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MALIBONGWE CONFERENCE

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE EMANCIPATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN?

(Paper prepared by Western Cape region)

INTRODUCTION

The ideas and issues raised in this paper need to be seen in the context of South African women's position as one of triple oppression, within an exploitative capitalist economy. Therefore the emancipation of women in South Africa requires national liberation, the transformation of gender relations, as well as an end to the exploitation of the working class.

The elements of South African women's oppression are interlinked in a complex way. We believe our emancipation can only be addressed as part of a total revolutionary transformation of South African social and economic relations. Such a transformation will not be accomplished instantly with the transfer of power from the minority regime to the people.

So national liberation will not immediately emancipate women. The struggle for women's emancipation is part of the struggle to establish a non-racial, non-sexist democratic South Africa. This is an ongoing process of longterm social transformation, which the ANC and the mass democratic movement are currently engaged in and which will continue long after national liberation is won.

The struggle for women's emancipation is acknowledged as an important task for our liberation movement as a whole, just as women's participation in all arenas of our struggle is essential. Women's issues are people's issues and people's issues are our issues.

This paper is based on a progressive political analysis of the South African situation, even though it does not always directly refer to this, since analysis is covered by the other papers. This paper focusses more on practical issues that need to be addressed in the process of women's emancipation.

The paper was extensively workshopped with a broad range of women from organisations. It indicates consensus on many issues, but not on all. We see this as a realistic reflection of present social and political conditions and organisational policies. Diversity of views are not necessarily unhealthy. In this vast list of problems and concerns, some have to be addressed more urgently than others. Perhaps the Malibongwe conference could start the process of identifying priorities.

We feel far more research and discussion is needed on the issues raised by this paper. Many of the points need to be underpinned with more information and analysis. There are also gaps in the paper, areas we have not looked at all or areas we have only looked at briefly. We present the paper in a spirit of opening up questions for debate and not as a final answer to any of them.

We now look at the following areas: Family and Home, Culture and Media, Contraception, Labour, Education, Social Services, Technology and Ecology, and Government.

FAMILY AND HOME

We in South Africa have had colonialism imposed on our people, and as a result have had capitalism introduced. We thus have both the nuclear family (a Western European concept) and many forms of the extended family (an indigenous family structure). Even though the extended family is more prevalent, especially in the rural areas, this predominance is hidden or not acknowledged; and it is the nuclear family which is commonly presented as the norm and therefore as more desirable.

The family is a microcosm of the broader society and it accurately reflects the oppression of women and the sexual and unequal division of labour (as noted by Engels). Any discussion on the emancipation of women in a post-apartheid society has to critically look at the family. We also need to expose the fact that the nuclear family is not the basic and timeless structure of all men-women relations.

Recent family history has revealed that even the concept 'family' became popular only towards the end of the 18th century in Europe, especially in England and France. Workers and peasants adopted this 'family form' only in the middle of the 19th century. Marx and Engels believed that capitalism would eventually destroy the family but we see how, in fact, modern capitalism needs the unwaged labour of women to 'service' the labourers; to breed new labour and to act as a super-exploitable labour reserve whenever required.

It is the urgent task of women's organisations and the liberation movement not to wait for liberation before formulating policy around the family; but to engage in discussions and debate now about alternative family structures. There is consensus that the present family forms, both nuclear and extended, are extremely oppressive towards women and that any new form should not oppress anyone.

We should learn from the situations in other countries that have undergone social transformation. Look at the experiences of our Cuban comrades; to what extent has the family code worked and freed women from oppression and men from their chauvinism?

In China legislation limits women to having one child only, while in the Soviet Union women are encouraged to have as many children as possible. In our own country population control and sterilization are enforced on black women while white women are encouraged to have many children. If there is going to be legislation around the number of children that women should have, women should be integrally involved in making those decisions.

Existing marriage laws give more power to men than women. Legislation around migrant labour divides families. This situation should be changed. We should also acknowledge the existence of alternative family structures, including single-parent families, households headed by women, communal living and so on.

In Southern Africa, we have the highest amount of female-headed households. This is one of the results of migrant labour which sees an incredible number of women abandoned to rear children alone. A growing number of women also choose not to marry.

There are enormous social pressures on women to get married. Women are seen not as independent beings, but rather as appendages of a male relationship - first as daughters, then as wives, then as mothers ...

Within the African context a mother is a symbol of respect and this indicates the important position that women hold in society. But this is contradictory as it could also be interpreted as a subtle form of coercion - that the only accepted role of an adult woman is to be a mother. We should rather have a situation where it is the woman's choice whether to get married or be or a mother.

Within the home or family unit it should not be the task of only the woman to do the housework. There should be an equal division of labour and responsibility of children. However we do not want the current situation where the work of a domestic worker frees a middle-class woman from household chores in order to live a full and meaningful life outside the home. It is every woman's right to be able to participate as a free and equal person in all aspects of the community.

Currently too, violence against women is extensive; not only on the streets, but in the very 'haven' of the family home. Women and children are not safe from incest, rape, battering and other forms of violence (including psychological and emotional violence).

A total revolutionization within our lives and social, political and sexual relations is necessary in order to guarantee the emancipation of women. We recognise that change will not come overnight, but we should work constructively to realise such change.

Some areas of change include:

Equal participation of women in socialised production; women have the right to work for equal pay for equal work; equal access to skills and promotion; full employment benefits for all; maternity rights for working women; job security during pregnancy and child birth

Full social protection of women's right to motherhood; equality in distribution of housework among all household members; socialization of housework and childcare; equality within marriage and divorce laws; the promotion and enhancement of family life and equal status for all types of alternative families including single-parent families

Non-sexist socialization and education for all in order to eradicate traditional cultural values that are oppressive and sexist as well as to equip women to play an equal role in all aspects of society; formal education and adult literacy programmes for especially black, working class and rural women are essential

An end to discrimination and unequal power relations in all aspects of society are necessary to overcome the structural and physical violence that women experience whether it be influx control laws, repression, rape or wife-battering

Equal participation of women in all structures of civil and political life which cannot be achieved in isolation of the current political dynamic; organised women should work towards developing the ANC's constitutional guidelines as a people's document, but also have the special task of ensuring that it fulfill's women's demands.

CULTURE

Not only should there be political change and changes in government and economic structures, but for true change there should also be a change in attitudes, norms and values. We shall term this cultural change. Because of the imposed colonial and capitalist value system, to build a new society we must create our own culture.

Building a people's culture does not mean a total rejection of everything Western, but rather that we should retain the positive aspects of Western culture and blend it with the progressive values and practices of our various indigenous cultures.

Our culture should instill in us self-respect as well as respect for all people, cultures and religions. This respect should counteract the sexist attitudes men have towards women. We know that many traditions, customs and religions promote negative and oppressive attitudes towards women from birth to old age, both in public and private lives. These practices also influence our behaviour and attitudes as well as legislation concerning women. But sometimes these century-old practices cannot be eradicated overnight.

Many traditions initially served as a means of protection and security for women in pre-capitalist and pre-colonial times. However we find that in practice civil law overrides traditional law and in our present capitalist society many of these initially protective customs have become oppressive towards women.

Among women too, there exist diverse opinions about practices like lobola, polygamy, female circumcision and so forth. Fortunately debate around lobola and other such practices has been initiated amongst women both inside and outside of the country. This process needs to be intensified and broadened amongst all women.

The mass based women's organisations and the people's organisations should regard this task as urgent. We cannot wait for freedom before we analyse this situation. Some women may be adamant that practices like lobola and female circumcision should be scrapped, but may not be sure exactly how this should be done. There are contradictory attitudes towards lobola.

For example one woman said:

"Yes it must definitely be scrapped but I cannot do it on my own. If I marry off my daughters without lobola it would be seen as an insult for me to refuse it. People would say: 'Ah, your mother gave you away for nothing. You're just a parcel. You've got no right to be here because nothing was contributed for you'".

The constitutional guidelines acknowledge the existence of traditional practices. It sees the transformation among traditional and hereditary leaders towards serving democratic ideals and the interests of the people as a whole, as a possible means of breaking down the sexism implicit in some traditional practices.

Future Consider
Because a large number of South Africans are religious we cannot underestimate the importance of the three main religions viz. Christianity, Islam and Judaism. These religions, as all religions, are patriarchal and justify the oppression of women. Religious scriptures are used out of context to justify this oppression. Politics and religion are often seen as separate issues and the dominant religious institutions actually encourage this viewpoint.

* At a Western Cape women's conference in August 1989, where more than 400 women's organisations were represented, it was decided that it is our task to challenge the promotion of male authority in religions and to promote non-sexist symbols through various programmes. Another area to be challenged is the tendency by religion to promote the domestication of women and motherhood as their only relevant role. There is also a commitment from women's organisations to draw in women from the different religions to be part of our struggle for liberation.

Media too is one of the main cultural institutions which develops and perpetuates societal norms and values. In South Africa, media inevitably perpetuates the dominant ideology - apartheid - which promotes not only capitalism and racism but also sexism. The point we should make is that media not only reinforces society's value-system, but that it is also an adequate reflection of society. It would therefore be naive to think that media alone can change people's attitudes. It is only when society is changed in its entirety that the sexism/racism inherent in our present media can be eradicated and replaced with a workable alternative.

An immediate starting point though is the development of a media charter - a code of progressive ethics that journalists and media workers subscribe to. Already the Association of Democratic Journalists is in the process of initiating such a charter among its membership.

A media charter could attempt to develop demands around some of the following points:

1. Challenge the gender-socialization which promotes careership for men and motherhood/marriage for women.
2. Ensure that affirmative action takes place so that women who wish to work in the field as writers, film-makers etc. should be encouraged and trained to so.
3. Challenge the media images and stereotypes of women as passive, submissive, subservient objects.

The other pertinent question women must address is to what extent we are responsible for perpetuating sexism ourselves. Are we allowing ourselves to be dominated? Are we delaying our own emancipation by not participating fully in all aspects of society? Yes, we do acknowledge that because of socialization and women's lack of equal access to education and skills-training; we often do not have the confidence and skills that men have.

But are we not often the ones who, even though we do much of the hard work in organisations - elect the males to positions of presidents and chairpersons while we reserve the secretarial portfolios for ourselves and thus reinforce gender stereotypes??? Do other women suspect us when we try to politicise them? Do we see non-conformist behaviour as being anti-social? How do we women relate to fashion? How do we strategise around countering the above?

WOMEN AND CONTRACEPTION

Apartheid has promoted contradictory attitudes on contraception, welcoming every white baby and attempting to limit the black population. In South Africa there is legislation around sterilization that is both racist and sexist. Black women are seen as minions and if there is no male partner to take a decision, the local magistrate (invariably a white male) can decide whether a woman should be sterilized or not. This happens without taking into account the woman's feelings or opinion on the matter.

So we inevitably find black women at the mercy of men - on the one hand husbands and partners who believe that having many children is an asset as well as a reflection of their sexual prowess, and on the other by white male legislators who wish to control the black population.

* Sex education at home and in schools is crucial. This would help in solving many unwanted teenage pregnancies as well as the problem of women burdened by too many children. We should also work on age, cultural traditions, religious and state attitudes towards abortion. We know that thousands of women are sterilized or die annually because of backstreet abortions. We feel a dire need for responsible and progressive attitudes towards abortion in our new South Africa.

LABOUR

What are the prerequisites that must be addressed before women can be emancipated in this sphere?

* Abolish the sexual division of labour: for as long as women are seen to be mainly responsible for housekeeping and childcare, any advance in terms of access to formal employment and training will be hampered.

* In addition, when women are seen as just housekeepers and mothers, they will continue to be treated unequally in employment. They are the first to be fired in a downturn of the economy - because they can be sent back to the kitchen!

* Abolish the division of labour into wage-earning and non-earning:

In a capitalist economy particularly, only salaried and wage-earning jobs are seen as real employment. The role of unwaged persons - women - who reproduce labour for capital is not acknowledged as important. Thus women are not protected once they are out of work, although if women were to stop reproducing labour, the economy would collapse.

While some women's organisations are advocating a socialist system based on the Freedom Charter, others feel that they cannot be prescriptive as this must be negotiated by the all concerned in drawing up the new constitution in a post-apartheid society. There was general consensus on the importance of process.

Demands made by the women's groups represented:

Obviously the demands of women organised in trade unions affiliated to COSATU form the basis for women's demands in the area of labour. The following demands should be seen as complementing these.



1. Equal pay for equal work;
2. Equal access to skills training, on-the-job training and promotions. Here the point was made that affirmative action is needed to enable women to make use of opportunities;
3. Maternity and paternity leave: This should be a package including job security during and after pregnancy, exemption from hard and dangerous work during pregnancy, childcare to be the responsibility of both parents and childcare facilities to be provided by employers;
4. When children are ill, there is a strong recommendation for compassionate parental leave - if possible;
5. Workers who are temporarily disabled should receive unemployment benefits. Workers who are permanently disabled should receive adequate pensions;
6. Women have the right to be free from all forms of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation at their workplaces. Education is urgently needed around this issue. Disciplinary action should be taken around offenders;
7. Occupational health issues: Standards of safety and health in the field of labour are measured in terms of safety for or danger to men. Research is needed into health hazards for women and safety standards should be determined by those most at risk and who are most vulnerable in order to provide maximum safety;

8. Shift work and hard physical work: Women should have the opportunity to do all kinds of work, but should not be forced to do shift work if this places a double burden on them. Throughout history women have always done hard physical work, but this has not been sufficiently recognised as it is often outside the sphere of wage-labour. There should be no job reservation on the basis of gender.

9. Status of work: All forms of work should be valued equally, there should be no hierarchy of labour. Changes in attitude are needed around this. The question of parity pay was raised. While there was agreement on principle, it was also felt that to institute this too early or too radically could lead to a loss of skilled workers who are needed to build the post-apartheid South Africa. Casual work: Women are often exploited in this category of labour when jobs are labelled casual to avoid payment of benefits. Casual labour should be properly defined i.e maximum period.

10. All workers should have the right to form unions, especially those at present most exploited, i.e domestic and farm workers. The group felt that women should be encouraged to take leadership roles in unions and other progressive organisations. This is not possible unless household and child-care responsibilities are shared, that is, unless there is a change of attitude in the home. The family is not a separate and private area apart from the political struggle. Women who are active in the workers struggle must get support at home. Childcare at the place of employment is also essential to ensure that women are freed for organisational work.

11. Domestic workers: There was some discussion around this field of work in the new South Africa. One proposal was that domestic work should be properly upgraded and recognised for the skilled labour it is, and be respected as such. Another proposal was that no-one should have to do another person's basic housework and cleaning to earn a living. The two positions are not mutually exclusive in the light of the demand for the recognition of the worth of all forms of labour.

We all feel far more research and information is needed in order to continue meaningful discussions around the future.

* EDUCATION

Problems Relating To Education:

General: Gender discrimination and gender-specific socialization and education. Educational structures/ materials/ practice favour males. There is a lack of expectation or encouragement for girls as well as a lack of role-models.

In the family: Unequal treatment of boys and girls in that boys are given more chances, particularly when there are fewer resources and opportunities. Boys and girls are trained into gender roles at an early stage.

At school: Education is gender-specific and existing textbooks and syllabi reinforce class, race and gender oppression.

Tertiary education: Continuation of gender roles in choice of careers/subjects. Women are encouraged to take certain subjects and are discouraged or even prevented from taking others.

Bursaries: Men tend to get preference. Even where this discrimination is being abolished in its more obvious form, it remains built into the selection process because women are not encouraged to study further in the same way as men are. When they do continue, they are often not supported. For example where there are children (own or younger siblings) to look after, the female student rather than the male will be required to give time to the household and children.

Demands and recommendations around education:

Again, these recommendations need to be seen as supplementing those developed by the progressive education sector organisations.

* Raising a consciousness about women and women's issues:
This should be part of education and part of the work towards national liberation. It is the task of women's organisations to address this in education and other areas, as the national liberation struggle does not specifically address the issue of women's liberation. It should be an on-going process after national liberation because men as well as women need to be freed from idea that men should dominate.

Changes in syllabi, textbooks and course content:

Women should feature equally and the role of women in South African history and culture must be researched and included. Example, Learning Nation has issued a 'real' history of South Africa with one chapter on women and without mentioning the Pretoria march. Women's organisations should contribute in this area to make sure that women's voices are heard.

Gender discrimination should be eradicated:

The choice of subjects should depend on individual needs and interests, not on gender. All educational opportunities should be available to women at all levels of education; from pre-primary to university. This should occur especially in fields which so far have had a traditional male bias such as science, technical training, political science, economics, and finance.

Women should be part of all decision-making levels throughout the educational structure and should be encouraged into positions of leadership.

Affirmative action:

To correct existing inequalities and to redress the effects of a history of oppression, affirmative action is needed and women should be especially promoted and encouraged into all levels of education. Priorities are nursery and primary school education as well as adult literacy. Special reference needs to be made to uneducated and undereducated youth (population statistics show that most South Africans will be under 18 in the 1990's).

There was general agreement on the allocation of resources, namely that most need to go to basic education programmes first (primary and adult literacy). However, highly skilled personpower will be needed in the new South Africa, so a concentration on university education is still very important. It was suggested that persons privileged to receive a university education should be encouraged to do some form of community service after completion of their education.

The links between poverty and literacy have not been explored for the purposes of this paper. This is a crucial and urgent research area. Studies have shown that literacy is not necessarily the magic word which will open all doors for the poor.

Research:

There is consensus on the need for research in all areas. While some organisations want research to "suit the needs of the people," others point out that "the people" is a vague term as our society is not a homogeneous one. The need to research with relative freedom was noted, as it is not always possible to predict the outcome of research (the discovery and development of penicillin is a case in point). It was agreed, however, that research priorities should depend on the needs of the majority and should strive to address and solve problems.

SOCIAL SERVICES

Under the present racist regime, social services for the majority of black people has been totally inadequate and poorly subsidised. Women dominate the workforce in social services. We are the ones who look after the young, the aged, the ill and disabled and the abused. We also support and look after the unemployed.

Yet, when we look at the power structures, the decision-making bodies and planning committees in the present situation; women are not sufficiently represented. Because of sexist differentiation, women have always been depicted as inferior and have been employed in menial tasks.

Pregnancy has always been listed as a justification for temporary employment and for the outright exploitation of women. Social services of the future must provide equal rights and privileges for women. Women need to become more active and assertive in this sphere.

For only when women are part and parcel of the decision-making process and develop as leaders in their own right and fight in organisations for the total integration of women, then only will we begin to see the development of a truly democratic South Africa.

The depth of change in our country will be reflected by the manner in which women are completely integrated into all aspects of life. We must ensure that women's rights are enshrined in a future Bill of Rights.

WOMEN, TECHNOLOGY & ECOLOGY:

As stated elsewhere in this paper, appropriating and building our own people's culture does not mean a rejection of all facets of Western culture.

This is so especially with regard to technology. We cannot afford to retrogress and discard outright the strides made in this field. What we do need in this age of technocracy is to constantly question what we mean by progress. Do we advocate progress/science/technology at whatever costs to ourselves and our environment? We see the some of the negative results of technology and computerization i.e unemployment, depletion of the environment and atmosphere; and we need to be aware of this constantly.

Our culture should also embrace respect for and awareness of our environment, the dwindling mineral and other resources and the harm that we as human beings are doing to our earth.

GOVERNMENT

We believe that the 'people shall govern,' and we know that more than 50% of our population are women. But this does not mean that women should only have the right to vote, but that women should be in the position to exercise that vote meaningfully.

The majority of our women, especially black rural women, are illiterate and have been deprived of a formal education. "The people shall govern" in our context therefore refers to the process whereby we will empower women to use their vote effectively - mass education and literacy projects and campaigns are vital in this regard.

Women should be adequately represented on all layers of decision-making bodies. We must be wary of tokenism - all women delegates must be empowered for their positions through on-the-job/in-built training programmes and affirmative actions. It is also imperative that there is a specific percentage of women delegates in all departments, both at local and central governmental level.

There is no consensus amongst women participants who drew up this paper as to whether or not there should be a women's desk or department of women's affairs. Some felt that women's issues would be marginalised or 'ghettoised' if we were to have a separate women's ministry. Each department, whether it be Land Reform & Agriculture or Economics, should have a women's component.

Others again were of the opinion that there should be a women's ministry which would act as a historic corrective. The task of the women's ministry would be to ensure precisely that the necessary affirmative action and education would take place at all levels of society. We do not see women's issues as separate, but that women's issues should become an integral part of the people's issues. We also realise that national liberation and socialism do not guarantee the emancipation of women. We the women must ensure that women's emancipation becomes a reality.

Zimbabwe
Min. of
Women's
Affairs

The structure of government should be such that we ensure that the voice of the people is heard. Zonal or area committees should feed local authorities and this in turn should be taken to regional level. Here again we will turn to our comrades in other countries. We should examine the various models and analyse which structures would serve our needs most without falling prey to bureaucratic and cumbersome structures.

Maybe we too, would require Committees for the Defence of the Revolution like our Cuban comrades. Here again the role of a women's ministry or women's organisations is crucial to ensure that women's issues are not overlooked or marginalised.

CONCLUSION

We should internalise our political theories. We should not just speak of equality and democracy at a governmental level, but practice equality and democracy in our lives, especially in our private lives.

Just as we want an end to 'political colonialism', we need to de-colonise our minds. We need a mental revolution whereby we exorcise our minds from the imperialist attitudes and values which have been imposed on us through our specific oppressive history. We note that there is no consensus among women on all of the issues raised. There is an urgent need for ongoing debate and discussion amongst organised women and, more importantly, consultation among all women.

The programme of action for women's organisations must include a vigorous door-to-door campaign in which we raise these issues with women. It would be presumptuous of us if we were to say that we speak for all South African women. The constitutional guidelines, the Women's and Freedom Charters could be a good starting point. Through this campaign we could politicise women as well as extend democracy.

We acknowledge the importance and relevance of the 1954 Women's Charter; but it is essential that the demands of women in the 1990's are canvassed and documented.

We should take the example of Cosatu and the SACP who drew up the Workers Charter. The mass-based women's organisations should also follow the process which had been used to draw up the Freedom Charter. We should go into the factories, the homes, the farms and the schools to hear what women demand.