

First World Anti-Apartheid Newsletter

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South Africa's Women *The Struggle Continues*

BY TANDE LUTULI GCABASHE

"When a man is oppressed it's a horror;
when a woman is oppressed it's tradition."

by

an anonymous African Woman philosopher.

South Africa is a country in transition; from the rule by apartheid to a non-racial, non-sexist democratic society. Two years ago, De Klerk announced that apartheid was morally wrong, a heresy, and was politically and economically unworkable. He further declared his intention to enter into constitutional negotiations with the African National Congress and other liberation movements. This culminated in the formation of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa.

Keeping in mind De Klerk's complicity in creating the present hostile environment for "negotiations", a topic deserving of an article to itself (see footnote), the question raised here is WHAT ROLE WILL WOMEN PLAY IN THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING OF THE COUNTRY? A legitimate question; by virtue of the fact that the present legal status of women in South Africa has remained in the Stone Age.

African women in South Africa are oppressed by the custom and tradition of a patriarchal African society and by apartheid rule. Under South African law, the woman is a perpetual minor. She remains subject to the authority of men regardless of her age or marital status. South African women cannot own property in their own right, inherit, act as guardian for their children, sue or be sued, nor enter into any legal contract without male guardianship. These women without legal authority, ironically, are singlehandedly responsible for their families when their husbands leave for eleven months at a time due to the migrant labour system. Faced with the daily trials and tribulations of the economic and political injustices of the apartheid system, she must sustain her family. She must feed them, and without indoor plumbing, she must fetch water for cooking, laundry and bathing. The South African woman's life is one everlasting chain of hard labour, struggle and poverty.

Poverty in South Africa fits into four components: gender, race, geographic demography and age. The Black South African woman's status encompasses all four components. Furthermore, women are disadvantaged by illiteracy, which renders them even less employable. Over six million adults in South Africa are illiterate, a large proportion of them being women. If because of the financial constraints imposed by the apartheid system, a choice has to be made between educating a son or a daughter, preference is given to the son.

Despite this, South African women have demonstrated remarkable courage, determination, and resilience as they wage their three-pronged struggle against RACISM, SEXISM AND CLASSISM in terms of economic oppression. Unfortunately, the plight of South African women is not unique to her, but also that of her contemporaries in Southern Africa as a whole. The stories of the struggle of the women of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Angola, Malawi, Botswana and ecetera, bear the same testimony to the oppression of their sisters in South Africa. From women

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1. See "Violence Threatens Constitutional Negotiations" and "Judge Exposes South African Police" in Southern Africa, April '92, Nat.Namibia Concerns 303-8302774



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GCABASHE - South Africa's Women-cont.

like Zimbabwe's Mbuya Nehanda who in the 1800's rallied her people to resist and led the struggle against the colonialists, to the women of Zambia today, who despite severe criticism have organized a new lobby group called the National Women's Lobby to increase the involvement of women in politics and in all other levels the decision-making process in Zambia.

The legacy of the struggle of South African women began even as far back as the Wars of Resistance of 1652-1902. Queen Nonesi of the Thembus, and Chieftainess Madinoga, led their people in heroic struggle against the colonialist invaders by fearlessly challenging their authority.

One of the founding members of the ANC was actually also a woman, Charlotte Maxeke, who led women in the anti-pass campaign, another burdensome and inhumanely oppressive apartheid law. These actions of women in the struggle against apartheid led to the formation of the ANC's Women's League (1918), which would serve as the vehicle for women to participate within the ANC in the

struggle against white settler colonialism. Since then, despite the handicap of being female in a male-dominated society, the women of South Africa have continued in the struggle.

Of great significance to the roots of the anti-apartheid struggle, is the passive resistance of African women against curfew regulations in the Transvaal in 1932. In 1956, tens of thousands of South African women peacefully took to the streets of Cato Manor, protesting the Pass Laws. The world was horrified when the police responded with force, wounding some women, and leaving three dead.

That same year, 1956, twenty thousand women from all walks of life, teachers, nurses, doctors, and rural women (some with children on their backs), marched on the South African capitol, Pretoria, to resist the degrading law to also extend pass books to women. The day before the march, the "government" quickly passed a law through Parliament that banned processions. Since a procession was defined as a continuous train of persons, the women divided themselves up into groups, leaving spaces between the groups. The police had been outwitted. The march was a success!

South African women's battle for even simple basic equality, unfortunately, even rages on today. As early as 1955, women of the ANC had insisted that their concerns become part of the organization's Freedom Charter. In 1992, there is a great need for a comprehensive program of education and training of women, coupled with an absolute revision of laws applying to women. Special attention will have to be paid to Black women in townships, squatter settlements and rural areas who have born the greatest bane of this discrimination. Health, employment and retirement laws must be revised, especially in terms of women's special needs like maternity benefits. Maternity benefits must be guaranteed under the Constitution. South African women still earn pay below the poverty line, even though the sustenance of South Africa literally rests on their backs.

In South Africa today, women from different political parties and organizations are engaged in the campaign for a charter of women's rights for all women in the country. It is ludicrous that, despite the contributions of women to the struggle for liberation and South Africa's transition process, there is no woman representative in CODESA, i.e. the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. This fact so exemplifies the status of women in South Africa in the 1990's.

South African women want to be active participants in the CODESA discussions. The ANC National Working Committee, in response to efforts by the ANC Women's League, is proposing to CODESA, the formation of a standing gender advisory committee. Also, a quota system was formally introduced at the 48th ANC National Conference in July of 1991 by which women should comprise 30% of all structures, departments and appointments. All of this, however, remains to be fully implemented.

Undoubtedly, South Africa's transition to a true democracy has only begun. And so also has the women's struggle for a society where all shall have equal

(CONTINUED NEXT PAGE)

Wathinta abafazi (You, the "government", have touched the women.)

Wathinta imbokodo (You have dislodged a boulder.)

Uzokufa! (The boulder will crush you!)

(A Note About the Author: Tande Lutuli Gcabashe is internationally known as an anti-apartheid activist, and is the daughter of former ANC President and Nobe Peace Prize Winner Albert Lutuli. She has been an on-going inspiration to persons of all ethnicities in anti-apartheid work, and across gender.)

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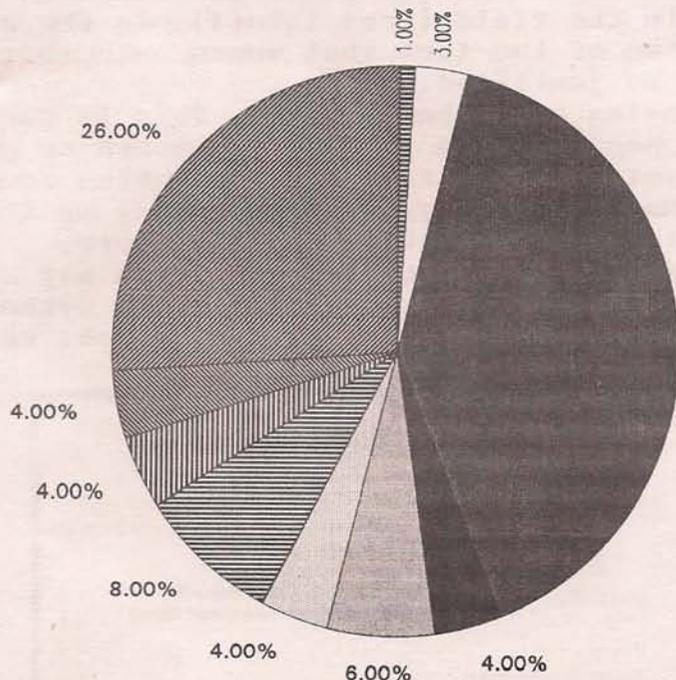
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Mali Women at Work

By AMINATA KONATÉ, B.S., Chemistry
a Mali Woman

A Typical Day's Work



- 4:45AM - 5:00 wake-up, shower & breakfast (1%)
- 5:00AM - 5:30 travel to fields (3%)
- 5:30 - 3:00PM work in field (40%)
- 3:00PM - 4:00 gather wood & travel home (4%)
- 4:00PM - 5:30 pound wheat (6%)
- 5:30PM - 6:30 fetch water (4%)
- 6:30PM - 8:30 cook meals (8%)
- 8:30PM - 9:30 household & children (4%)
- 9:30 PM - 10:30 children's bedtime routine (4%)
- 10:30PM - 4:45 mother sleeps (26%)

* Graphic Design by Jennifer Freeman

From the above graphic, one may clearly see that the work schedule of the Mali woman is quite intensive. **WOMEN DO HAVE FULL WORK DAYS!!!**

Knowing that agriculture is essentially practiced by women in many areas of Africa, it follows that women should be assisted in their agricultural efforts, rather than to be ignored. If one wants to talk about food production in Africa, one would need to mention women and their role. Usually, they're not mentioned at all, or just superficially. A major problem in this re-

gard is that usually men are at the head of such organizations that relate to agricultural problems. We are only dealing here with the very old and familiar problem of male domination.

Mali women have always contributed to agriculture and to the raising of cattle. And this is not merely working the family plot. Mali women are also involved in commercial agriculture for export. And women do the so called man's work too, with pickaxe or whatever.

There are certain kinds of farming in Mali that are considered to be "women's work". This includes growing vegetables,
(CONTINUED NEXT PAGE)

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rice, peanuts or fonio. In addition, certain products of national or even international importance, such as saumbala or kauté, are produced solely by Mali women. Women also produce soaps from the ashes of the gardenia plant.

Women are also responsible for transportation labors. Fetching water and wood are strictly her areas. But, in certain vicinities, she is responsible also for the transportation of the farming products. One can see her walking and carry heavy bags full of groceries they will sell at the market. The women are not allowed to use donkeys or bicycles or other means of transportation in certain parts of Mali, West Africa.

Women are also active in Art. Women produce handcraft materials from canvases, make pottery and produce materials for the building of houses. In urban areas, women also work outside the home. They want to be considered as something more than what they have been considered in the past. In the future, more women will be lawyers, doctors, engineers, etc.

Very early, Mali women moved into the areas of health and education. Now, they also work in factories. So, nowadays, women learn how to overcome the same problems that men deal with. Their successes show that they are far from being inferior in any way. And these walls that separated men and women are being put down right now in Mali. There are still men who believe, though, that educated women are poison.

In an underdeveloped country, it becomes necessary that both husband and wife help, share and assist one another in all areas; taking care of the children, financial burdens. This kind of coordination, due to traditional attitudes towards women, is already a difficult feat in a monogamous household. Imagine the complexities in a polygamous household.

Women must know and become aware that they are partly responsible for the amelioration of their destiny. Most problems whose solutions depend upon the transformation of social and cultural structures, depend upon relationships between men and women. It is in our domain and reach. Polygamy was justified in the past, due to the need for people to work in the field (free labor!). In the urban areas, polygamy is justified in the name of the fact that women outnumber the men. But all this needs more substance to be justified.

In Mali, women appear essentially as having a "motherly role". This is due to tradition and religious belief. This must needs change if Mali women are to participate in the nation and in economic development at the decision-making level.

Women are more visible in politics in Mali these days. The Secretary of State in Social Affairs is a woman. There are also women deputies and ministers.

We must find a way in Mali where relationships between men and women may add to their mutual flourishing. In Mali, women have always been cited. In mythology she dominated by her wisdom. She governed secret societies. We Mali women, we have power. We need to be efficient and effective with it.

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