

THE WOMEN'S CHARTER. JOHANNESBURG , APRIL 17th 1954

PREAMBLE We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, Africans, Indians, Europeans and Coloureds, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.

A SINGLE SOCIETY. We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both men and women. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress.

TEST OF CIVILISATION. The level of civilisation which any society has reached can be measured by the degree of freedom that its members enjoy. The status of women is a test of civilisation. Measured by that standard, South Africa must be considered low in the scale of civilised nations.

WOMEN'S LOT. We women share with our menfolk the cares and anxieties imposed by poverty and its evils. As wives and mothers, it falls upon us to make small wages stretch a long way. It is we who feel the cries of our children when they are sick and hungry. It is our lot to keep and care for the homes that are too small, broken and dirty to be kept clean. We know the burden of looking after children and our land when our husbands are away in the mines, on the farms, and in the towns earning our daily bread.

We know what it is to keep family life going in bachelors' huts and shanties, or in overcrowded apartments. We know the bitterness of children taken to lawless ways, of daughters becoming unmarried mothers whilst still at school, of boys and girls growing up without education, training or jobs at a living wage.

POOR AND RICH. These are evils that do not need to exist. They exist because the society in which we live is divided into poor and rich, into non-European and European. They exist because there are privileges for the few, discrimination and harsh treatment for the many. We women have stood and will stand shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk in a common struggle against poverty, race and class discrimination, and the evils of the colour-bar.

NATIONAL LIBERATION. As members of the National Liberatory movements and Trade Unions, in and through our various organisations, we march forward with our men in the struggle for liberation and the defence of the working people. We pledge ourselves to keep high the banner of equality, fraternity and liberty. As women there rests upon us the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women, which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and insubordination.

EQUALITY FOR WOMEN: We resolve to struggle for the removal of laws and customs that deny African women the right to own, inherit or alienate property. We resolve to work for a change in the laws of marriage such as are found amongst our African, Malay and Indian people, which have the effect of placing wives in the position of legal subjection to and giving husbands the power to dispose of wives' property and earnings and to dictate to them in all matters affecting them and their children.

We recognise that women are treated as minors by these marriage and property laws because of ancient and revered traditions and customs which had their origins in the antiquity of the people and no doubt served purposes of great value in bygone times.

There was a time in African society when every woman reaching marriageable stage was assured of a husband, home, land and security.

Then husbands and wives with their children belonged to families and clans that supplied most of their own material needs and were largely self-sufficient. Men and women were partners in a compact and closely intergrated family unit.

WOMEN WHO LABOUR Those conditions have gone. The tribal and kinship society to which



men away from their tribal homes, the growth of towns and industries and the rise of a great body of wage-earners on the farms and in the urban areas, who depend wholly or mainly on wages for a livelihood.

Thousands of African women like Indian, Coloured and European women, are employed today in factories, homes, offices, shops, on farms, and in professions such as nursing, teaching and the like. As unmarried women, widows, or divorcees they have to fend for themselves, often without the assistance of a male relative. Many of them are responsible not only for their own livelihood but also that of their children.

Large numbers of women today are in fact the sole breadwinners and heads of their families

FOREVER MINORS. Nevertheless, the laws and practices derived from earlier and different states of society are still applied to them. They are responsible for their own person and their children. Yet the law seeks to enforce upon them the status of a minor.

Not only are African, Coloured and Indian women denied political rights, but they are also in many parts of the Union denied the same status as men in such matters as the right to enter into contracts, to own and dispose of property, and to exercise guardianship over

OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS. The law has dragged behind the development of society; it no longer corresponds to the actual social and economic position of women. The law has become an obstacle to the progress of the women, and therefore a brake to the whole of society

This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large section of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves.

We shall teach the men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and practice.

NEED FOR EDUCATION. We also recognise that large numbers of our women folk continue to be bound by traditional practices and conventions, and fail to realise that these have become obsolete and a brake on progress. It is our duty and privilege to enlist all women in our struggle for emancipation and to bring to them all realisation of the intimate relationship that exists between their status of inferiority as women and the inferior status to which their people are subjected by discriminatory laws and colour prejudice.

It is our intention to carry out a nation-wide programme of education that will bring home to the men and women of all national groups the realisation that freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage.

AN APPEAL. We appeal to all progressive organisations, to members of the great National Liberal movements, to the trade unions and working class organisations, to the churches, educational and welfare organisations, to all progressive men and women who have the interest of our people at heart, to join with us in this great and noble endeavour.