up issues of national importance - like the Bantu Education Campaign, the Congress of People, Group Areas and Resettlement. The Federation, Women's League and the other affiliate organisations, mobilised women into the liberation struggle, but these organisations were also committed to taking up the immediate daily issues of the oppressed, and improving their living conditions. It is useful to identify the different kinds of issues that these organisations took up: there were local political issues - for example, the Defend the Municipal Vote Campaign in 1956, opposition to the introduction of Apartheid on buses in Cape Town; local community and women's issues - the state of the roads in Worcester, creches in places like Blaauwlei and Wynberg; opposition to beerhalls and to the illegality of brewing and selling beer from their houses in a number of areas - Cato Manor, Langa; opposition to the increase in the price of bread; issues that arose from State policy and affected the entire country - for example, the Group Areas Act and Resettlement, Rent Increases in 1954, the Bantu Education Campaign in 1955, passes for African women. These campaigns were not run as nationally co-ordinated campaigns, and regions were left to determine their own pace and decide how to organise around these issues. For example, the Bantu Education Campaign was particularly strong and well organised in the Transvaal, while in the Western Cape it was hardly taken up at all. The Western Cape as a coloured labour preference area, has a completely different combination of class and race relations from the Transvaal, although there are factors internal to the politics of the Western Cape ANC which could have contributed to the lack of success of the campaign as well.

The 1956 march to the Union Buildings on 9th August was the only truly national campaign - a campaign in which the Federation and its affiliate organisations had the dual intention of organising women regionally to fight against the passes as it became an issue in that region, as well as organising women to join the march to the Union Buildings to take their demand sheets to Strydom. The

African women's spontaneous responses in a number of regions in fact acted as a stimulus to the Federation and the Women's League to generalise the resistance across the whole country. This served the added function of undercutting the divisive tactics of the state in issuing passes at different times in the different areas.

I want to make a final point on the kind of issues the Federation took up, that relates to the way in which the Federation and the Women's League saw the relationship between community and women's issues. There was no clearly defined line between these issues. Issues like rents, education, street conditions, and so on, were seen as touching the women most strongly. Women were best placed to take the initiative in these community issues. The question of creches was seen both as a community issue - they are necessary facilities in the community as a whole - and as a women's issue - the women needed to be relieved of the problem of child care while they were at work. This understanding of community and women's issues as being integrally linked is a reflection of the policy adopted in 1954. This stand had implications for the relationship between women's organisations and general organisations - it ensured that these organisations were involved in joint campaigns, again the Unity in Action policy, and ensured that the women's organisations could not be seen as being sectarian and divisive - a criticism that was bandied about in some quarters. Most importantly, seeing women's issues and community issues as one and the same thing overcame the 'privatisation' of women's problems. Immediately these problems are moved out of the arena of the home, and become 'collective' problems of the community.

#### Footnotes

- (1) Thanks to Barbara, Bridget, Peta-Anne, Sheila, Debbie and Annette for workshopping this paper with me.
- (2) We battled to find a suitable term for organisations which men and women could join - we thought of 'peoples' as opposed to women's organisations, but the idea of the United Party being a people's organisation was too much - so we stuck to 'general organisations'!
- (3) I have done most of my research on the Western Cape and so this may have warped my understanding of the Federation as a whole.
- (4) Taken from my thesis

# Indian Women in Resistance

**Amina Cachalia**

Since the onset of Indian life in South Africa, Indian women have always been at a disadvantage. With the influx of indentured labour, women had been dragged from the sweets of India and shipped to South Africa as prospective wives of workers in order to look after them and promulgate a potential work force. The Indian woman's marriage was thus one of convenience and the rearing of a family was done under great difficulties - almost a slave-like existence.

Indian indentured labour came about from a great demand for Indian goods which were too expensive to import according to the great demand for them. Therefore "Sugar Barons" of Natal enticed free traders to supply that demand locally. These traders developed lucrative businesses which supplied the local population.

1886 was a watershed in South African history - the lure of the gold rush. Indian traders introduced friends and relatives to this commodity and this resulted in a greater incursion of labour. Indentured labourers were told that at the end of five years they could have the choice of returning to India free of charge or remaining in South Africa as citizens with equal rights. These promises proved false, as was discovered in 1893 with the removal of Indian rights.

1893 was the year in which Gandhi arrived to settle certain conflicts between compatriots. At this time in the Transvaal Indians were already feeling the oppression of segregationist legislation. Gandhi's decision to remain in South Africa and help the exploited people protect their rights led to the formation of the Natal Indian Congress of 1893.

With the defeat of the Boers in the Anglo Boer War, the Transvaal and O.F.S. were handed to the British. Under their reign, conditions for all Blacks worsened and Gandhi's disillusionment with the system caused a breach between British and Indian relations.

In 1904, Responsible government was handed to the whites, and all blacks were excluded from it. The new Transvaal government tried to force pass laws onto the Indians and was met with great opposition. Opposition took the form of Gandhi's 1904 passive resistance campaign which was to be used as an effective protest tool against unjust legislation and discrimination. However, the first campaign had to be postponed several times because of negotiation between Smuts and Gandhi. A subsequent campaign was organised which was far more effective because it involved Indians from all sectors and in this passive resistance campaign Indian women made essential contributions.

In 1910, the Union of South Africa declared Indian marriages null and void. This was an attack on womanhood and further inspired them to join the resistance campaigns. Both literate and illiterate women were aware of the daily exploitation to which they were subjected and this determined them to enter fields of political and social endeavour. Masses of women participated in the march from Natal to Transvaal.

In 1946, under the leadership of Dr. Asvat, a passive resistance campaign was organised in which hordes of women marched from Transvaal to Durban to protest against injustices. Despite daily abuses from government and other hooligans, they persevered until they were arrested, charged and sentenced. All Indians participated in support of the campaign and the collection of funds. 1946 was to pave the way for greater political struggles under the Indian Congress.

1948, with the Nationalist rise to power, marked the application of further discriminatory legislation, such as the Population Registration Act. The Indian Congress had to organise to resist such acts. Indian women played an important and difficult role, because they had been oppressed on two fronts: because they were black and because they were women. Their determination led to the formation of the Woman's Progressive Union in the Transvaal. They drew up a simple constitution, organised public meetings, canvassed Indian areas, which resulted in massive support. The Woman's Committee decided to organise themselves for independence. They started typing and literacy classes to increase their independence, and were provided with books and facilities by the South African Institute for Race Relations. They gave classes in domestic and political matters and determined that their national liberation would be from within not without. The success of P.W.U. was seen in their participation in political campaigns such as the Defiance Campaign in 1952, in which Indian women

helped organise and collect funds.

With the establishment of the South African Federation of Women, the P.W.U. had an influential role to play. They were among 20 000 women who marched to Pretoria's Union Buildings to protest against pass law extensions.

With the Group Areas Act of 1953, Indian Women organised to march to the Union Buildings on December 10th. They were baton charged, arrested and injured. But despite these difficulties and others which Indian women faced, they participated in a proud struggle from their arrival, and have always worked towards a free South Africa.

The struggle for national liberation and women's rights are synonymous. Neither are over and when liberation is achieved, women's rightful role will be achieved in a non-racial South Africa.



# Speech of the UWO Delegate to NUSAS Women's Conference

The UWO was approached by NUSAS to talk about women's organisation and the UWO. In this speech I will look at:

- why the UWO came into being
- when the UWO started
- what the aims of the UWO are
- what the structure of the UWO is
- how we try to work democratically
- what our practical work is

The UWO came into being in 1981, after a group of women, who had their roots in the Federation of South African Women, felt the need to mobilise women in the struggle again. These women saw all around them that the women bear many burdens and have many problems.

- As housewives, high rents, rising food prices, poor and badly maintained housing make it difficult for us to make ends meet.

- There are not enough creches nor adequate schooling facilities. Our children often have to leave school to help support the family or look after young children while we work.

- Many of us do two jobs. We work in factories or shops during the day and at home we are expected to do all the housework as well.

- The worst paid unskilled work is done by women in the factories, on farms and as domestics. When jobs are scarce we are the first to be laid off.

- In the factories we are often forced to have family planning. When we fall pregnant we may lose our jobs because maternity leave is not granted.

- Those of us who cannot get jobs are sometimes forced into running shebeens or becoming prostitutes.
- As women in the Homelands, most of us are not allowed to come into cities to look for work or to live with our husbands who work there.

As women we often feel inferior to men because we have been taught to believe that our place is in the home. This prevents us from becoming actively involved at work and in the community to overcome these problems.

It was as early as 1978 that the small group, about eight women in all, formed themselves into an ad-hoc steering committee to work towards a Conference of women in the Western Cape. This group looked deep into a number of questions. They discussed:

- the Women's Charter
- the FSAW Constitution
- the difference between an organisation and a federation and how an organisation would be able to affiliate to a Federation later on.

There were many difficulties for the steering committee on the way. However, by April, 1981, the Steering Committee had prepared a draft constitution based on the principles of the Women's Charter. The Steering Committee advertised widely to inform people about the Conference which was to launch the UWO. The Conference was attended by over 500 women from 31 areas of the Western Cape. Here, the Constitution was adopted and an Executive Committee elected.

The aims of the UWO are spelled out in the Constitution. Briefly, they are to encourage all women:

- to participate in the struggle for full and equal democratic rights for all.
- to work on practical activities which affect the day to day problems of people in oppressed communities and at work.
- to struggle for the removal of all racial and sexual discrimination and economic exploitation.

In order to achieve these aims, the UWO adopted an organisational structure consisting of branches based in the various communities of the Western Cape. Branches undertake practical work affecting women as members of their community. Every two months, branches come together at Executive Council where decisions are taken and problems of the organisation are discussed. Council is the central decision-making body of the organisation and consists of two representatives from each branch, plus the Executive Committee.

A number of sub-committees and working groups report to Council. The most important is the Organising Group which

assists the full-time organiser in visiting branches and building the organisation. A number of other committees such as the Consumer Committee, Creche Committee, Workers' Support Committee or August 9th Committee are elected from time to time.

Office bearers are elected at the annual Conference which also gives direction to the organisation through drawing up the Policy of the Organisation. The UWO now has nearly 600 paid up members and 19 organised branches.

To work democratically in the UWO means that we try to make sure that the broad membership participates fully in the decision-making of the organisation. In practice, this means that agendas must be sent to branches two weeks before Council meetings; emergency decisions are taken by the Executive but branches are informed as soon as possible.

Of course, things do not always run smoothly. We are learning through our own efforts and our own mistakes. Taking decisions together also means that all our members must know the background to a particular problem or they must know what the implications of a particular decision will be for the organisation as a whole. Only then can we genuinely take decisions together. We found that when important decisions such as Policy decisions need to be taken it is useful to have a workshop before a Council meeting. Recently, for example, Conference recommended that a workshop be held on:

'Should the UWO be a National Organisation?'

The workshop then made a recommendation to Council. On the basis of that recommendation, Council decided that the UWO should not be a national organisation. So, the question of national organisation was raised at Conference by one branch; a workshop was planned and an agenda sent to branches; distant areas that had applied to the UWO for membership were invited to participate. Council then took the final decision. On the question of our relationship to the FSAW, the UWO has an open working relationship with the Federation. Our branches are ready to prepare for affiliation.

This method may seem slow and clumsy but since we are all learning together at each stage, we have sometimes had to sacrifice short-term efficiency for long-term understanding. In our practical work, our branches are guided by the Policy of the Organisation, drawn up by Conference. This year, Conference reached deadlock in deciding on a uniting theme for the year. Some branches wanted High Prices, others Child Care. Again, we had a workshop for all branches. It was decided that High Prices would be the long-term uniting campaign and child care the uniting project. In this way, branches are guided in the kind of issues they take up and in the kinds of projects they set up. Also,

any links forged with other progressive organisations can be built on the basis of concrete practical work.

Branch work on the High Price theme varies from film shows to surveys to taking up rent struggles. Branch work on Child Care includes the organising of playgroups, talks on child development and health care.

If all this sounds too good to be true, it is only because it is a brief outline. The daily work of building an organisation is full of ups and downs, victories and setbacks. The UWO wishes to encourage all women to come forward and to take up the work of the women's struggle.

Finally, I leave you with the message of Aunt Dora Tamana, honourable member of our Executive Committee. Aunt Dora is 82 years old and an inspiration to everyone who knows her.

You who have no work, speak.  
 You who have no homes, speak.  
 You who have no schools, speak.  
 You who have to run like chicken from the vulture, speak.  
 Let us share our problems so that we can solve them  
 together.

We must free ourselves.  
 Men and women must share housework.  
 Men and women must work together in the home and out  
 in the world.

There are no creches and nursery schools for our  
 children.

There are no homes for the aged.  
 There is no-one to care for the sick.  
 Women must unite to fight for these rights.  
 I open the road for you, you must go forward.

# Women and Health

**Jacklyn Cock**

Many of us will have experienced the oppressive effects of a health care system which focuses on cure rather than prevention, which individualizes many of our problems by blaming the victim and which all too often weighs profits more than human life and well being. The workings of the health care system are particularly relevant to us because although women comprise the majority of health care workers men continue to dominate the system. They control access to information, determine treatment philosophies and provide definitions of health and sickness. Doctors are extremely important in defining the boundaries of what it is to be a woman and in controlling those women who might attempt to cross those boundaries. This social control can be either material (eg. refusing access to an abortion) or ideological as in the case of much psychiatry.

I'm going to argue that women are denied control of their bodies in three separate ways:

- Through rape which is a political means of terrorising women, and controlling their movements.
- They are denied full expression of their sexuality and the freedom to explore their unique sexual responses.
- They are denied access to those technological means which are available for controlling reproduction by the stranglehold the medical profession has over these means and their distribution.

So the three agents of control I want to talk about are firstly the phenomenon of rape, secondly the definition of femininity which is current, and thirdly the male dominated professionalised practice of modern medicine. I'll talk a bit about how medicine has come to be male dominated, when historically healing was the function of women operating through self help networks. A historical tradition which which feminists are now trying to reclaim.

## Rape.

Rape constitutes a form of social control in so far as it represents a means of keeping women in 'their place', a way of constraining their behavior. For example Griffin has stated that,

"The threat of rape is used to deny women employment ...  
The fear of rape keeps women off the streets at night.  
Keeps women at home. Keeps women passive and modest  
for fear that they might be thought provocative."

(Smart & Smart pp 100)

It is not rape itself which constitutes a form of social control but the internalisation by women, through socialisation, of the possibility of rape.

The radical feminist position on this question is stronger. For example Susan Brownmiller in a fascinating book called "Against our will" talks about rape as a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. What the radical feminists often ignore is that rape as an assertion of power and a means of degradation is sometimes against men as well. For example it was widespread in South East Asia during World War II when the conquering Japanese army raped men as well as women members of the conquered populations. It is also widespread among our prisons. I was told by an attorney this week that there are 30-40 rapes every night perpetrated by men upon men in the Johannesburg fort - the medieval-type prison just up the road from us. But obviously the majority of rapes are perpetrated upon women, and occur on a terrifying scale. (777 women are raped every day in S.A. at present.)

So that's the first way in which women are denied control of their own bodies.

Secondly women are denied full expression of their sexuality.

This level of control is largely ideological in terms of how femininity is defined. The dominant view for some time was that women did not need or enjoy sexual activity. To have sexual intercourse with one's husband was an act of duty rather than one of pleasure - "Shut your eyes and think of England". This belief in female sexual anaesthesia was closely connected with the cult of motherhood, since it was assumed that the sexual instinct in men was paralleled by a maternal instinct in women. The glory of woman, her *raison d'être* and her most sacred duty in life was seen to lie in motherhood. The core of this definition of femininity is that women are essentially reproductive beings. Sexual overindulgence was dangerous. Particularly masturbation - the last cliterodectomy I have read about in the West was performed in America in 1948

by a doctor on a five year old girl-child as a cure for 'excessive masturbation'. Recent research has established that a woman's sexual pleasure is rooted in the clitoris, so one's talking about a total denial of a woman's sexual feelings here. This was established by research done by Masters and Johnson who stressed the irrelevance of the vagina and the centrality of the clitoris to women's attainment of orgasm; they also talked about women's multi-organic potential - presumably an idea which is deeply threatening to men. Because of the current equation of femininity with a lessened sexual drive and capacity, women have been denied the opportunity to explore this dimension of their bodies. Current definitions of femininity also mean that women cannot take the initiative in sexual encounters. This denial is an important form of ideological control.

The third level of control over women's bodies is material and relates to the denial of access to these technological means which are available for controlling reproduction.

Lets take contraception first. The two most effective methods of contraception - the oral contraceptive pill and the various intra-uterine devices can only be obtained through doctors. Women are therefore totally dependent on the doctor agreeing with what they see as their contraceptive needs. It is still not uncommon for young girls seeking prescriptions for the pill to be refused by doctors who make moral judgements about whether or not girls of that age should be having sexual relations. The contraceptive pill has been posed as a panacea to all women's worries about unwanted pregnancies. The pill is promoted to women by doctors who often assure their patients that it is still the safest and most reliable form of contraception. But the pill has 27 known side effects, including depression and loss of sexual feelings. It can also lead to chemical diabetes. One in eight women develop chemical diabetes within a short time of taking oral contraceptives; it can also lead to migraines and high blood pressure. For this reason one feminist has called the pill 'the new oppressor'. A question that rises here is why a pill for men has still not been marketed. The answer lies in the fact that so far all trial versions have had marked side-effects. These included shrinking testes, enlarged breasts, changes in liver function, weight increase and an alcohol intolerance. With the exception of the last one, these side-effects are almost identical to those experienced by women. They are considered sufficiently harmful to prevent the male pill from being marketed, but did not stop the female pill from being introduced to millions of women. This decision was a medical one which also means that it was a male one. It was evidently considered that these side-effects would be intolerable to men but that women, having no choice, would have to endure them. Third world women are particularly vulnerable here, as they have

been the victims of a long-acting contraceptive injection called Depo-Provera which was banned in America for its known adverse side effects, but widely distributed in the third world and widely prescribed for black women in South Africa. The 'normal' woman is constantly portrayed as a person with something of a childish incapacity to govern herself and in some need of protection. This child/woman must not be allowed to control her own child bearing capacities. As a result access to abortion must be determined by more mature "male" persons.

Abortion is illegal in South Africa except where approval is obtained from at least three doctors, and illegal abortions extremely frequent and dangerous. A professor of law has estimated that as many as 100 000 illegal abortions occur annually in South Africa, and this means many sick women in hospital wards throughout the country and not infrequent deaths. It is because of their control over women's reproductive capacities that many feminists have argued that the medical profession is the principal agent in the colonisation of women. Certainly women have higher morbidity rates than men - they consult doctors more frequently.

It is possible that a good many female illnesses have a structural base - generated by the conflicts and strains attached to women's role in society. I'd like to point to two examples of this in particular individuals - both 19th century feminists:

- In a fascinating biography of Olive Schreiner which came out last year, First and Scott suggest that the asthma from which she suffered her whole life stemmed from the conflicts and isolation (both personal and political) she experienced in her struggle to become an independent woman in a male-dominated, colonial society.

- Another 19th century feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman collapsed with a 'nervous disorder' for which she sought help from Dr. Mitchell, the greatest nerve specialist in America at the time. This was his advice to her:

"Live as domestic a life as possible.  
Have your child with you all the time.  
And never touch pen, brush or pencil  
as long as you live."

Fortunately Gilman realised that the source of her illness was that she did not want to be a wife; she wanted to be a writer and an activist. So discarding Mitchell's prescription, she took off for California with her baby and her pen.

The crucial question facing 19th century women was the choice between marriage and a career. Both Schreiner and



Gilman believed that they should be combined - that women should be free to engage in creative work outside the home. But the combinations of the roles - mother/wife and wage worker has created a good deal of stress for women in contemporary society.

In modern society there is an increasingly high rate of neurosis and mental illness among working class women. The widespread solution to this socially constructed stress is the prescription of tranquillisers and anti-depressants. In Britain in 1978 there were 20 million prescriptions for sedatives and tranquillisers - most of them for women. Tranquillisers are perhaps the modernised response to the nineteenth century practice of clitoridectomy which was widely seen by British surgeons as an appropriate treatment for a variety of female disorders. The worrying thing is that these drugs work. They are anaesthetisers, they dull responses, they create a sense of well-being. Of course they also smother awareness and undermine a person's capacity for acting upon the world to change it. This raises important questions about the increasing control of women by the state-regulated medical profession.

I want to argue that the medical profession acts as an institution of control over women in two main ways:

- Firstly, they control women's reproductive function. Technology has made it possible to regulate fertility, to perform safe and painless abortions, to make childbirth relatively pain free and to reduce or remove the pain and discomfort associated with a large number of illnesses and disorders suffered only by women. But women do not have direct access to the means of controlling these processes. That access is regulated by the medical profession. Freud's aphorism, 'Anatomy is destiny' because it is totally up to individual doctors, and to the medical profession as a whole to decide how much control women should have over their own bodies. Roberts writes, "As dispensers of fertility control, abortion and obstetric care, doctors represent the power men have over women's bodies and lives throughout society". (pp.157)

- Secondly, the medical profession acts as an institution of control over women in their perpetuation of women's domestic role, of the 'ideology of domesticity'. Doctors are educated to see their patients as examples of individual pathology rather than as products of pathology in the social structure. Consequently when a patient presents with a particular complaint at the surgery, the general practitioner will tend to assume that the complaint either has a physical basis (which can be diagnosed and treated) or that it is of 'psychosomatic' character.

There is a structural problem - the sexual division of labour in capitalist society - a structural problem which takes two forms:

- the isolation of the domestic worker as housewife; and

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