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OPPRESSION EXPLOITATION AND RESISTANCE - BLACK WOMEN

IN SOUTH AFRICA

Referat AG 10/11/03

(3) Introduction

Black women in South Africa are the most oppressed and exploited under the Apartheid regime. Not only they are denied fundamental human rights, political, economic and social, but as Black women they do not even enjoy the same, albeit limited, legal rights as their men. . In the incredibly violent society which has arisen out of the harshness of life under the Apartheid system, they are the most vulnerable of victims.

(b) The Bantustan and Migrant Labour policies

The Native Land Act of 1913 followed by the Native Land and Trust Act of 1936 allocated 13 % of the land to Africans (71 % of the population) and laid the basis for a coherent policy of labour exploitation. It was apparent from the start that the amount of land set aside was totally inadequate to sustain an independent African subsistence - and this was always the intention. Nationalist M.P. Mr. G. F. L. Froneman was quoted as saying, "We are trying to introduce the migratory labour pattern as far as possible in every sphere. This is, in fact, the intire basis of our policy as far as the white economy is concerned."

Thus the South African economy is based on cheap black labour flowing from the Bantustans. The areas designated as "Black" are in the most barren parts of South Africa, having suffered droughts for centuries. There is extreme overcrowding, a situation which is rapidly . deteriorating as a result of the forced removals of over 3.5 million people to the Bantustans. Very" few job opportunities are present in the Bantustans and very little economic activity takes place within its borders. In 1980, only 13 % of the income of the Bantustans was generated within its boundries.

Figtiures compiled by the Bureau for Economic Research in 1980 showed that over 15.2 million Africans living in the Bantustans had no measurable income.

The fact that African labour was required by the white economy did not, however, entitle them to political rights or rights of domicile in the white homeland. This is clearly stated in the 1922 Stallard Commission. The African "should only be allowed to enter the urban areas, which are essentially the white mans creation, when he is willing to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man and should depart therefrom when he ceases so to minister."

Furthermore, as Mr. Froneman stated in 1969, "This African labour force must not be burdened with superflous appendages such as wives, children and dependents who could not provide a service."

A married woman would only be allowed in the cities if she were needed on the labour market.

(b) The Influx Control and Pass Laws

The whole system of migratory labour is controlled 'by the Influx Control and Pass Laws. Africans are required to carry with them at all times pass books which they have to produce on demands on pain of arrest. Between 1948 and 1981, at least 12,5 million people were arrested under the pass laws, and at any one time, pass offenders comprise one third of South Africa's prison population. In 1982 pass arrests increased by over .30 % indicating a tougher line of action by the state. In the Western Cape alone, according to official figures, 17015 people were arrested in 1983 - the vast majority of them women.

The Black Urban Areas Act, Section 10, prohibits any African from remaining in a urban area longer than 72 hours unless he or she has permission to live and work there and/or has resided in the area continuously since birth. Migrant workers never achieve this status because they have to return to the Bantustan for one month a year. The Bantu Law Amendment Act of May 1964 placed a total ban on the further entry of African females in the urban areas other than on a visitors permit, for a specified and restricted period, unless they are dependents of men with urban qualifications.

Thus, in South Africa, it is official policy for husbands and wives to live apart except for occasional visits - rendering it a crime for a married woman to live with her husband.

The whole system also means an enormous saving on wage bills and social services for the state, because the workers family are supposed to eke out an existence for themselves "back home" in the Bantustans, and the worker can be paid a single man's wage.

(d) Effects

The effects of these laws on Black women were profound. As more and more men left to work in the cities, the women left behind came to play an increasingly important role in keeping the subsistence economies of the Bantustans functioning. This situation was very favourable for the state because they needed to prove the validity of the Bantustans by maintaining their existence. The state was therefore not anxious to see a widespread migration of women from the reserves to the towns; one of the reasons why the pass laws were extended to women after 1952.

This effectively prevented women from coming to the towns to look for work unless they had permission from the rural labour bureau - and this was almost never granted.

The migrant labour system has resulted in tremendous social upheaval 'with the destruction of the family unit and all its devastating consequences - illegitimacy, promiscuity, venereal disease, prostitution and alcoholism. Women have had to bear the brunt of caring for their families and supporting them, thus completely reversing the traditional role of women. The trend is more and more to single parent families led by the mother with illegitimacy becoming an accepted state of

of affairs. In Soweto, for example, the illegitimacy rate is 60 % and the figure is also high in the rural areas. A survey done in the Heiskammehoek area found an illegitimacy rate of 25 0/0, These realities are in direct contradiction with an official state policy which demands a settled nuclear family as the basis on which women can obtain urban rights. Furthermore, the proposed legislation, The Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill, requires as a condition for permanent urban resident status of children born in urban areas, that both parents are legally married. The high illegitimacy rate, migrancy and the tendency towards single parent families means that children automatically lose their urban rights. Entry is also made contingent on the availability of employment and official accommodation - the latter an important factor which was to lead directly to the development of Squatter camps around the cities due to the shortage of housing.

Because of the stringent application of the Influx control regulations, women find themselves forcibly removed from the cities and dumped in the barren, remote and hostile environment of the Bantustans. To date, 57 % of all African women live in the Bantustans separated from their husbands, friends and communities in the cities. They are isolated, lonely, starving and desperate. Life is a daily struggle for existence at the most basic level. Nothing can be taken for granted - neither food nor fuel nor shelter.

Poverty and malnutrition are rife and the Infant Mortality Rate in the rural areas of South Africa is one of the highest in the world. In some rural areas between 40 % to 50 % of children die before their 5th birthday. In May 1983 the IMR amongst Blacks in Worcester in the Cape Province was 550/1000.

An African woman writes of life in the reserves:

"It is a tragic story of thousands of young women who are widows long before they reach the age of 30; young married women who have never been mothers; young women whose life has been one long sorrow - burying one baby after another and lastly burying the husband and father. To them - both men and women - adulthood means the end of life; it means loneliness, sorrow, tears and death; it means the end of life without a future because there is no present."

(e) Women at work

(i) Rural women

The effect of banning women from the urban areas meant that there was a huge reserve army of women in the Bantustans where practically the only work available was as labourers on white farms. Impelled by poverty and desperation this was only taken as a last resort. The work is hard and the hours long. They are mercilessly exploited, sometimes paid only in kind or on a daily basis thus increasing job insecurity. Official figures given in parliament in 1981 indicated that farm workers could still be earning as little as R52 a month including the food provided by employers - cash wages alone were as low as R23

a month. A government commission was told in 1982 that some farm workers were earning R10 a month.

The desperate situation of the rural African woman explains why in spite of appalling work conditions and low pay, the farms are never short of labour.

For rural women, the other Choice of work is in the limited industries set up within or on the borders of the Bantustans. Most of the enterprises which moved to the Bantustans did so as a result of concessions offered by the government, not least of which was exemption from wage board determinations. Thus again, a vast amount of cheap labour is readily available for these industries. In the Bantustans of Lebowa, the Ciskei, Bopothatswana and Venda, more than half the work force in the factories are female.

The other source of work for Bantustan women is heavy manual labour. increasing numbers of women in the Bantustans are working on construction sites, in road gangs, building dams etc. At present with drought and starvation in many rural areas women must take any work they can get - even if it means working on a road for 80 cents a day.

(ii) Urban women

Women who work in the cities comprise a reserve army of labour -. cheap, flexible and disposable - drawn into production in areas and sectors of economic growth, but also vulnerable to redundancy. Those who lose their jobs are endorsed out. Black women contract worker: who lose their jobs are faced with the prospect of never again being permitted to work in "white" urban areas outside the homelands. In 1979 when a government moratorium allowed unregiSLereg workers to legalise their positions thousands of people became "legal" contract workers. They still had to return annually to the Bantustans to renew their contracts but they could return to their jobs in the city. This has now been stopped in a further influx control clamp put into effect in 1982.

The vast majority of women in the cities, over 60 %, work in domestic service where again they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by ruthless employers especially as many of them are in the cities "illegally". They work long hours, often seven days a week in the case of "living in" servants, for low pay (usually less than 30 Rand a month and sometimes as low as 10 Rand a month!) and enjoy no social, pension or sick benefits. They are often also expected to work as "nannies" in which case they care for their employer's children while their own are left behind in the Bantustans in the care of elderly relatives or sometimes even in the care of older children. If 'she is lucky, she will see them once a year.

The Federation of South African Women (to be discussed later) described their situation graphically.

"Living in servants quarters in the backyards, African women from the country, from the farms, the small reserves. women far from their homes, forbidden by trespass regulations to have their husbands or even their tiny children with them, to lead a family life, isolated and unaware, dependent upon the 'madam' for the roof over their heads."

Only 12,8 % of African women are employed in factories, these jobs being predominantly occupied by Coloured and Indian women. African women are found mostly in the clothing, food, furniture and electrical industries where average wages are low and where they occupy semi-skilled or unskilled jobs, thus making their economic clout minimal. In fact in some of these industries women are replacing men,

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striking for better pay and working conditions. Reporting on the strike, the Johannesburg Star quoted the case of Joyce Malatji, a 39 year old mother of seven, who is employed at the Penge asbestos mine in Lebowa. She gets 2.50 Rand for a 10 hour shift working day. She has to remove all the waste matter from the asbestos and does not even wear protective gear.

(f) legal Status

The subordinate state of women was entrenched by the Apartheid state in the system of customary tribal law. Under it women are deemed perpetual minors in direct contradiction to the existing realities of women as bread winners and heads of their households. The most regressive and reactionary features of tribal law as codified and construed by the white regime were incorporated into the Natal Code (Law No 46) of 1887. Under this law an African woman married by customary union (i.e. by tribal law) is considered a minor under the guardianship of her husband. She cannot own property of her own, she cannot sue or divorce and she has no right to keep her children if her husband divorces her. A further act passed in 1927 simply endorsed the conservative views of women already embodied in the Natal Code Law.

This meant that she could not own land, but a married woman or, widow with children found the whole burden of agricultural work falling on her shoulders. She was the head of her household with the entire responsibility of rearing her children, but she had no right to custody by law. These laws and their discriminatory effects were felt more acutely with industrialisation and urbanisation of women. If a woman is living in the city with her husband who has Section 10 rights, and she is widowed or divorced, she will lose her right of abode in the city and be endorsed out. Women are therefore totally dependent on their husbands for these rights and are therefore sometimes forced to remain in marriage where they may be subject to violence and abuse by their husbands.

(g) The roots of resistance

Apartheid laws have thrust responsibilities, and therefore an independence unknown to most women, onto the shoulders of Black women in South Africa. This has brought forth qualities of strength, courage

and endurance. The accumulated frustrations, bitterness and despair which is the lot of most black women gives rise to a state where only a spark is required to ignite a violent and angry response to particular injustices. Thus the first recorded incidence of resistance in 1913 with the issuing of passes to women in the Orange Free State. It was a fierce and unexpected campaign, the scale and intensity of which impressed observers. At the time, the African Peoples Organisation (A.P.O.) in its report on the rebellion stated:

"In the meantime, we, the men, who are supposed to be of sterner stuff, may well hide our faces for shame and ponder in some secluded spot over the heroic stand made by Africa's daughters."

Opposition to passes was a major issue round which women would rally. The 1913 campaign provided the momentum for the establishment of the Bantu Womens' League in 1913 and in 1943 the Women's League of the African National Congress was formed.

It would be issues which directly affected their lives which would stir women into political action - passes, Bantu Education, higher rents, rising cost of living and lack of housing and amenities for example. It was organisations which were prepared to take up these issues that attracted women into politics.

Before the Second World War the three most important organisations to deal with women politically were the A.N.C., the Communist Party of South Africa and the Trade Union Movement. In the 1940's and 50's certain trade unions played a very important role in nurturing and directing the course of the Womens' movement, most notably the Food and Canning Workers Union established in 1941, where the majority of workers were women. As the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) which was to be formed in 1955, the Food and Canning Workers Union was committed to non-racialism and equal rights for all.

The Trade Union Movement acted as an important training ground for a new class of leader - working women from deprived backgrounds. These women rose to leadership positions in the wider political movements. The Food and Canning Workers Union played a leading role in activating women especially in the Western Cape.

The Second World War provided a major impetus to womens' political activity with the establishment of several grassroots organisations such as the Peoples' Food Council and The Womens' Food Committee which fought for a fair distribution of food and which protested against food shortages.

Another important landmark in the history of the Resistance Movement was the Defiance Campaign launched jointly by the A.N.C. and the S.A.I.C. (South African Indian Congress) in June 1952. This was an important stimulus for the A.N.C. Womens League in key areas on the Rand and the Eastern Cape and helped create the climate in which the future Federation of South African Women took shape. A number of new recruits to the Womens League entered politics through the Campaign, amongst them Lillian Ngoye - later National President of both the A.N.C.W.L. and the F.S.A.W.

(h) The F.S.A.W. and the Charter of Womens' Rights

On the 17th April 1954, the first National Conference of Women took place and the Federation of South African Women, 'a multiracial organisation, came into being. It was attended by more than 150 delegates representing 250.000 women from all over South Africa. They adopted a Charter of Womens' rights which summarised the demands of women in South Africa for themselves, their children and families. The Charter called for the right to vote, the right to full employment opportunities, equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights. It called for compulsory and free education for all children, the removal of laws that restrict movement and all oppressive laws; Through the Charter, the Federation pledged to build and strengthen womens sections in the national liberation movements and to organise women in trade unions and through the peoples' varied organisations. It further committed the Federation to strive for permanent peace throughout the world.

The FSAW worked closely with the ANCWL especially in the anti-pass campaign and in 1955 was present at The Congress of the People held at Kliptown near Johannesburg where the Freedom Charter was adopted. The culmination of their joint activity was on August 8th 1956 which has since been designated "Womens Day". On this day 20.000 women assembled at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the seat of government, to protest against the pass laws. They stood in silent protest for 30 minutes before handing their petitions in.

Not only did the women in the towns protest. The most famous of the many protests which took place in the rural areas was in Zeerust in the Transvaal in 1957. Here police reaction was particularly brutal. When women burned their pass books in protest, they were shot, beaten (some with babies on their backs), detained and jailed. Their homes were burnt down. "

In 1959 major unrest again broke out, this time in Cato Manor in Durban where there were many issues of discontent, but which finally focussed on the government-run beer halls. Women were incensed by the beer halls which took their men away from home, and 'which made them spend all their hard earned money on drink, when they were prohibited from brewing beer at home. The women launched a successful boycott of the beer halls and formed picket lines to prevent any men from breaking the boycott. They destroyed the beer and damaged buildings. Cato Manor was the catalyst, and the unrest spread like wildfire throughout the province of Natal. Women in the rural areas attacked the cattle dipping tanks which they were supposed to maintain but for which work they were not paid.

, However, it was the Pass laws which were a major issue with women throughout the 1950's because they had seen what pass laws had done to their men and the humiliation and suffering they had experienced. They realised the threat to their homes and families arising out of the issue of passes to women. Alice Kunene, a delegate to the anti-pass conference held on the East Rand in 1957 spoke for all women when she declared: "The Pass Laws means the death of our children. The oppression of the pass laws is going to bring destructions to our homes."

In 1960, Sharpville sparked off the inevitable crackdown on the liberation movement and the ANC was banned, driven underground and forced to review their strategy - the armed struggle began. Today women have joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), the army of the ANC. The FSAW itself was not banned, but its leaders were banned, arrested, jailed, house arrested and exiled, thus effectively crippling it. Although it still held a National Conference in 1961 it was operating under severe restrictions. This meeting was to be its last, but the legacy it left would remain to inspire women in the future to fight for a free and democratic South Africa.

(i) Resistance Today. The Squatter Camps - Crossroads

Today the resistance is very much alive and flourishing in the Squatter camps established in the Cape Province by people in defiance of the migrant labour and influx control laws. The most famous of these is the Crossroads squatter camp. Influx control has been particularly stringently applied in the Cape Peninsula which has been declared a "coloured preference area". To this end, the building of houses in the three main African Townships was stopped. Africans were thenceforth expected to enter the area on a yearly basis and spend 11 months of the year in bachelor hostels, ignoring the fact that many of them were already long term residents in the city. This was also contradictory to the demands of the white economy as between 1968 and 1974 the employment of African contract workers rose 200 % on average. The government has tried to destroy Crossroads by bulldozing the shanties, burning them, setting dogs on people, beating them etc. always with the threat of armed intervention close at hand. The fact that Crossroads still exists today is the result of the work of the women who organised themselves into the Crossroads Womens' Committee. This organisation played a major role in organising and defending the camps.

Crossroads as a community, in fact, is a lesson to the government. It has a lower crime record than official townships, and its health statistics are better than those of the Bantustans. The residents, through their committees, have organised schools, creches and community centres, and churches.

In spite of promises by Dr. Koornhof, the then Minister of Cooperation and Development, in 1979, that the squatters would be rehoused locally - a promise made under pressure of public outrage - both in South Africa and abroad, it is now clear that Crossroads is doomed to destruction. The now deputy Minister of Cooperation Dr. Grange Morrisson has said in March 1984: "The Crossroads camp is a symbol of defiance and anarchy" and would be destabilised as soon as possible. Those residents qualifying for urban status would be moved to the new black ghetto presently under construction, Khayelitsha. This is a barren area miles away from Cape Town surrounded by sea and sand.

The people of Crossroads are, on the other hand, determined not to move.

The Crossroads Womens Committee is affiliated to the United Democratic Front, the largest political grouping to emerge in a decade. The late 70's and early 80's saw the emergence of several mass based womens movement, e.g. the United Womens Organisation formed in the Western Cape in 1981. Some of the members are those who had their roots in the FSAW, notably the President, Dora Tamana, who died recently. In Johannesburg, the Federation of South African Women (FedSAW) was formed - also with the mantle of the old FSAW. Old FSAW members are active in the organisation. In addition, there is the East London Womens Organisation, the Port Elizabeth Womens Organisation and the Durban Womens Organisation. Again the issues are the basic ones affecting the lives of women and their families - Influx Control, working conditions, rising costs of living, bad housing, lack of amenities, schools, and creches etc. Womens organisations all have close links with the Trade Union Movement and Community Organisations - all of which have a major base in the United Democratic Front. Its influence in the UDF can be seen in the far reaching claims for sexual equality contained in the UDF declaration at its formation last year.

Another important development is that today, the domestic workers, a group previously the most isolated of all workers, are being organised in Domestic Workers Associations and Trade Unions. The unions, especially in the Cape, have achieved some measure of success in the fight for better working conditions. Most important of all, they are bringing together, albeit only socially, the vast majority of black urban working women.

The increasing political activity of the black women has manifested itself in the recent spate of strikes in South Africa - a country where strikes are illegal. According to the Minister of Law and Order, Mr. Louis le Grange, the police had been called to the scenes of strikes 99 times in 1983. Altogether 525 black workers had been arrested.

The history of resistance of black women in South Africa is one of peaks and troughs, women only coming to the forefront of the political stage when particular issues were at stake. This was partly because of the extremely repressive nature of the regime, and partly due to the demands of their daily lives which usually means a double working day - the demand of work, home and family making it difficult for them to fulfill their political commitments. This was not eased by the fact that in many cases their menfolk were suspicious and resentful of their wives' political activities which took them away from home.

. (j) Conclusion

The situation of black women in South Africa today presents a challenge to middle class Western feminists, for while it is true that as a general category women occupy a subordinate position to men and that women in general have experiences in common, sex is not only, or even the dominant, determinant of woman's place in society. In societies like South Africa, where the dominant mode of production

is capitalist, Class has a crucial bearing on the position of women. Furthermore, in South Africa, there is the added dimension of colour. it is the womens' different class and colour rather- than their shared sex, which finally determines their basic political allegiances. The vast majority of white women in South Africa have been separated from their black sisters by a very wide gulf, one located in the basic structures of white supremacy. Thus the suffragette movement in South Africa in the late twenties was a feminist but a racist affair, ignoring three quarters of the women in South Africa. On the other hand, black women in South Africa are not engaged in a narrow struggle for womens' rights only, but in a struggle for National Liberation as a means to achieving those rights. This does not mean that they do not recognise their own specific oppression as women.

As Helen Joseph, National Secretary of the FSAW said in 1957, "... the fundamental struggle of the people is for National Liberation and any womens organisation that (stands) outside this struggle must stand apart from the mass of women this statement does not in any way mean that the Federation of South African Women was not concerned with the problem of womens rights, and that it did not strive for the emancipation of women what was realised was that it would be impossible for women to achieve their rights as women in a society where so many fundamental rights were denied to both men and women by virtue of their colour."

(k) The Year of the Women

It is a recognition of the militancy of the women and as a means of consolidating the ranks of the womens movement that the ANC has declared 1984 the Year of the Women.

In 1983, Gertrude Shope, head of the ANC Womens Section, stated "our main priority is the political development of our women which will ensure their full participation in the liberation of our country." When declaring 1984 the Year of the Women, the President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, said: e

"Our struggle would be less powerful and our national and social emancipation could never be complete if we continue to treat the women of our country as dependent minors and objects of some form of exploitation or another. Certainly it can no longer be said that the womans place is in the kitchen. In our beleaguered country the womens place is in the battlefield of struggle."

In 1957 a woman in Zeerust commented:

"The Women of Africa are on the march!"

.Her words may prove to be prophetic.