

Sta thkeae-
 --... w?aw k.
 tage of the total detained in the
 crackdown against resistance.
 9 This is because while women are
 THE WOMEN S active on the ground, in the rank
 . and file of mass organisations, -
 STRUGGLE they are still poorly represented i .
 in leadership positions. Cries of
 By Hilda Bernstein Freedom says; .
 "This incomplete representation
 I Women Is participation in the South African struggle for libera- of women m the structu
 re of
 tion is as old as the struggle itself. Over the years, womenis rcszstance has been
 organisations have gained political direction, become integrated acknowledged and challen
 ged
 into the struggle as a whole, and have acquired formidable by -w0men Wh0_ suppon the i
 power United Democrattc Front the
 UDF and the trade union
 . . _ ederation, COSATU, have
 From the time that South Africa was formally constituted as a na- f k h h ll
 tion the activities of women have taken lace on two levels first ta en up_ t e c a enge 0
 f
 ' h lf . p - , encouraging 'the maximum
 smce women are a the population, as part of the struggle of the p articip ation of women.
 m
 whole population; and secondly, through specrflc womenis
 organisations. This struggle on two levels continues today.
 Cries of Freedom, produced by the Catholic Institute for Inter- In coming months and y ea
 rs,
 women like Albertina Sisulu Wlll
 national Relatlons, describes how women have been a Vital force,
 increa in l be '
 bringing renewed Vigour to the tradition of reslstance Wthh has leade fshg y 0 f 5:: 121:1
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 survived decades of repression: democratic? movement 5
 , "In urbans uatterca sandrural villa es, women have been The wa s in which women I
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 , keyparticipants in mobilising against mass evictions and forced h ave or gani 5 ed amon
 g
 removal of communities. Domestic workers have come together themselves have been very
 to fight against the long hours and pitifid pay which makes them diverse, very often foun
 ded on
 the most exploited sector of South African workers ... In the a local or community basis:
 communities the fight against apartheid includes rent boycotts organisations that aim to
 give
 in protest against racially based municipal councils. Consumer mutual assistance in the d
 ifficult
 boycotts of White-owned business are desiged to put pressure lives women lead, self-help
 on the business sector to take a stand against apartheid. These clubs, church societies,
 as well
 actions depend on the decisive support of women, who in many as those directed at specifi
 c
 . cases. are the heads ofhouseholds. " _ political issues. In 1913, for ex-
 . . . ' . . am le in their cam :ll na amst
 In schools and universmes, girls and young women take part in, p , p g g
 the pass laws, women found that
 actions demanding democratic control of education. In White com- . . .
 ' deputations and petitions had
 munmes, women campaign against military conscription, reveal-
 failed. They then "threwoff their
 mg the role of the armed forces in maintaining and enforcmg . .
 apartheid shawls andtookthelawmto their
 own hands." 600 women in
 , Bloemfontein marched to the . -
 Poorly represented in the leadership municipaloffices demanding to '
 see the mayor, and deposited a
 While women suffer the 3: me penalties as men for their political bag containing their pa
 sses at the
 activism (3 050 were detained without trial under the state of feetof the deputy mayor, t
 elling

emergency in 1987 alone) women still comprise a small percen- him they would buy no more.
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Pivotal role in political organisations

Women's organisations have always operated within the framework of the political resistance movements, because of the women's clear understanding that the reforms they need are dependent upon a restructuring of the state itself. This is one of the reasons why women's participation and initiatives often subsequently disappear from written history. It is easy to see the role of women in activities specific to women, but not so easy to see the pivotal role they have played in the general activities of the largely male-led organisations; yet women have emerged as primary catalysts for protest, and challengers of apartheid. With all the disabilities and devastating effects of apartheid on their status and their lives, they have never lost sight of the fact that meaningful change for women cannot be forthcoming through reform, but only through the total destruction of apartheid.

Jud

A recent women's meeting in South Africa: the veteran Annie Silinga was present in her wheelchair

This has led to the women's struggle being subsumed into the general struggle, and thus in the past the crucial role played by women was not widely recognised. Women, for instance, were active in Mahatma Gandhi's early campaigns against discriminatory laws, and 40 years later were among those who took part in the Defiance Campaign, defying racial laws and offering themselves up for arrest in their thousands.

Double objectives

In the 1950s, women formed themselves into the first organisation to draw women of different groups into one body with clear objectives. This was the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) that set out, at its first conference in 1954, its double objective of fighting for liberation for all through the overthrow of apartheid, and of fighting against women's special disabilities. The Women's Charter that came out of the conference proclaimed FEDSAW's aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations and customs that discriminate against women, but emphasised that women do not form a separate society from men, and that they joined with men in the struggle to remove all social evils and obstacles to progress.

It was FEDSAW that organised a nation-wide campaign against the extension of the pass laws to women, culminating, on August 9th 1955, in the historic demonstration at the seat of the government in Pretoria, when 20 000 women gathered to present their hundreds of thousands of petitions against the pass laws.

FEDSAW was never declared an illegal organisation, but bans and restraints on all who attempted to organise or speak on behalf of the women led to its decline in the 1960s. With the upsurge of revolt, particularly among young people in the 1970s, women re-formed themselves into political organisations under the same or different names. In the Transvaal it was the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), but attempts to form a united national organisation have been repeatedly thwarted by the imposition of regulations under the states of emergency, and thus today the most active women's organisa-

A woman shows her sjambok wounds
given her by the police.

nant when they are detained, and if they do not
miscarry the must carry their pregnancy to term,
often under intolerable conditions. Cries of
Freedom says:

" Women have been beaten and tenured while
aready in poor health resulting from pregnancy
without adequate care, food, medical attention
and exercise. Women have had to give birth
under prison conditions. " ' i

Many miscarry as a result of assault, torture, lack
of medical care or the stress of detention. '
One case alone can show what women suffer.

An 18-year-old woman was detained and inter-
rogated when she was five months pregnant. When
her cellmates demanded her release, they were all
tear-gassed in the cell. She became quite ill from
this, and ultimately gave birth in the prison
hospital, but was not allowed to receive clothes

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for the baby nor see family visitors. After the baby
became ill and was put into hospital, she was
released but given a restriction order.

Women who have given birth in detention must
either keep their infants with them in appalling
conditions, or have them taken away.

Detention of mothers creates traumatic situa-
tions. In oncecase, four children aged 15, 13, 1 1
and seven were left alone when their mother was
detained and were not told what had happened to
her. She was detained for two years. The eldest
child told the others their mother would never have
abandoned them, and that she must have died.

J oyce Mashamba last lived with her husband,
George, 13 years ago, when their youngest child
was one year old. In 1976 they were both
imprisoned, for five and ten years. When George
was released, J oyce was again detained. On her
release, she was confined to Pietersburg, while
her husband lives in Johannesburg.

New methods of resistance

The detention of women and their families, has
revealed the extent to which women are deter-
mined to resist, to organise, to struggle. They have
become increasingly politically conscious, and
they have sought and found ways to reorganise
when restrictions operate against them. Women
of different races, segregated into different areas,
separated by apartheid lawsthat harass and divide
them, are finding more and more common ground
to oppose political oppression, conscription of
White sons into the army; to oppose removals, un-
just rents, rising living costs. Their organisations
have become increasingly politically orientated,
stronger in, aims, more militant in activities.
Generally, womenls organisations are stronger
now and more united.

However, womenls issues still seem to have a
low priority in the mass democratic movement:

"Non-racialism and democracy are accepted
principles of the struggle, yet-not non-sexism, "
states one woman leaders _

By pressing their specific claims, womenls
organisations can be accused of being divisive. But
feminism, as defined by progressive womenis
organisations, does not present a threat to the unity

of the mass democratic movement. It is, rather, a recognition of the fact that women are the most oppressed sector of the community and need their own organisations to help them develop their full participation in the struggle against apartheid. And they do not wish to exclude men from this process. A FEDTRAW executive member states:

"The responsibility to organise women as a sector of the oppressed lies with the democratic movement as a whole and not just with women. The democratic movement is committed to the maximum unity of the oppressed, and this means that men must be committed to building and strengthening women 's organisations. " The position of women has changed considerably over the past few years, particularly in towns. Far more women are now in employment outside their homes (roughly a third of Black women in metropolitan areas work; about half of these are domestic servants, semi-skilled or unskilled labourers; most of the remainder work in clerical jobs or as teachers or nurses.) More women receive education, even if only in the lower standards. More women are heads of households. Against huge obstacles, women's organisations have survived and grown, adapting to changed conditions. Women remain adamant that women's issues must be seen in the context of the whole struggle for liberation, feeling themselves to be more ready than ever before to be an integral part of that struggle. Far from weakening or discouraging women's activities, years of repression and of the continuing state of emergency have brought new understanding and strength to the women's organisations. Separation, loss of children, detention, gaol, torture - even death sentences - have not deterred or chastened the spirit of the women of South Africa. They will be as ready to play their full part in a free, non-sexist, non-racist democratic South Africa as they have been to play their part in the achievement of those aims.

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A cultural group performing at the second annual women's festival organised by FEDSAW, Cape Town, May 1989

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