

ARTICLE

by Emma Kalk & Sarah Warner (Std 8)
Kingsmead, Rosebank

Women, Resistance and Revolution

(An analysis of the women's movement in South Africa)

The progression of time has seen almost every society form a restricting mould into which women have had to fit, or misfit, as the case may be. Until recently, our understanding of South Africa has been impoverished by a failure to recognise the part played by women in the unfolding of its history.

It is a sad reflection on our society that a need has been created for women's organisations, but it is in the unity offered by these organisations, that women have discovered solidarity.

In South Africa, most women suffer a double repression of colour and sex. Therefore women's organisations in this country take a different form to those elsewhere in the world. These organisations are often closely linked or affiliated to political organisations and strive for national liberation on the grounds of their colour, as well as reform on the grounds of their sex.

The mobilising of women can be seen as a reaction to the conditions under which they live. In resistance to limitations imposed upon them, women have struggled to create a non-sexist South Africa which is, in many aspects, more difficult than the struggle for a non-racist society.

The women's movement cannot be aptly described as revolutionary in terms of a physically violent change but it certainly represents an ideological revolution, radically altering the stereo-type image in which women have been portrayed.

In this way, the women's movement in South Africa can be seen not as a fight against male privilege but as an attempt to destroy African tradition, subvert Afrikaner ideals and decent British values.

Tribal System

African women were made aware of their inferiority in the tribal system and were awarded the most menial tasks. However, with the colonisation of South Africa, these women were reduced to landless farm labourers, domestic servants and perpetual minors - a far cry from the freedom enjoyed by prominent tribal women such as Queen Nonensi and Chieftainess Suthu who reigned over their respective peoples with confidence. Today African women are active in politics and commerce.

The Anglo Boer War produced some of the most capable women that history has ever known. For instance, Marie Koopmans de Wet collected boxes of goods, forwarding them to Boer families suffering in the diabolical conditions of Lord Kitchener's concentration camps. She was one of the first people to see the need for a women's organisation and helped to found the "Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouvereniging".

The Act of Union that concluded the Boer War failed to unite South Africa. By excluding black people, it sowed the seeds of discontent that another generation of women and another epoch of South Africans would have to reap.

Migrant Labour

The discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand during the late 1800's encouraged many people to migrate to the developing towns and villages. Black women have been described by Cheryl Walker as those "left behind, lumped along with children, the old and the sick into the emotive but blurry category of the "dispossessed" or "surplus".

Thus, until the 1930's and beyond, African women remained tied to the rural areas, locked into homestead production and the underwriting of a predominantly male migrant labour system.

The passing of various influx-control laws made women dependant on their husbands and fathers. The Land Acts, passed in 1913, restricted the ownership of land to no more than a tiny plot and eight years later the population of African women in Johannesburg increased from 12 160 to 60 992.

Beer Brewing

Although some urban women sought work as domestic servants, washerwomen and prostitutes, most obtained additional income from the brewing and selling of traditional beer and skokiaan. The money earned from this liquor trade enabled women to feed, clothe and educate their children.

Women,
Resistance
and
Revolution

During 1902, in Durban, the government opened the first of many official beerhalls. These halls operated in competition with the shebeens and inspired strong resentment.

Cato Manor

In Cato Manor, Natal, the destruction of stills and drums of home brewed beer by the police signified the loss of income for many women. On the 17 June 1956, crowds of these women attacked municipal beerhalls, and drove out the male customers, destroying beer and equipment.

Bertha's Bill

On the 19 May 1930, white women above the age of twenty one years, were given the franchise. The bill was named after Bertha Solomon who had led the campaign for Women's suffrage.

For years the issue of the women's vote had been a subject of controversy. Some hoped that, in the event of the "weaker" sex acquiring the vote, separate polling booths would be provided. Others said it violated their conception of what was "right and proper in a Christian sense." A certain Dr Visser even assured the state that it was a "scientific fact that the development of a woman's brain stopped at a stage beyond which a man's went on".

The Black Sash

The Black Sash which celebrated its 35th birthday on the weekend of the 19 May this year, focuses on mass removals, migrant labour, the destruction of family life and enlightens the public to issues affecting black women.

The Black Sash was originally called the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, and was founded in 1955 in protest against the removal of coloured voters from the common roll - Black sashes being worn as a sign of mourning for the constitution.

The Bantu Women's League was founded in 1913 and was a forerunner to the A N C Women's League founded in 1948. This has since become an effective Women's organisation and is now known as the A N C Womens' Section.

The Federation

The Federation of South African Women was founded on the 17 April 1954 at the "First National Conference of Women" in Johannesburg. The Federation was a non-racial Womens organisation, the aim of which was to bring the women of South Africa together, to secure full equality for all women and to strive for the protection of the women and children of South Africa.

A Charter of Womens' Aims was drawn up. It declared, "We women do not form a separate society from men. There is only one society". Initially the Federation was involved in issues directly affecting women, including Bantu education, the Group Areas Act and rent increases. Its aim was to "strive for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women"

Pass Protests

In reaction to the government's decision to issue passes for African women, the A N C Women's League with the Federation, launched a massive protest campaign, as initially, the pass laws had only applied to African men. "An insult to African women is an insult to all women. The Federation determined to fight this insult.

The two largest and most publicised protests occurred at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The first occurred on the 27 October 1955. Two thousand women from the Transvaal marched to the Union Buildings, leaving petitions at the door of the Minister of Native Affairs. A year later 20 000 women of all races from all over South Africa converged at the Union Buildings on the 09 August 1956. One representative from each race group: (Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Sophie Williams) left petitions in Prime Minister Strijdom's office.

The 09 August has since become National Women's Day in South Africa. Eventually, however, all African women were forced to accept the registration books, as without them, pensions could not be drawn, children could not be registered and nurses and teachers were dismissed.

The banning of the A N C Women's League and the detention of its leaders, deprived The Federation of South African Women of the bulk of its members eventually leading to its collapse.

Women for Peace

After the 1976 Soweto uprisings, a number of White women's organisations were formed. These organisations, such as Women for Peace founded by Mrs Harry Oppenheimer, sought to promote change through peaceful co-operation and understanding.

Women in Industry

Over the past 20 years, an increasing number of black working class women have been employed in the industrial sector because they offer a cheaper form of labour. Factory work presents many problems for these women, namely - low wages, lack of promotion and job security, unhealthy conditions and discrimination.

The special and complicated position of these women workers has meant that, when they join a Union, they express different demands from those of their male counterparts. Demands include those for maternity rights, childcare facilities and an end to sexual harassment. Women activists have fought consistently for workers solidarity across the barriers of racism, sexism and class within the trade unions

Women,
Resistance
and
Revolution

Malibongwe Conference

Re-iterating the importance of unity in struggle, the Malibongwe Conference held in January this year in Amsterdam, presented a unique opportunity for women to hold discussions on an international level. Over 100 women representing South Africa, described the triple oppression experienced by many women in this country.

CONCLUSION

As we have shown, women have always been aware of the burning issues of our time. The ideological revolution originating with women's rights has gone a full circle resulting in women becoming independent and conscious of their contribution to society. However, we are still trying to achieve our full potential and there will be a need for women's organisations in the future. In Parliament we still experience unequal representation, and in the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress three out of thirty five members are women.

Unfortunately there is and will be a need for women's organisations in the future, to protect women and express their views. We hope that a climate will be created in this country in which there will be no need to differentiate between men and women, black and white and that we will be proud to be classed unanimously as South Africans.

"You have tampered with the women; you have struck rock". (Freedom Song "Wathint a bafazi")

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALHADEFF, VIC : *A newspaper history of South Africa* : Don Nelson : Cape = 1986
- BARRETT, JANE et al : *South African Women on the move* : Zed Books Limited : London = 1985
- BERNSTEIN, RILDA : *For their Triumphs and their Tears. Women in an apartheid South Africa* : Idaf : London = 1985
- CALLINICOS LULI : *Working Life Volume 2* : Ravan Press : Johannesburg = 1987
- CARTER, GWENDOLEN & KARIS THOMAS (ed) : *From Protest to Challenge Volume 3* : Hoover Institution Press : California: 1977
- JOSEPH, HELEN : *Side by Side* : Zed Books Limited : London = 1986
- LABOUR BULLETIN
VOLUME 14 : Number 4 : October 1989
- LA HAUSE, PAUL : *Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts* : Ravan Press : Johannesburg = 1988
- NEW NATION, NEW HISTORY : *New Nation and History Workshop* : Johannesburg = 1989
- QUINTA, CHRISTINE : *Women in Southern African* : Skotaville Publishers : Johannesburg = 1987
- READERS DIGEST : *The Illustrated History of South Africa. "The Real Story"* : Readers Digest Association = 1988
- RUSSELL, DIANA : *Lives of Courage. Women for a New South Africa* : Basic Books Incorporated: New York = 1989
- SHADEBERG, JURGEN : *Nelson Mandela and the Rise of the ANC* : Jonathan Ball and Ad Donker Publishers = 1990
- VAN ONSELEN, CHARLES: *I New Babylon* : Ravan Press Johannesburg = 1982
- WALKER, CHERYL (ed) : *Women and Gender in South Africa* : David Phillips : Cape Town = 1990