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Interview with Priscilla Maxon o

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What were the women's organisations that existed in the '80s?

We first formed an organisation called United Women's Organisation (UWO) which was affiliated to UDF. It was organised under the scope of UDF, but as the time went on we had problems with the name UWO because it was a national thing, therefore it was not possible for any region to have a national name, e.g., the Border region was supposed to have sort of a Border UWO, etc. After a period of time it was obvious that the trend we were following was not a correct one, it was not wise for us to have a name which was national, as we used to consult with underground structures. The different areas therefore changed the name UWO and called themselves according to their regions. In our region we called ourselves Border Women's Congress and from there we went to localities. Each local had its name. In East London we called ourselves Gombo Women's Congress (GOCO), which was an affiliate to BOWCO. It was GOCO that kept the women's struggle going until the unbanning of the organisation, the coming back of the ANC as a whole and then we integrated into ANC Women's League structures.

As women, around which issues did you organise?

Our region is divided into two, the rural and urban areas, so we differed in our methods of mobilising women in rural than how we mobilised women in urban areas. In urban we mobilised. IWOmen because we had no pre-schools for our children and also the problem of children staying on the

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streets. In our region we had the problem of the children flocking to Highway Taxi Rank and being exploited by taxi drivers. We tried to rally women around those issues. We mobilised them again in joining mass democratic struggle where fought things like rent, water, etc. If you talk about women in rural areas we fought things like water, they needed taps in their areas, clean water. We also rallied them around creches and we succeeded in some areas due to efforts made by women, shortage of schools. When we mobilised them for the struggle we never forgot the objectives of the movement as a whole. We mobilised them because as women they are oppressed, even within the organisation just because they are women. There are certain things that women are not allowed to do even within the organisation, e.g., a woman cannot be chairperson, even today they are still doing that, so we rallied them against those issues, so that even our organisation should be aware that there can be women leaders, instead of being put aside they would be developed so that they can hold leading positions. That is why we referred to as triple oppression, because even at home we are being regarded as minors. You are a minor at home, within the organisation and also within the society as a whole. Even at factory level those who would be employed are males because of the argument that they are strong and can be able to hold heavy objects than women.

How did you manage to mobilise church women?

We managed to infiltrate them even though it was difficult

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to do so. For instance, you would not get a platform in the church as a woman from the political organisation to talk about political issues, their response would be that they concern themselves with church issues, they do not involve themselves in political issues, but managed to make breakthrough by going to churches and be involved in their church groupings, hence every year when we commemorated the march by women of 1956 we would invite them as church women..

How was the relationship between women's structures and community civic organisations?

By that time there was no national civic body. What used to happen every region had its own residence association, e.g., Mdantsane Residents Association, Duncan Village Residents Association.

How was the relationship with trade unions, youth..?

With trade unions the most important union that I can mention was South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), and it had large numbers of membership. As women...some of women's organisation members were workers at that time in factories, also some of them were shop-stewards, so it was so easy for a trade union to give a women's organisation a platform, even in a trade union general meeting. It was not difficult because even women were also members of trade unions. Another trade union which had it large membership being women was FAWU because at that time it was strong and the fact that the co-founder of FAWU was woman, she went into exile...Ray Alexandra. This had a great effect

for FAWU to see itself as a staunch member of a women's organisation. We had no problems with SAAWU and FAWU. It had predominantly large members of women. With youth organisation there was a relationship, but at that time these were different youth bodies. There was an argument that which one was close to women. There was a group of women which still kept the name UWO, and there was that one which changed to GOCO and had some contact with underground structures. Even with youth there was a split, there was youth which was pro-GOCO and also another one pro-UWO, but there were unity talks initiated by underground structures (although there was...). The unity was not achieved up until the unbanning years.

Were there some organisations that were opposed to the affiliation to UDF?

That was the initiative of the UDF that there should be organisations affiliated to UDF. If you were not an affiliation of UDF at that time meant that you were useless because that was the only body that rallied support from different organisations though they affiliated as individuals.

How did the State of Emergency affect the women's organisation?

Like any other organisation, all its members were affected. There was a time, especially between '83-'85. The organisation was weakened because most of its leadership was in detention. Those who managed to go to hiding kept the organisation going because even themselves were hiding

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their activities. The organisation was very weak but it managed to survive. When released from prison we would revive the organisation. What was happening, the government would detain people for a certain period and then when they were releasing them another group would be detained.

What kind of campaigns did you embark on and how effective were they?

It was difficult to embark on campaigns because of the State of Emergency, more especially in Ciskei. The campaigns I remember in Ciskei was when we were forced to pay tax, and we managed to fight that one successfully as women. One of the campaigns involved marches demanding creches or removal of councillors. Women participated a lot at the death of CINIP in Ciskei because it was this CINIP which was forcing women to pay tax every month like men. We managed to defeat their call.

What I like about the struggle of the '80s is that we never lost faith.