In less than ten months South Africa will hold its first democratic national election. As excitement builds, many South African women ask what the “new South Africa” will hold for them. Over nine million new voters will be women who have significantly contributed to bringing South Africa to this historic moment. They have a double reason for electing a new government, as the apartheid regime entrenched not only racism in their laws but sexism as well.

In South Africa, 18 million Black men and women will vote for the first time in the country’s first one person, one vote election scheduled for April 27, 1994. The task of voter education will be enormous, given the size of the electorate and the fact that few of the political parties, including the ANC, have stood for a national election before. Women make up at least 54 percent of the population of new voters. The way these women vote will have a great impact on the elections.
Negotiation Process

A good indicator of the size of the problem women face is that there are very few women taking significant part in the current national negotiations. Therefore it is very difficult to have women’s concerns placed on the negotiators’ agenda. This issue was raised in the first round of negotiations at the so-called CODESA talks where women forced the creation of a gender committee that addressed women’s issues. However that committee was extinguished in the new negotiating forum. Instead, there is a new rule in the current multi-party forum that each party include at least one woman in its negotiating team. In addition women have undertaken an independent project to develop a charter of women’s rights that cuts across racial and political lines, for inclusion in the new constitution. (See the box, “Women in South Africa” for more details.)

Elections

Another major challenge for women is whether any of them will be elected to serve in the Constituent Assembly that will write the new constitution. The election has been designed so that parties will be represented based on proportional representation. Current plans are that each party will submit a list of 200 names for a national election and 200 names regionally for a total of 400 seats. For example a party that wins 25 percent of the vote will then have 100 people elected to the Constituent Assembly. Unless the women who are on the negotiating teams are able to successfully advocate for women’s inclusion, it will be more difficult for them to insist that women’s names be placed on the elections lists.

Women’s Local Efforts and Voter Education

In some areas women run local grassroots organizations which are focusing on voter education and how women can use the vote to ensure that they are treated fairly by the new government.

The country’s main voter education group, Matla Trust, a non-partisan organization set up to provide voter education for Black South Africans, is aware of the problem that female voters face. Barry Gilder, who works in the media section of Matla says that “providing voter education for women is critical as we approach our work.” However most of the voter education work is not divided between men and women since the task is so large that resources do not provide for a specific focus on women. He also states that there is great concern about a low turnout of women on election day. One effort to combat this is to be sure that polling stations are close to everyone.

One effort to reach women is a collaboration between SPEAK, a South African women’s magazine, and Matla Trust. Each month the magazine is running a page on the election and what voting means. The page will combine the voter education expertise of Matla with SPEAK’s attention to women’s issues. The main focus of all of SPEAK’s voter education work is to encourage women to vote independently of their husbands and fathers. In the July 1993 issue of SPEAK, the voter education page closes with this rallying cry for women’s participation in the elections, “We must make sure women’s names are on the lists of the political party we support. We must also demand that women’s names are high up on these lists. People at the top of the list have a better chance of actually getting onto the Constituent Assembly. We must make sure that those women high up on the lists are people who will fight for women’s rights and gender equality.”
**Women in South Africa**

In South Africa, as in many African countries, women work a double shift. They are often responsible for both the housework and earning income outside the home. Typical domestic chores include: providing and preparing food, gathering water, collecting fuel, caring for children and elderly, and cleaning the house. Women generate income outside the home by selling livestock, produce and crafts. In addition, many women work as wage laborers. Women have also taken over traditional men’s tasks such as farming, maintaining the livestock and building houses.

The primary reason for the shift in traditional division of labor is the system of apartheid that has forced many men to leave their homes and families in the rural areas to find work in the cities and mines. This urban migration has left many women at home in the rural areas. Consequently, the women who remain run the home, the farm and the family. Due to the absence of men in these areas women become the primary decision makers, wielding considerable influence in the family and community. However, this new responsibility is not represented in the formal structures of society. In most areas men hold the institutional positions of power both in the family and in the community.

In urban townships women have other daily hurdles. Many women who live in these townships are unemployed and have no means to support their families. There is also a continuous stream of people flocking to the townships thereby creating a housing crisis. In addition, the violence in the urban areas is a very serious threat to both men and women.

Until recently, under South African law, African women were legally minors and needed the signature of a man to secure loans, telephones, apartments and other essentials. Lydia Kompe, a trade unionist and field worker for Transvaal Rural Action Committee made the following statement about the women and the law, "...When we say there are going to be changes in this country this attitude which has actually been legislated — that women are minors — must be quickly abolished. In the new constitution we don’t want to see any discrimination of any sort regardless of color, creed or sex. We need to have the same say, equal opportunities like anybody from the workplace to the rural areas. We need to have the same privileges." (From: *Land Update* no. 17 Sept/Oct 1992 p.6)

**Women’s Charter**

One response of South African women has been to form the Women’s National Coalition (WNC). The Coalition’s main objective according to member Modiegi Kumalo, is to "...prepare for the future of South Africa now," and to unite women and ensure that a new South Africa is non-racist and non-sexist. The main project of the Coalition is the campaign for the Women’s Charter. The Women’s Charter will be a document outlining women’s rights to be incorporated in the new constitution. The Coalition is conducting a nationwide survey of South African women, to determine their needs in a future South Africa. WNC Project Manager, Pregs Govender described the project, "Women need to know that the issues they face on a day to day basis link up to the campaign, that this campaign is about South African women seizing the opportunity to begin transforming society and their lives." Some of the issues that have already emerged from the survey are: more participation from men in domestic duties; equal pay for equal work; inclusion in the political process; easier access to health clinics; equal property rights for men and women; and more schools. Members of the Coalition believe that without a Women’s Charter to address these and other issues, only men will benefit from the transition to a new government.
Sister Bernard Ncube and Voter Education

Sister Bernard Ncube of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) is holding voter education workshops that cover the theoretical and practical aspects of voting. The ICT is a nonpartisan group that is asked by non-governmental organizations, churches, unions and political organizations to hold voter education workshops. Sister Bernard’s work stresses demystification of the vote, importance of participation, education and training of new voters, holding mock elections, and trying to instill a sense of moral obligation into people to vote.

She says, “By holding these workshops I have found that asking women to vote is more than simply asking them to learn how to fill out a ballot. By asking women to vote I am asking them to reexamine their self-identity. Most of these women have never operated in an environment that encourages them to speak out, to assert their claim on individual choice or action. For the majority of South African women to use their vote they must first find out who they are and then be convinced that voting has something to do with their lives. These women have endured mental and physical bondage most of their lives. The greatest need is for information. Programs of mass mobilization and education are needed to reach these women.”

Sister Bernard says that there is a lot of skepticism about the voting process. Women don’t have a clear sense of how voting will change their lives and they fear voting because of the violence. However, women are not passively watching the election process. Sister Bernard stresses that women are also talking about using their vote to advance their own issues. As voter education groups come into contact with women they are finding that women have a set of questions and an agenda that they want to follow. As women learn about the election they begin to ask questions, such as, “What will voting mean to our lives after the election?” “Which parties will deliver to us?” and “Who will create a truly better South Africa?” Although parties have started to do outreach towards women to get their vote Sister Bernard believes that most of these overtures have been nothing but tokenism.

The process of voter education will take time and effort from all the people involved. Voter education needs to be done on a very basic and time consuming level. When Sister Bernard addressed a group of 600 women in the Transvaal she explained that if women don’t vote and participate in the transitional process, they become an endangered species. They will not “exist” in a new South Africa, because they will not be represented. She said that the women got angry and started asking questions. Eight hours later they had performed a full fledged mock election and had detailed discussions of the transition process. “This is the level that voter education is required.”

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As local grassroots groups attempt to tackle the problems that confront female voters, the main objective is to help women understand that by voting they will be able to improve their lives. The ANC Women’s League is holding workshops in local areas. Some members of the Women’s League believe that most women want to vote for the ANC but are afraid that their ballots will not be kept secret.

Even though there seem to be many obstacles in the way of women voting, it is very likely that women will turn out in full force on election day. In other African countries, such as Namibia and Zimbabwe, women arrived at voting stations even though they may have had to walk for miles with their children on their backs. The South African women will reach the polling booths despite the hurdles.


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