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Women staking claim for greater authority

ORGANISED and determined ANC women are staking a claim for greater authority in their political and private lives.

When hundreds of women met in Kimberley last week for the first national conference of the ANC Women's League in more than 30 years, they agreed that their needs must be addressed now, not after black liberation.

Delegates to the four-day conference made it clear they regarded themselves as being oppressed.

"Literally, even to this day, women are like slaves," said ANC cultural officer Barbara Masekela.

Conference spokeswoman Frene Ginwala described the discussion on women's emancipation.

"When the time came for women to talk about their own experiences, there were five microphones. And women were queuing up like mad at each one."

Complaints

Their complaints were wide-ranging, including discrimination at the workplace, rape and domestic abuse, repressive laws and sexist behaviour by their husbands.

Rural women voiced anguish at the oppression they faced in their day-to-day life: the difficulties in securing food and water for their families and the lack of access to the land.

The delegates put the responsibility for women's emancipation on the State, whether the current Government or a future black-dominated government.

They formulated a programme of action which challenged male domination, even inside the ANC.

The programme demands greater representation in ANC

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leadership. Seventeen seats out of an expanded 105-person national executive should be reserved for women, the delegates determined.

They also called for 30 percent female representation in all groups within the ANC.

To monitor discrimination and these proposed affirmative action policies, the programme calls on the ANC's national executive to set up a women's commission.

Constitution

It would be chaired by a woman and have a majority of female members.

Delegates are also determined that women should not be left out of the constitutional process.

A campaign to ensure that women are represented in a future constituent assembly, or any group charged with drawing up the new law of the land, is to start on August 9.

In order to promote women's equality, delegates resolved to encourage the recruitment of more women into the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe.

Other resolutions of the programme of action include:

- * Sending a memorandum to President FW de Klerk demanding that he end township violence. On the day that the memorandum is sent mass action will be carried out, with women dressing in mourning clothes to represent the huge death toll of the violence;

- * Calling for a national women's peace conference involving women of all political persuasions;

- * Setting up a women's al-

liance of all groups concerned with the advancement of women, again not just consisting of women within the ANC;

- * Establishing crisis centres to help victims of rape, assaults and sexual harassment;

- * Calling on schools to address gender issues in their formal curricula;

- * Launching a campaign for one affordable health and welfare system;

- * Mobilising around the issue of Aids, with support given to families of Aids patients;

- * Pushing for the formation of a commission to tackle children's health and education problems; and

- * Spearheading a drive to fight illiteracy.

The programme also resolved to pay attention to the needs of rural women, farm employees and domestic workers.

In addition to these issues, the conference devoted much time to formulating the structure of the league.

Banning

After a 30-year banning, the league is starting anew inside the country and many feel that a different type of organisation is called for.

"This is a new sort of league (compared) to the one we had before," said the league's financial administrator Thembi Majola.

Formed originally to support the overall cause of black liberation, many feel the league should now focus primarily on women's issues.

Consequently, delegates felt it essential that it should be autonomous, financially and otherwise.

In the past, delegates felt, the league was sometimes given short shrift by the central ANC leadership.

"The ANC body would take a long time to approve funds or funds would be diverted," recalled Majola.

"We need to be able to control our own organisation and determine its direction, to control its human as well as material resources," said Lindiwe Mabuza, the ANC's chief representative in the United States.

In other structural decisions, the delegates determined that league office-bearers would hold no other office within the ANC.

"You find that when women wear too many hats, the women's work suffers. People put the women's work at the bottom of the list," said Ginwala.

Problems

The league will have a national executive of its own, comprising five office-bearers, six women elected at the conference and 15 regional representatives.

Despite the unified stance taken by the delegates, there were also problems that reflected the diverse backgrounds of the delegates.

There were divisions along age lines, with the older women voicing dissatisfaction with being in the same organisation with their juniors.

"Culturally, my grandmother would not want to be in the same organisation as me," said Terry Matuala.

There was also some resentment expressed against intellectuals, felt to be assertive in discussions but hesitant to participate in league work.

Nonetheless, there was an optimistic mood at the conference, generated by the feeling that women were finally speaking up for themselves and working together to solve their own problems.

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