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Women in revolt

White women in South Africa are unequal. Abortion is illegal in all but very restricted circumstances. Relatively few of them have waged jobs; having black domestic servants, many of them are relegated to a parasitic existence.

But an infinitely greater burden of sexual oppression is suffered by the black women who are domestic servants for the white women.

Indian women in South Africa have special problems because of the religious and cultural traditions of their community which mean that very few of them indeed go out to get waged jobs. African women are the hardest-hit victims of the whole migrant labour system.

That system relies on and exploits the family structure in its most stripped-down, crudely economic form. The African man appears in the white city, unencumbered, as and when required as a worker; meanwhile the African woman stays on

the bantustan, working the land to gain a subsistence, bringing up the next generation of workers, and maintaining the male worker in periods when the capitalist does not need him.

Flawed

Love and companionship, however flawed in the normal capitalist family, are not provided for at all here. The woman in the family is an economic reservoir and shock-absorber for capital, and nothing more. The male worker is legally forbidden to take his wife and children with him when he goes to work in the white areas.

Most African women, therefore, live in the bantustans. (Officially, five million out of eight million, though a lot of women are outside the bantustans illegally).

The bantustan women suffer desperate, grinding poverty, relieved only by remit-

tances from men working in white areas, as and when those remittances arrive.

And worse. The system in the bantustans, ruled by chiefs under an addled version of African traditions imposed by the white government, is very male-dominated. Almost all women in the bantustans have the same legal status as children, utterly dependent on their fathers or husbands. One of the first measures of Transkei when it became 'independent' was to legalise polygamy. When women go outside the bantustans, their pass books have to include a permit from their father or husband.

Bophuthatswana bantustan adds an 'up-to-date' element to this primeval oppression. A £50 million resort complex includes gambling, sports, and cinemas, and lots of black women prostitutes for wealthy whites driving across the border from South Africa.

The migrant-labour/bantustan system

in its dogmatic form is unliveable, and in fact to a substantial degree it has broken down. Family structures have shattered: only 23% of African women are married, as against 46% of white women, and 60% of children in Soweto are born out of marriage.

Millions of women enter the white areas illegally to find work. They find forms of oppression perhaps less bleak than on the bantustans, but scarcely less severe.

A decreasing but still large proportion of African women work as domestic servants for white women. (One quarter of all women employed in 1980 — black and white — were domestic servants). They suffer not only long hours, low pay, and personal humiliation, but also a law forbidding them to live with their husbands even if the employer agrees.

Underestimate

Increasing numbers of women have jobs in industry. In 1946 African women were only 1.8% of all production workers in South Africa. Now in the textile industry they are 30% of the workforce (1981).

Between 1973 and 1981 the proportion of women in the black workforce increased from 14 to 22%. (These official figures probably underestimate the situation because of illegal workers). Since the mid-1970s black women have also begun to get jobs like nurses, teachers, cashiers, sales clerks, etc.

Even there, however, their wages are lower than men's. And generally maternity agreements for black women are so poor that women have to try to conceal pregnancies from the employers and to work right through them.

In the black townships women find terrible conditions. Housing is overcrowded (an average of five people per room in Soweto). The brutalising, depressing conditions of black male workers often drive them to take it out on women. Wife-battering is common; rapes have been estimated to run at 800 per day in South Africa. Rape of a white woman by a black man can bring the man a death sentence, but the police regard rape of a black woman as a minor offence.

Worried by the fact that African birth rates outstrip whites, the government provides free contraception. The injected contraceptive Depo-Provera, which is cheap and effective but banned in many

Western countries because of side-effects on women's health, is widely used.

Black women in South Africa do not just suffer. They have played an active role in the liberation movement, and today the importance of women's organisation and women's demands is recognised by both ANC and the black consciousness movement.

This recognition did not come without struggle. As late as 1955, the Freedom Charter made only the slightest and most abstract references to women's demands.

At the conference which adopted the Charter the Federation of South African Women put forward a whole series of demands relating to health care, education, housing, social services and food.

They included specific demands for women in the reserves/bantustans — the provision of medical, educational and shopping facilities, etc.

This proposal came under attack. The Congress leadership argued that it implied acceptance of the principle of separate reserves for Africans and criticised the women for not thinking the issue through clearly enough.

The Federation accepted this criticism and withdrew their proposal. But Cherryl Walker argues that the FSAW was being 'unnecessarily humble'. She writes:

"Merely ignoring those areas (bantustans) because they formed part of an unacceptable policy did not solve the problems of basic survival confronting the people living there. Nor did it assist those people develop their own strategies for resisting the very policies which kept them in an impoverished and dependent position". (Women and Resistance in South Africa).

Another controversial aspect of the Federation's document, 'what women demand', was its call for birth control clinics (fulfilled in perverted form by the white government since then). This demand, which went against deeply ingrained ideas about female sexuality, was not included in the Freedom Charter.

Apart from a general statement about 'equal rights for all without discrimination on the grounds of colour, race, sex or belief' and apart from one clause calling for special medical care for mothers and young children, the Charter had nothing to say about the democratic rights of women.

Another arena in which women had to

fight to make their voice heard was the fight against pass laws. For many years the white government, assuming that African women would stay on the land and were not wage workers, had not required them to have pass books. In 1952 they started to impose pass laws on women. It took a fierce struggle over many years before they succeeded.

The climax came in the Johannesburg anti-pass protests of 1958. By this time the government had succeeded in issuing about a million pass books to African women, mainly in the rural areas. Now the acid test came as they began to take on the large towns.

A campaign of mass civil disobedience broke out, with active leadership given by the ANC Women's League and the Federation of South African Women. Thousands went to gaol and participated in demonstrations.

But the ANC leadership took a cautious stance. They argued that it was placing a large financial burden on Congress to get the women out of gaol. In any case, the ANC stressed that the anti-pass campaign was under their direction and not that of the women and that it was not obliged to consult with the Federation or the Women's League 'on each and every aspect'.

Momentum

Under intense pressure from the authorities, a mass demonstration was called off and in its place a 'parade' of about three or four thousand took place. At this point, when there was clearly a lull in the momentum of the campaign, the ANC decided that 'the first phase had ended' and called off the campaign.

Whether this was right or wrong was arguable. Perhaps it was better to call off the civil disobedience at its height rather than let it fizzle out. However, Cherryl Walker writes:

"It was essential for the ANC to follow up on the women's campaign. Having submitted to the ANC's authority, the women were entitled to expect that the participation of the men in the rest of the campaign would be active. In this they were disappointed.

The FSAW's report...concluded: 'The Federation awaits direction from the ANC as to the course which the anti-pass campaign will follow and requests that this direction may be given in the very near future...Women await with impatience the active entry of men into the anti-pass campaign'."

This request was repeated the following year but the leadership never materialised.

Women have also played a big role in the new non-racial unions. Some unions have taken successful action for equal pay and for maternity agreements.

There were 24 women general secretaries of unions in 1983, but this does not represent as much progress as it seems, for in the South African non-racial unions general secretary is usually seen as an administrative rather than a high-profile position.

Lydia Kompe, Transvaal organiser for a FOSATU union, notes that "No union has yet elected a branch chairlady...Perhaps a female treasurer, since people think a woman is more responsible and will be more careful with money...

"Even in textiles, where there's mostly women, I've never heard of a chairlady of the branch or a president" (quoted in McShane et al. p.87).



Arrest under the pass laws.