

AUGUST 9th - TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON: NEW ROADS ARE OPEN

An explanation of the significance of South African
Women's Day

Hilda Bernstein

No proper assessment has yet been made of the role of the women of South Africa during the 1950's, at a time before the banning of the African National Congress, when the possibility of organising mass demonstrations (although under great difficulties) still existed.

But without doubt it was an important period that laid the basis for the militant participation of a new generation of women in the protest movements and uprisings of the past few years. ~~A leading woman in the Federation of South African Women in the 1950's, Dora Tamana, who is now 82 years old, put it this way at a Conference in Cape Town in May of this year: "I opened the road for you - you must go forward."~~

New roads were opened in dramatic fashion 25 years ago when 20,000 gathered at Pretoria on August 9th, 1956, in a massive demonstration. It was the culmination of continuous nation-wide struggle against the imposition of passes for women.

Women in South Africa had been excluded from pass-bearing under the Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 (all males had to take a pass at 16 years) and this was largely the result of a relentless struggle waged by women in the Orange Free State for more than a decade previously; surely the beginning of the 'opening of the road' in the sense of mass, organised, political activity by women.

The Free State was the only province where, in 1913 - when the women's struggle began - women as well as men had to have passes. These were in the form of residential permits for all black people and had to be purchased monthly at a cost of 2/6 each, a heavy burden for families when £2 a month was considered a reasonable wage.

After years of pleas and petitions (the earliest records of these date from the beginning of the century, before the formation of any women's organisations, when ~~xxx~~ various organisations of men put in pleas to the authorities, addressed to the Colonial Secretary, local administrators and to the king), the women of Bloemfontein decided that they would take action. "We have done with pleading: we now demand!" they declared. Passive resistance spread throughout the province. In small country towns and tiny dorps, women marched to deposit bags of passes at the doors of the authorities

As more and more women were arrested and fined, they all declared they would not pay any fines, but would stay in gaol as long as necessary - (a stand that was to be echoed by others 47 years later with the slogan 'No fines - no bail.')

The ensuing ~~xxx~~ struggle lasted for years, with many hundreds of women enduring imprisonment in primitive ~~xxxxxxx~~ gaols under harsh conditions (described by Sol Plaatje in his book 'Native Life in South Africa', published in 1919).

The inspiration derived by later generations from these early events was considerable. Lilian Ngoyi (who led the women in the 1950's), recalled of hearing about the women's

struggles at her mother's knee, and Congress Mbata of the ANC says his name 'Congress' arose from his mother's loyalty to the S.A. Native National Congress - forerunner of the ANC - arising from her participation in the Free State resistance of 1913 and again in Johannesburg in 1918. And it was largely because of the activities of the women in the Free State that white legislators felt the inclusion of women in the 1923 Act would be too dangerous.

Through these struggles, a sound tradition of unity and determination was forged. While women later campaigned in dozens of issues - food, housing, education, bus fares, child care were only some - the opposition to the pass laws remained pivotal. Women knew the ruthless dismemberment of their families, the years of useless separation, the sufferings of 're-settlement' (which is in effect, banishment) to be evils arising from the whole structure of apartheid society, but the worst of these evils rests on the whole migratory labour system, which is only made possible through the operation of the pass laws.

While it may appear that there was a period during which women were relatively quiescent, this is not so. There was never a time when women did not organise on local and community basis, sometimes coming together under the banners of their independent churches, but often through the inspired community leadership of ANC women militants in stockfels, burial societies and self-help groups. It was a way of survival for women in possession of nothing except their own fighting spirit and their love and care for ~~ex~~ each other, and it was through such activities that the women attained a sense of their own worth and found their own abilities. It helped them to organise locally until the time came for them to attack the very structures that oppressed them.

In the 1950's, through the existence of two organisations, women achieved an impressive level of organisation and activity, culminating in the rally of 20,000 at Pretoria. The African National Congress Women's League played a pioneer role in helping to bring more women into the struggle for national liberation, while the Federation of South African Women had an important function in linking together the women of different organisations that made up the Congress Alliance, thus drawing its base from the broadest cross-section of the population and providing a forum for women to meet, discuss and formulate policies around issues that were of specific concern to women, as well as joining them in the broader struggle for liberation. The Federation also provided a means for expressing the women's clear need for an end to their special disabilities as women, and a chance to demand equal wages, opportunities and rights. It is not always realised to what extent men dominated in even the most radical of organisations, and how, with few exceptions, the women were always silent in political discussions. Through the Federation they began to find their voice - and what a powerful voice it would prove to be.

The Women's Charter, adopted in Johannesburg in 1954 at a Federation conference, is a forthright statement of aims and policies, declaring the aim of women of all races to strive for the removal of all laws discriminating against women. "We women do not form a society separate from men," it states, " . . . as women we share the problems and anxieties of our men and join hands with them to remove

social evils and obstacles to progress." Then the Charter goes on to describe the position and the special problems of women, and how laws affecting women have lagged behind changed conditions, the laws becoming a brake on ~~xxxxxx~~ the whole of society. "These intolerable conditions would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large ~~x~~section of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and priveleges which they demand for themselves. We shall teach the men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and in practice."

Thus various roles were fulfilled by the Federation, which was concerned with the organisation, the education and the militant activities of women within the broader framework of the struggle for national liberation waged by women and men alike.

In 1952 the white parliament extended ~~ed~~ pass law control to women, although the actual date by which women had to have passes was not set. One of the Federation's most important ~~resolutions~~ was to "strive ~~for~~ to remove all laws that restrict free movement." Thus the campaign against passes for women - and against passes as such - drew tremendous support throughout the country and drew women into the ~~the~~ political arena in mass numbers.

In 1955 the women in the Transvaal organised the first demonstration to Pretoria, attended by what seemed a remarkable number - 2,000 women of all races (though the majority, of course, were black) Earlier in the year a delegation of women from the Black Sash (a liberal organisation of white women) had gone to Pretoria on a similar mission. "The white women went to Pretoria and did not invite us," the Federation said. "We will go to Pretoria and invite everyone."

To get there, the women had to overcome formidable obstacles. They had their personal problems of arranging for care of the children, some encountered hostility from ~~xxx~~ husbands who wanted their meals and clean clothes prepared; but the biggest difficulties arose through police interference, refusals to issue permits for road transport, and many forms of harxassment. Delighted by the success of this demonstration, which had been confined to the Transvaal, the women of the Federation resolved that they would make a similar, nation-wide protest the following year.

Month by month the protests against the pass laws grew. An account of the street marches in small and large towns, the deputations to local authorities, the protests of all kinds, ~~xxxxxx~~ would provide material for many a doctoral thesis. Letters came to the Federation from all over the Country. In Cape Town, women marched through the streets with protest placards; East London women took up the cry: "Oh, what a law! We are refusing totally!" they declared; women of Germiston, undeterred by threats of mass arrests and even that their leaders would be shot, marched to their local offices crying: "Even if the passes are printed in real gold, we do not want them."

In small towns and large urban centres, the protest demonstrations continued, from groups of a few hundred to as many as 4,000 at a time. There had never been a time when

women showed their strength and their militancy in such a united way.

The night before the demonstration, the women began gathering in Pretoria. Contingents arrived from many distant places - a thousand miles from the Cape, more than 400 miles from many parts of Natal. Railway clerks refused to sell tickets to some women; coaches and cars were stopped on the roads and turned back by police blockades. But 20,000 women did manage to arrive, a triumph that for once caught the police off-guard and drew admiration and cooperation from men who for once took over the burden of domestic duties. Seeing the pictures of the great demonstration in the press the next day, one ANC leader shook his head and said: "How did they dare?"

It was a day we can never fully describe, and will never forget. All demonstrations in the city were banned by the police, so the women converged on the heart of administrative government, the Union Buildings, walking in groups of never more than three, and all Pretoria was filled with the women. They came wearing their green and black Federation blouses, or with skirts and shawls embroidered with ANC symbols (this was 4 years before the ANC was outlawed.) Indian women were brilliant as butterflies in their saris; Xhosa women came in national dress, with ochre skirts and starched turbans. There were Coloured women, and a sprinkling of white women that confirmed the multi-racial nature of the protest. For two and a half hours the women filed up the tree-lined avenue of broad, shallow steps that led to the classically-designed amphitheatre, embraced by two wings of the pillared building. Five women leaders representing all racial groups, headed by Lilian Ngoyi, president of the Federation, and Helen Joseph, the secretary, carried huge bundles of protest forms to the office of Prime Minister Strijdom (who was not there to receive them) with hundreds of thousands of signatures. A commissioner at first refused to let them in to the building, because they were of different races! He would only admit them separately. But "No apartheid!" said the leaders firmly, and stood their ground. Eventually they were allowed to deposit their forms outside an office and returned to report to the huge gathering.

Then, while white civil servants crowded at every window and balcony, the great gathering of women rose to their feet and with thumbs upraised, stood in total silence for thirty minutes, until they burst into singing the national anthems, a tremendous harmony Union Buildings had never before heard; and they dispersed.

It is now 25 years since that demonstration took place. Despite all protests, bit by bit women were literally forced to accept passes. Without their pass number, mothers could not register the birth of a child; hospitals refused to take in patients; nurses and teachers were sacked; and old women and the disabled could not claim their tiny pensions. Residence permits were refused, schools turned away pupils. In addition, a long period of the most ferocious political repression now began with the 4½-year long Treason Trial in December of 1956, the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, the introduction of total license to the security police to torture through the 90-day and 180-day laws, the Terrorism Act and other laws.

With severe losses, the liberation movement had to adapt itself to new methods of organisation, new policies and activities. Leading members of the Women's Federation, as of other organisations, were house arrested, banned or imprisoned; and some left the country. But the 20,000 women who went to Pretoria that day had seeded the earth for the time of a new harvest.

For this August 9th we are not simply remembering the triumph of 25 years ago. We are seeing the women of South Africa surging forward along that road. A recent Conference of women in Cape Town, to establish a United Women's Organisation, stated that "The Federation of the 50's had paved the way for the organisation of women in the 70's and 80's." One of the delegates at that conference, 82-year-old Dora Tamana, made a stirring plea to the women: You who have no work - speak! You who have no homes - Speak! . . . We must free ourselves. Men and women must share housework. Men and women must work together in the home and out in the world . . ." and she added proudly: "I opened the road for you, you must go forward."

Building on the experiences of the past, women are participating in greater numbers than before in the militant activities that are bursting out of South Africa today. You see them in the forefront of the student uprisings, confronting armoured cars and guns; they are participating in trade union organisation and strike actions; and as always, they continue to work through local and community groups, their own grass-roots forms of organisation that help women to survive under conditions designed to crush them completely. They are a new generation, as militant and courageous as their mothers and their grandmothers were, but with no illusions about the violence of the struggle they face.

There will never be another day like that one in 1956 when the women went to Pretoria. The doors were slammed and barred. The power and unrelenting violence of the minority white state inevitably shaped the form of present and future struggles.

But one day the women of South Africa will again fill that amphi-theatre; when apartheid and all its cruelties and injustices has gone. That cannot be achieved without the full participation of half the population - the women; that cannot be a true triumph without the freeing of women from their own extra oppression and disabilities. The memory of August 9th inspires us in struggle. We women will free ourselves as we free our country. We must accomplish both together. We know we will accomplish it. The road is open.

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Collection Number: A3299

Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers Research Archive**

Collection Funder: **Bernstein family**

Location: **Johannesburg**

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