

# SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION — UNYIELDING RESISTANCE



The black women of South Africa are chained by a triple yoke of oppression. Under the system of apartheid each component of their existence as women — their sex, their colour and their class — combine in a variety of ways to grind them down and negate their right to social equality. Within the racist and sexist system of white minority rule women are not only oppressed in relation to men, but also in relation to each other.

All women in apartheid South Africa are oppressed but they are not oppressed equally. For white women, both colour and class significantly reduce the disadvan-

tages of gender. Being white and members of the middle and upper classes, they are empowered politically, economically and socially through white minority domination and white monopoly of ownership and control of the country's wealth. They do not stand before society as equals of white men, but neither do black men — and even less so do black women.

The intensity and consequences of being oppressed as women is, for white women, significantly reduced by other key social factors.

In sharp contrast, the combination of these social factors serves to grind African women down to the very

depths of apartheid's social hierarchy. The white minority has built a system of colonial domination within a territory they share with the indigenous oppressed majority by tightly restricting and inhibiting the movement of African women out of the reserves. In forcibly anchoring African women and children in the reserves they have created and tried to perpetuate a system which concentrates most of the very limited rights the majority of South Africa's population may have in less than 14% of the territory.

And it is through their enforced presence in the bantustans that the regime has been possible to perpetuate, entrench and extend the

system of migrant labour and to inhibit, if not prevent, the development of a stable, family-based, urban African working class in a common South Africa.

National and gender oppression directly affect the position of African women as part of the labouring classes. Women, their children, the aged, invalids and unemployed, have been deemed 'superfluous appendages' of labour, although they are the base of an artificially sustained system of migrant labour, and therefore essential to the cheap labour system. Their access to waged work has been severely restricted. The majority of African women are unemployed, and unemployment is most concentrated among them. Of those in work, the majority are in the two worst sectors of the economy — service and agriculture — where pay and conditions are the most extreme. And even the small proportion who are employed in secondary industry are relatively disadvantaged because they are concentrated in the lowest paying branches of manufacturing — food, textile and clothing production.

In the racial and social hierarchy of white minority rule, Indian and coloured women generally occupy an intermediary position between African and white women. Although they suffer gross and systematic discrimination and oppression — never to be equal to white men or women — politically and economically they are generally better placed than African women, sometimes equalling or surpassing African men.

The majority of South African women, under the burden of triple oppression, wage a daily struggle for life itself. The extremes of deprivation and degradation they have been subjected to by colonial minority rule have dictated, as the late Chief Albert Luthuli so incisively put it, that 'women concern themselves with fundamentals'. And it is these fundamentals which have been at the heart of the heroic record of resistance waged by South African women of all races.

Although the focus of struggle has

shifted from time to time, bringing out the immediate and burning issues confronting women in their particular communities at any given moment, the battles they have waged have always centred on the essentials. They continue to strive for:

- food, shelter, work and a living wage equal to that paid to men;
- the right to family life, to live where they choose, to an education for their children, to adequate health and child-care facilities and to security in old age or illness;
- an end to physical and psychological violence against women;
- the right to organise as workers, as women and as part of the democratic majority without fear of detention, arrest, imprisonment, banishment, exile, torture or physical and psychological abuse;
- an end to all forms of minority-imposed, undemocratic representation and constant police, military and para-military harassment;
- the right to stand and be represented at every political level by people of their choice, irrespective of sex, colour, creed, religion or ethnic origin; and
- for the right to live in and build a non-discriminatory, unitary South Africa based on the will of all the people.

In their opposition to colonial minority rule, South African women have proven themselves to be fearless fighters. They take initiatives and stand up to the Pretoria regime on many occasions, sometimes in conditions where men have held back. They have shown great courage 'under fire'. The resistance struggle in South Africa is filled with examples of women who, at great personal risk and with enormous self-sacrifice, have withstood gross torture without yielding; who have overcome the strictures of banning, detention, banishment and even exile to continue to organise and resist; and who have kindled and kept the national spirit of resistance aflame in the most adverse conditions.

Organisationally, the Federation of South African Women, formed in 1954, was the forerunner of non-racial, democratic, mass popular organisation that has become the outstanding characteristic of the national liberation movement.

Today there are several regionally-based women's organisations which are — under very difficult repressive conditions — working to come together in a single national women's organisation.

In their individual capacity and through their organisations, women have begun the long and arduous struggle to inject women's concerns into the mainstream of political life and thereby to overcome the barriers of centuries of oppression which have relegated the voice of women to the margins of society.

The oppressed women of South Africa have never been alone in their struggle. Always ready to learn from others, for decades they have been enlightened by developments in the women's movement internationally, creatively applying methods of work and organisation to the particular conditions that exist on the ground. At the same time, they have been able to share their plight and the experiences of resistance with women all over the world. In this way they have forged firm bonds of friendship and support with peace and freedom-loving women and men across the globe, all of whom contribute to the struggle against apartheid.

The African National Congress and its Women's Section call on women everywhere to strengthen and extend these ties of mutual respect and concrete solidarity. Now, more than ever before, the women and people of South Africa need your support to destroy the heinous system of apartheid. Only with its total destruction will it be possible for the people of South Africa — and especially South African women — to begin to overcome the criminal legacy of entrenched racial and national oppression, and social — including sexual — exploitation.