

"OUR WOMEN ARE A ROCK"

WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

by

Sally Robinson

The White women, although accorded normal voting rights, do suffer the limitations faced by women under all Western bourgeois democracies... Their experiences, however, can never be comparable to that of Black women. With their limitations, South African White women have been put on a pedestal. A pedestal based on false and mythical bourgeois standards: that they are fragile, decorative, weak (feminine) and incapable of the simplest work that Black women perform daily for both their masters and themselves...

— Zanele Dhlamini "Women's Liberation: A Black South African Women's View", *Sechaba* (September 1972).

In South Africa discrimination against women seems to pale when compared to racial oppression. Yet it is in South Africa where women — mostly, though not exclusively, African — have an impressive history of consistent and militant struggle against an exploitative socioeconomic system and an unjust legal system.

Women have been and continue to be a distinct, though not separate, political force in the context of the national struggle. Given this experience, there is little doubt that women organizing and mobilizing themselves as a group can only strengthen and not divide or weaken the fight against racial oppression. The form and focus of their struggle has been shaped by their experiences in a racist society — and their experiences are those of Africans who, as women, are assigned a unique role in an economic system which is based on the super-exploitation of black labor.

African Women in the Economy

The majority of African women (73%) eke out a living from tiny plots of uncertain tenure for themselves, their children and oftentimes elderly and infirm relatives in desolate "homelands", while their husbands work as migrant laborers in "white" industries

*Reprinted with permission of the author. This article originally appeared in *D & A News*, Vol. 2, No.2 (June 1975).

or for a "single man's" wage.

Eroded land, prolonged absence of able-bodied men, overcrowding, lack of seeds and implements have long since rendered the agricultural production of African women sub-subsistence.

The yields from their labor must be supplemented by the meagre wages of husbands, sons and brothers. Yet, even this does not ward off malnutrition and associated disease and death.

African women are prevented from escaping the impoverished reserves to join husbands and seek work in urban areas by a complex of pass laws and influx regulations designed to exclude "superfluous" Africans, *i.e.*, Africans not needed as workers, from urban areas.

Those African women who do live in urban areas remain insecure in residence and employment. While entry into the cities of South Africa is almost impossible for Africans, but especially African women, mass removal, as well as individual endorsement out, to homelands is a daily threat.

In its efforts to "re-tribalize" Africans the South African government forces women who have lived and worked in an urban, industrial world to become peasant producers in a fragmented social and economic setting. (See D & A Pamphlets: *South Africa: The "Bantu Homelands"* and *South Africa: "Resettlement": The New Violence to Africans*).

In "white" (both rural and urban) areas one out of three African women is gainfully employed. The majority of these women work as domestic servants or farm hands. Limited educational opportunities and job reservation, both legal and customary, keep African women out of semi-skilled white collar occupations such as typists and telephone operators.

A few have gained a precarious foothold in manufacturing occupations, particularly in textile, clothing and food processing industries; and in occupations classified as professional-technical, largely teaching and nursing.

The major importance of African women in the South African economy, however, continues to lie in their role as supporters of "redundant" Africans in the reserves. Their unpaid work enables employers of African men to pay wages that could not possibly support a family, *i.e.*, a "single man's" wage. Secondly, women's work in domestic service is an integral part of the system of privilege for the white minority.

Women in Political Action

According to Elizabeth Landis in "Apartheid and the Disabilities of African Women in South Africa" (Notes and Documents, No. 4/75, UN Unit on Apartheid), "...no African woman has been able to enter any urban area lawfully for nearly a decade, since it has become official policy not to issue permits to women" (pp.5-6).

This policy could only be implemented with the extension of the pass system of control to African women. The struggle against this extension has been central in the history of African women's political activities.

In 1913 with the support of the recently founded African National Congress, African women in the Orange Free State opposed the extension of passes to them by means of mass demonstrations and bonfires fueled with their passes. Confronted by an anti-pass campaign raging throughout the province, the government was forced to abandon its scheme for a time.

Since 1913 the white-minority government has intermittently attempted to bring African women under the control of the pass system. Each time these attempts were met with militant opposition by women. Some were spearheaded by political activists in the nationalist movement but many anti-pass campaigns began with spontaneous mobilizations of defiant women.

Perhaps the largest organized effort occurred in 1956, when 20,000 women demonstrated in front of the government's administrative buildings in Pretoria, chanting "Women don't want passes!". African and non-African women came from all parts of South Africa despite police efforts to prevent them from reaching Pretoria. Many were harassed and detained on their way and some when they tried to return home.

A delegation of women headed by Lillian Ngoyi, president of the Federation of South African Women, attempted to deliver to the Prime Minister a petition of grievances and a pledge to continue their struggle against unjust laws.

Apparently intimidated by the power of masses of women in political motion, the Prime Minister was out of his office that day and the petition had to be delivered to his Secretary.

The day of this historic mobilization, August 9, is still remembered as South African Women's Day.

In spite of this, the government resumed issuing passes in 1956, beginning in Winberg in the Orange Free State where pass officials arrived unannounced. At first, the women accepted the passes, deceived by the officials' assurances of their "advantages". But shortly after, the daughters of an earlier generation of pass resisters marched to the magistrate's office and burned the passes he refused to take back. For this they were arrested and charged with theft.

The issuance of passes continued, for the most part in towns remote from large centers. Women were told that if they refused passes, their husbands would lose their jobs, their sick would not receive medical attention, their dead would not be buried...

The government did not make idle threats. In the village of Pulfontein in the Western Transvaal, for example, a woman reputed to be at least 100 years old was denied her old age pension for refusing a pass.

Baton charges were ordered to disperse protests and women were arrested and jailed by the thousands.

Government efforts and women's resistance continued through the rest of the decade. Anti-pass protests were mounted in 1957 in Zeerust (in the Western Transvaal) where police shot into a peaceful assembly of women, seriously wounding many, then arrested 58; and in Johannesburg and its townships of Sophiatown and Alexandra in 1958, where demonstrators were subjected to mass arrests. In 1959 in Veeplants (near Port Elizabeth) and Lady Selbourne (near Pretoria) African women met pass officials with choruses of revolutionary songs and slogans and refusals to accept the passes.

The extension of the pass system has not been the only issue around which African women have mobilized as a political force. African women together with other women have actively opposed with mass demonstrations and boycotts the removal and dispossession of communities for "separate development", the banishment of political leaders, starvation wages and the use of forced prison labor in agriculture.

Women have formed a significant part of the opposition to such laws as the Bantu Authorities Act and the Bantu Education Act which are designed to complete the denial of rights of free movement, residence, employment and equal education to Africans.

In preparation for the Kliptown Congress on June 26, 1955, women collected people's grievances and demands which were set

forth in the Freedom Charter. This is a program for social justice in a non-racial democracy, which was adopted by the Congress and subsequently recognized by the UN.

Out of these and other struggles have emerged organizations to give effective expression to the political consciousness, commitment and courage of South African, especially African, women.

Foremost have been the African National Congress Women's League, founded in 1948 within the African National Congress (ANC) to carry out its work among women and address the special needs of women in a national liberation struggle; and the Federation of South African Women, established in 1954 as a broad grouping of women, including the ANC Women's League as a founding member, African women not in the ANC, and non-African women committed to opposing racial oppression.

In the wake of Sharpeville in 1960 these organizations met the same fate as others which were leading mass opposition to white domination. The Women's League was banned together with the ANC as were the leaders of the Federation of South African Women.

Throughout the 1960's women were banned, placed under house arrest, imprisoned and tortured for their political activities.

These women include Dorothy Nyembe who spent 15 years in prison and Florence Matomela who was tortured in prison and died upon her release.

Helen Joseph, a prominent leader in the Federation of South African Women and Lillian Ngoyi, president of both the Women's League and the Federation, were placed under house arrest and remained confined for 8 and 11 years respectively. As other women, such as Florence Majola, stepped into the leadership of the Federation to replace banned leaders, they too were banned.

African women and men continued to participate in and support the banned ANC and for this risked arrest and imprisonment. In 1969 Winnie Mandela, Martha Dlamini, Virginia Mngoma, Rita Nzanga and Joyce Sikhakhane were among the 22 Africans charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for promoting the aims of the ANC. Two other women, Shantie Naidoo and Brysine Namkahlá spent almost a year in solitary confinement for refusing to testify against the accused.

Many African women, such as Mary Ngalo and Zanele Dhlamini have been driven into exile by a government bent on destroying the people's will and ability to oppose it.

These and countless other women have through their brave and prolonged struggle for liberation earned the tribute paid them in the theme of an African freedom song, OUR WOMEN ARE A ROCK.

Note: Much of the information contained in this article was obtained from a paper presented by the Women's Section of the ANC to the All-African Women's Conference held July, 1972 in Dar-es-Salaam.

* * * * *

SALLY ROBINSON is Editor of D&A News and staff associate of Defense and Aid/USA. She is currently researching for a book on Women in the South African economy.