

# Attitudes towards feminism among women in the ANC, 1950–1990: A theoretical re-interpretation



By Zine Magubane

## Introduction

In 1982 an unnamed ANC member said the following in *Voice of Women: A Quarterly Magazine of the ANC Women's Section*: 'I am a woman, a worker, and I am black. Therefore I must fight for my freedom on three fronts. I believe we must fight the greater evil, apartheid, first. Ours is a national liberation struggle and our battle to win equal rights [as women] must be fought within this arena.'<sup>1</sup> The actions of women in the ANC have 'not been studied on their own terms or for their own significance'.<sup>2</sup> As a result, scholars have been unable to fully 'comprehend the priorities of women in a national liberation struggle'.<sup>3</sup> The events that I analyse in this chapter address the following misconceptions about women's activism in the ANC:

- That their decision to pursue their aims for gender equity within the parameters of the anti-apartheid struggle, rather than develop an autonomous feminist movement, represented their failure to develop an appropriate feminist consciousness or indicated a fundamental hostility to feminism.
- That their decision to use motherhood as a motivation for social activism and cross-race coalition building represented an essentially conservative and anti-feminist viewpoint that failed to appreciate the differences between women.
- That they failed to recognise or deal with sexist or patriarchal attitudes at the household level or as expressed by men in the national liberation and trade union movements; and further that the sexism of men in the liberation movement stunted women's radicalism and activism.

1 'Consolidate Our Gains!' *VOW*, 4th Quarter, 1982, 1.

2 Nomboniso Gasa, 'Feminisms, Motherisms, Patriarchies and Women's Voices in the 1950s', in Nomboniso Gasa, ed., *They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers: Women in South African History* (Pretoria: HSRC Press, 2007), 211.

3 Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter, 'We Opened the Road for You: You Must Go Forward: ANC Women's Struggles, 1912–1982', *Feminist Review*, 12 (1982), 14.

The chapter explains why many women who supported the ANC in the 1980s prioritised the struggle for national liberation over the struggle for women's emancipation and why 'motherism' became such an important mobilisation strategy. The final section examines whether and in what form ANC women addressed sexism within their own families and communities as well as in the national liberation struggle. It asks whether or not ANC women articulated a knowledge of sexism within these arenas; how they interpreted and explained sexism; and what type of future society they envisioned building. It also assesses what impact the presence of women had on the national liberation struggle. Specifically, it asks, did women tend to become more conservative when they entered the national liberation struggle? Did they tend to become radicalised? What impact did their attitudes have on the course and trajectory of the national liberation struggle?

In order to do this, the analysis begins in the 1950s when women established organisations like the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) and the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) and began to strongly protest against the apartheid state's policies. The events of the 1950s impacted on the struggles of the 1980s in a variety of different ways. First, the 1980s marked historic 30-year anniversaries for the establishment of FEDSAW, the historic women's anti-pass demonstration in Pretoria, and the Defiance Campaign. Activists were inspired by this history. Ruth Mompati took the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the 1956 anti-pass protest to remark that: 'For the oppressed women of South Africa to achieve their emancipation, their equality, they have to fight for the freedom and dignity of their people. The fight for national liberation is the prerequisite for women's emancipation.'<sup>4</sup> The 1950s protests helped to give the new organisations guidance with respect to organising strategy. As one of the many pamphlets produced in the 1980s to commemorate the 1950s put it: 'Inside South Africa the traditions, the policies and the experience of FEDSAW are alive and influential.'<sup>5</sup> The fact that FEDSAW veteran Dora Tamana, then in her eighties, opened the proceedings of the United Women's Organisation (UWO) which was formed in 1981, illustrates the fact that as 'the unbroken history of struggle was uncovered and became familiar to this new generation of women, the appeal and relevance of the ideas of their mothers became increasingly popular'.<sup>6</sup> Both the UWO, largely based in Cape Town, and the Federation of South African Women, centred in Johannesburg 'deliberately took up the mantle of the FEDSAW of the 1950s'.<sup>7</sup> The UWO was a federation of women's groups, both white and black; FEDSAW was an individual membership organisation. During the celebrations marking FEDSAW's 30th anniversary and the release of Dorothy Nyembe from prison after 15 years, the UWO and the Women's Front organised a joint anniversary rally where 'old and new generations of resistance came together' and 'struggles and lessons recalled from the

4 ANC, *Apartheid – You shall be Crushed: Women's Fight against Apartheid* (London: ANC, 1981), 5.

5 ANC, *Women Organised: A FEDSAW Commemorative Pamphlet* (London: ANC, 1989), 16.

6 *Ibid.*, 14.

7 Elaine Unterhalter, 'Women in Struggle: South Africa', *Third World Quarterly*, 5, 4 (1983), 892.

past gave inspiration and direction for the future'.<sup>8</sup> As Leila Patel, a member of the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), explained:

In the late 1970s in the major centres in the country, small groups of African women could once again be seen at funerals and political gatherings dressed in the black and green uniforms of the FEDSAW. For the first time in almost 20 years, the FEDSAW was becoming visible. The symbolism of historical tradition and the link with the beginnings of a women's movement has given impetus and direction to contemporary initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

Second, women who had been active in the seminal campaigns and organisations of the 1950s helped to establish new organisations in the 1980s. A number of women's organisations sprang up during the 1980s (e.g. the United Women's Organisation in 1981; the Vaal Women's Organisation in 1983; the Lamontville Women's Group in 1983; the South African Domestic Workers' Association in 1986; the United Women's Congress in 1986,<sup>10</sup> and the UDF Women's Congress in 1987). These organisations affiliated to the major groupings within the anti-apartheid movement which themselves had emerged during the 1980s (e.g. the United Democratic Front in 1983; the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985; and the National Education Crisis Committee in 1986). According to Leila Patel 'many women who were trained by their experience in the FEDSAW [played] a part in these new organisations'.<sup>11</sup> The UWO was initiated by eight women who had been involved in the FEDSAW in the 1950s. Tsebanang Bagaetsho, an executive member of FEDTRAW and the UDF and one of FEDTRAW's founders recalled:

We called ourselves Women's Federation of South Africa, even if we were only in the Transvaal, basically because we wanted to take the form and feature, the method of organising of the old Federation of South African Women. There are women who were active in the 1950s. Originally they were the first people who started it jointly with other women. They are still there giving guidance to the new generations. And they are still very active.<sup>12</sup>

Frances Baard gave a similar explanation of the role she played in FEDTRAW:

At this conference of the UDF in Port Elizabeth, we happened to meet a lot of women ... from the affiliated organisations, from the trade union movement, from the civics, the church organisations, the UWO [United Women's Organisation] and so forth. We called these women together to speak to them. They were very keen that we should form an organisation of women, a national organisation. And they decided that they were going

8 'Organising to Resist Oppression', *Malibongwe: ANC Women's Section (UK) Newsletter*, 1984, 3.

9 Leila Patel, 'South African Women's Struggles in the 1980s', *Agenda*, 2 (1988), 31.

10 At the urging of the UDF, the UWO amalgamated with the Women's Front (WF) which was a small group of township-based women, to become the United Women's Congress (UWCO) on 22 March 1986.

11 Patel, 'South African Women's Struggles', 31.

12 'Women Fight State of Emergency', *Sechaba*, April 1987, 30.

to get all the women who were there, call all the women together after they have reported to their different places and the different organisations where they come from, and in some time to come they'll call a conference of the women. Then they'll have a national executive and so on, like the Federation used to be. But whether we'll call it a Federation ... we are just going to see what they think. We are already arranging for that conference, it will be a very great thing!<sup>13</sup>

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, chairperson of the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW), gave a very similar explanation:

In the 1950s and 1960s, women like Dorothy Nyembe, Gladys Manzi, and Fatima Meer led women's resistance. These fearless women were at the forefront of struggles waged by the women of FEDSAW ... These women continue up to this day to be the light of our newfound democracy. They have dedicated their lives to the struggle. In the 1980s, when NOW was being formed, we were advised to go see Gladys Manzi, who was then living under a banning order. At great risk to her life, Gladys took us in and told us about FEDSAW and how women were organised into the ANC in the 1950s and 1960s. NOW was inspired by the experiences of women like Gladys, Dorothy Zihlangu, and Abertina Sisulu among others ... It was this rich history of resistance that inspired us to organise women in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, when it came to analysing the relationship between the national question and the gender question, the experiences of FEDSAW and the ANCWL provided important lessons for NOW, the UWO and FEDTRAW. Because the historic anti-pass protest of 1956 'fundamentally changed the position of women within the liberation movement', 1980s activists often looked back to the 1950s to answer the question 'whether women should fight against oppression and violence from men or from the apartheid state'.<sup>15</sup>

The influence of FEDSAW can be seen most clearly in its analyses of the interconnections between gender, race, and class oppression. As *Women Organised: A FEDSAW Commemorative Pamphlet* explained:

In South Africa African women, the most vulnerable and deprived of all groups within the apartheid state, have been forced to embark on a road that takes them beyond their own specific oppression. The struggle of South African women for recognition as equal citizens with equal opportunities is primarily the struggle against apartheid, for national liberation. Nor is it a question of putting one first, then taking up the others. There can be no change in the fundamental position of women, in their social and political

13 Frances Baard, *My Spirit is Not Banned* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), 87–8.

14 Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, 'What Price for Freedom?: Testimony and the Natal Organisation of Women', *Agenda*, 19 (1998), 62.

15 Unterhalter, 'Women in Struggle', 893.

status, without the defeat of apartheid. But apartheid will not be defeated if half the people – the women – are constrained from playing their full role in the national liberation movement.<sup>16</sup>

An ANC-authored statement delivered at the World Conference for the UN Decade for Women in Copenhagen in 1980 determined that:

With all the disabilities and devastating effects of apartheid on the status of women ... those most oppressed of the oppressed have never lost sight of the fact that meaningful change for women cannot be forthcoming through reform but only through the total destruction of the apartheid system. Thus the common exploitation and oppression of men and women on the basis of colour has led to a combined fight against the system instead of a battle of women against men for 'women's rights'. While women desire their personal liberation, they see that as part of the total liberation movement.<sup>17</sup>

- Thus, I will explore in further depth below three key threads connecting activism in the 1950s to that of the 1980s:
- The emphasis placed on fighting for women's emancipation within, rather than autonomous from, the national liberation struggle.
- The manner in which gender concerns were seen as family issues and thus helped to politicise people around bread and butter issues.
- The focus on producing a gendered construction of what it meant to be a worker and a citizen.

## Feminism and national liberation: A critique of the dominant paradigm

Women in the FEDTRAW and other likeminded organisations strongly believed that 'the Federation was not a failure. Indeed, it is an important part of their pre-history – an important "root"'.<sup>18</sup> Sibongile Mthembu, a participant in the 1976 Soweto uprising who spent four years in prison, was interviewed by author Beata Lipman in 1984. She expressed her opinion on the matter thus:

At the moment it's more important for me to fight for political rights as a black person ... thereafter I might fight for my rights as a woman. But sometimes I think the two wars should go together ... we have no option but to face the political struggle ... The way I see it, at the present moment all blacks in South Africa, both men and women, have come together; and they want to fight this whole system as it is.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> ANC, *Women Organised*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> African National Congress, *Women: March to Freedom* (London: ANC, 1987), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Patel, 'South African Women's Struggles', 31.

<sup>19</sup> Beata Lipman, *We Make Freedom: Women in South Africa* (London: Pandora Press, 1984), 98.

Amanda Kwadi, an executive member of the FEDTRAW and the UDF echoed these views when she said:

To appreciate the type of demands made by women in South Africa, the context needs to be properly understood. We are waging a struggle different from that in the United States and Western Europe. Ours is for national liberation and the type of demands found in the Freedom Charter reflect this. The vote is denied to black South Africans. That is so basic a right that it is taken for granted by Western European and United States feminists. Without the vote we do not control our own country, let alone have rights as women. That is why many of our demands are ones for which we struggle shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk.

Since the 1913 women's march to the Bloemfontein administrative offices to protest against the Land Act, women have waged a number of campaigns. Many of the demands of the Women's Charter and a separate document, the Women's Demands for the Freedom Charter, were ultimately incorporated into the Freedom Charter. The demands of the Freedom Charter have not yet been met. The struggle for women's emancipation in South Africa was inseparable from the struggle for national liberation, the struggle to realise the demands of the Freedom Charter.<sup>20</sup>

The ANC women's secretariat Mavis Nhlapo firmly stated: 'In our society women have never made the call for the recognition of their rights as women, but always put the aspirations of the whole African and other oppressed people of our country first.'<sup>21</sup> Despite the inspiration it provided to many women's groups in the 1980s, a number of well-regarded texts on women's struggles in South Africa are very critical of FEDSAW. Julia Wells, for example, describes black women's resistance to the pass laws in the 1950s as 'centred on conservative social goals – to retain a known social order rather than to create a new one'.<sup>22</sup> Cherryl Walker, likewise, argued in *Women and Resistance in Southern Africa*, that 'the formal commitment to women's emancipation was overshadowed by practices and ideas that could only be described as patriarchal'.<sup>23</sup> Their criticism of FEDSAW centres on the fact that 'the ideological framework within which women were mobilised was generated by nationalism rather than feminism'.<sup>24</sup> Women who chose to draw on FEDSAW's legacy in the 1980s were criticised in similar ways. Beall, et al., for example, write that:

[T]he way in which political organisations have conceptualised women's oppression and their role in the struggle has limitations. This has implications for the way in which women participate in the struggle, for the way in which

20 ANC, *Women: March to Freedom*, 6.

21 P. Seidman, "No Freedom without the Women": Mobilization and Gender in South Africa, 1970–1992, *Signs*, 18, 2 (Winter 1993), 296.

22 Julia C. Wells, *We now Demand! The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993), 139.

23 Cherryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in Southern Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), xvii.

24 Shireen Hassim, *Women's Organisations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 28.

women's interests and needs are addressed in the course of struggle, and for development policy in a 'post-apartheid' future ... In strategic terms... women's concerns [are] subordinated to, rather than included *as part of*, struggles to achieve socialism in SA. Where the emphasis is on national liberation, women's struggles are likewise subsumed.<sup>25</sup>

These arguments, like many others written within this ideological vein, counterpose feminism and nationalism. They assume that nationalist movements, because they are male dominated, are hostile to feminism and that women in nationalist movements must choose between pursuing nationalist aims and submitting to patriarchy, or forming what Hassim calls an 'autonomous feminist movement'.<sup>26</sup> However, these arguments miss the fact that feminism and national liberation are context-specific terms. We cannot speak of feminism or nationalism in the singular. Rather, we must talk in terms of nationalisms and feminisms. As Deborah Gaitskell and Elaine Unterhalter explain:

The concept of nation has a different content according to the way in which the social forces are aligned at any particular moment and the nature of the prevailing ideologies. Far from being an incontrovertible given, 'nation' is one of the most elastic of concepts. This is particularly clear in the case of South Africa. Very different notions of nation have been developed by the dominant classes on the one hand and the dominated on the other.<sup>27</sup>

Anne McClintock is, likewise, correct in her insistence that 'there is not only one feminism'.<sup>28</sup> Just as feminism is not the monopoly of any one class, 'it is not the monopoly of any one national, ethnic, or racial group'.<sup>29</sup> According to Mohanty, there is a strong feminist tradition among black American, black British, and Caribbean women. These women 'have always engaged with feminism, even if the label has been rejected in a number of instances'.<sup>30</sup> ANC member Phyllis Jordan, in a 1984 discussion article in *Sechaba*, disagreed with what she called the 'reactionary and racist' tendencies within bourgeois feminism. Nevertheless, she argued that 'the reactionary nature of white bourgeois feminism should not be allowed to detract from the sound principles of women's emancipation, any more than Botha's calling himself a 'nationalist' tarnishes the image of nationalism in general'.<sup>31</sup>

25 Jo Beall, Shireen Hassim and Alison Todes, 'A Bit on the Side'? Gender Struggles in the Politics of Transformation in South Africa, *Feminist Review*, 33 (Autumn 1989), 30.

26 Hassim, *Women's Organisations*, 82.

27 Deborah Gaitskell and Elaine Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress', in Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds, *Woman-Nation-State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 58.

28 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (London: Routledge, 1995), 384.

29 Tessa Marcus, 'The Women's Question and National Liberation in South Africa', in Maria van Diepen, ed., *The National Question in South Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1988), 102.

30 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke, 2003), 50.

31 Phyllis Jordan, 'Black Women and National Liberation', *Sechaba*, December 1984, 14.

In the 1980s, many black activist women drew on the growing canon of feminist writing by and about women of colour. As Gertrude Fester, a member of the United Women's Organisation (UWO) and the UDF explained in a 1989 interview with Diana Russell: 'We tried to get hold of resources written by Third World women like *Feminism in the Third World* and *National Struggles in the Third World*, which were compiled by a number of Third World women writers.'<sup>32</sup> Therefore, rather than assume as Walker, Hassim and Wells do, that certain women have failed to achieve the proper level of consciousness I propose, instead, that we ask what type of consciousness developed in response to the situations that women found themselves in. As Mohanty explains:

Third World women's writings on feminism have consistently focused on the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism ... In addition, they have insisted on the complex interrelationships between feminist, anti-racist, and nationalist struggles.<sup>33</sup>

Rather than dismiss these women as being hopelessly deluded by their own collusion with the patriarchs of the national liberation struggle, as other scholars have done, we should instead try to understand how the women in question conceptualise the multitude of issues and challenges they are facing. Given their material circumstances, how did they define the relationship between women's emancipation and national liberation? What, for example, might have motivated Frene Ginwala to say 'we must start now (if we have not started) to free ourselves from "male chauvinism" and its counterpart "feminism"'?<sup>34</sup>

To begin with, we must take careful note of how Kwadi, for example, positions her own struggle for gender emancipation with respect to the struggles waged by women in Europe and North America. Oftentimes when black South African women appeared to be rejecting feminism or North American and/or European theoretical models, their choice to do so was depicted as stemming from a knee-jerk rejection of feminism on the grounds that it was 'white' or 'western' rather than reflecting their careful analysis of the different political, social and economic situations faced by women in Europe and America versus those faced by women in South Africa. For example, Beall et al. argue that:

the tendency within national liberation movements to equate feminism with western bourgeois feminism results in a dismissal of the insights of feminism as being irrelevant to Third World women ... this has stultified the debate around women's oppression in South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

32 Diana E.H. Russell, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 250.

33 Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 52.

34 Frene Ginwala, 'ANC Women: Their Strength in the Struggle', *Work in Progress*, 45 (1986), 10–11.

35 Beall et al., 'A Bit on the Side?', 33.



Hassim, likewise, argues that:

The extent to which feminist activists were able to harness and develop feminist consciousness was constrained by the attitude of the nationalist movement toward this project. From at least the 1970s feminism had an uneasy status within the national liberation movement. On the one hand, it was seen as an ideology primarily articulated by white (academic) Western women. Its perceived intellectual roots in the North were seen to limit its applicability to the experiences of black women in the highly exceptional circumstances of apartheid. Although feminism was by no means a homogenous set of ideas or political prescriptions, and was certainly not articulated as homogeneous within South Africa, it was treated as such by the ANC.<sup>36</sup>

If we read the statements of Ginwala and Kwadi carefully, however, we can appreciate that two tendencies are at play. First, it is not African women who should bear the blame for having originally equated ‘feminism’ with western bourgeois feminism. Rather, it has much more often been the case that women and men who have been part of the western bourgeois feminist tradition have made themselves the privileged and exclusive subject of these discourses. In other words, they have tended to extrapolate and generalise from their own experiences and social locations. Instead of recognising those experiences and social locations as particular and specific, they have tended to universalise and thus render their particular experiences normative. The critique that bell hooks made of white American feminist authors applies equally well in the South African case. As hooks so aptly puts it:

In most of their writing, the white American woman’s experience is made synonymous with *the* American woman’s experience ... The force that allows white feminist authors to make no reference to racial identity in their books about ‘women’ that are in actuality about white women is the same one that would compel any author writing exclusively on black women to refer explicitly to their racial identity. That force is racism. In a racially imperialist nation such as ours, it is the dominant race that reserves for itself the luxury of dismissing racial identity while the oppressed race is made daily aware of their racial identity. It is the dominant race that can make it seem that their experience is representative.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, Hettie V, an Afrikaner feminist and activist interviewed by the author Diana Russell in 1989, agreed that, ‘a lot of the criticisms of us – like that we were too western – were valid because we took feminism straight from America and Europe and fought for the same things here’.<sup>38</sup> It was for these reasons an unnamed ANCWL

36 Hassim, *Women’s Organisations*, 29.

37 bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 138.

38 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 287.

member told *Outwrite Magazine* that ‘for a lot of our comrades, feminism has got a negative, western feminist context’.<sup>39</sup> Thus, African women should not be faulted for their scepticism and hesitancy. They are not rejecting feminism for its ‘western-ness’ per se, but rather for how its adherents have failed to formulate feminism in ways that do not reinforce what Dyer calls the normalising discourse of whiteness or, more simply, ‘the equation of being white with being human’.<sup>40</sup>

The manner in which white women were given the vote is instructive here. According to Phyllis Jordan, ‘traditionalist attitudes and opposition to feminism in South Africa have in one sense acquired legitimacy because of the history of the white suffragette movement in our country. Historically this movement has been linked to reactionary and racist causes, which have in a way tarnished the very issue of women’s rights’.<sup>41</sup> In the 1930s Hertzog, the nationalist premier, campaigned for white women to be given the vote because their votes would dilute the power of the black vote in the Cape. White women were thus enfranchised by means of a racially exclusive Bill that defined ‘woman’ as a person of ‘wholly European parentage, extraction or descent’.<sup>42</sup> As a result, ‘the female political nation in South Africa was constituted in racially exclusive terms’.<sup>43</sup> A similar process can be identified when we analyse how white women were incorporated into the South African labour market after World War II. According to Clark, in the post-war period ‘South African officials sought to increase factory production without upsetting the labour status quo that reserved skilled jobs for whites and kept Africans, no matter their job, classified as temporary and unskilled. *White women would provide the solution to South Africa’s dilemma*’ [italics mine].<sup>44</sup> White women were thus able to make strides in the labour market because enabling them to do so would reinforce and support the system of racial hierarchy.

When we look at the strands of feminist discourse in South Africa we can identify a process of mutual reinforcement whereby feminist scholarship produced by privileged women in the dominant racial group reinforced the legal fictions of apartheid in so much as both discourses define ‘woman’ in racially exclusive terms. In a speech in New York in January of 1984, E.S. Reddy, the UN assistant secretary general, made the point: ‘If they were not *black* women of South Africa, there would be an outrage in the world. The major governments would be denouncing apartheid and imposing sanctions. But in this case, we have occasional condemnations, but little action.’<sup>45</sup> Black women, therefore, could not hope to follow the same path to liberation (legally or ideologically) as white woman had. They had to be wary of uncritically adopting discourses and ideologies about the essential nature of female emancipation that emanated from what was essentially a racist political and economic context. As Newman explains:

39 ‘ANC Women Speak’, *Outwrite: Women’s Newspaper*, 41, November 1985, 10.

40 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge 1997), 9.

41 Jordan, ‘Black Women and National Liberation’, 14.

42 Gaitskell and Unterhalter, ‘Mothers of the Nation’, 64.

43 Ibid.

44 Nancy Clark, ‘Gendering Production in Wartime South Africa’, *American Historical Review* (October 2001), 1185.

45 ANC, *1984: Year of South African Women* (New York: ANC, 1984), 9.

[R]acism was not just an unfortunate sideshow in the performances of feminist theory. Rather it was centre stage: an integral, constitutive element in feminism's overall understanding of citizenship, democracy, political self-possession, and equality. Feminism offered race-specific ideas about gender, citizenship, social development and racial progress that enabled white women to fashion moral arguments for altering (white) 'woman's nature' and for bringing about radical change in gender relations, not just among whites but also between whites and those they deemed primitives.<sup>46</sup>

Helen Joseph underscored this point when she remarked that:

The fight for women's rights in South Africa really has been conducted *by* white women *for* white women. For example, Olive Schreiner turned her back on the League of Women Voters because they were only fighting for the rights of white women. The Business and Profession Women's League was really confined to white women from its inception. I withdrew from it for that reason.<sup>47</sup>

Women in the ANC recognised that living in a racist society fundamentally impacts not only their experiences as women but also the content of their struggle. They were well aware that many of the gains that white women had made with regard to gender equality had been granted to them in order to further entrench white supremacy. As Maggie Resha put it, 'white women were the ones to pull the noose to strangle members of their own sex who, except for their skin colour, shared so much with them'.<sup>48</sup> White feminists have tended, however, to try to ignore the fact that the gains they had made as women were often made possible because they occurred in the context of what we might term white 'nationalist' struggles. As Mohanty so aptly explains, 'feminist historians focus on "gender" as the sole basis of struggle (the feminist part) and omit any discussion of the racial consolidation of the struggle (the white part)'.<sup>49</sup> Mohanty thus warns us against the error of thinking about women as an 'already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location, or contradictions'.<sup>50</sup>

The tendency to think of women as a homogenous group opens up certain types of feminist analysis to yet another error that Mohanty identifies. As she explains, 'western feminists who sometimes cast Third World women in terms of "ourselves undressed" all construct themselves as the normative referent in such a binary analytic'.<sup>51</sup> The following quote by Walker, wherein she uses the white American feminist, Betty Friedan, and the analytical construct of 'the problem that has no name' to describe the situation of African women is a typical example of this.

46 Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 183.

47 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 206.

48 Maggie Resha, *My Life in the Struggle* (London: South African Writers, 1991), 138.

49 Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 55.

50 *Ibid.*, 21.

51 *Ibid.*, 22.

Women's struggles against male domination, whether in their families, workplace, or political life, were for the most part private and riddled with ambiguity. Few would have acknowledged them as 'political'. These were struggles 'without a name', to adopt the phrase used by Betty Friedan to describe the roots of the contemporary women's movement in the United States.<sup>52</sup>

Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, is an analysis of the existential problems faced by relatively privileged and well-off married, suburban white American women who were seeking to escape the boredom and alienation of a suburban existence which consigned them to the private sphere and the world of children, home, and family. As Friedan herself says in the opening chapter of *The Feminine Mystique*, which bears the title 'The Problem that has No Name':

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the significant question – 'Is this all?'<sup>53</sup>

In her transposing of Friedan's theory and analytical concepts from America to South Africa, Walker assumes some essential similarities between women's material circumstances that are simply not there. First, it assumes that women live in suburbia with their husbands and children. In actual fact, however, large numbers of black women in apartheid South Africa had neither the economic means nor the political right to decide where and with whom they lived. For example, in 1972, ten years *after* Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and ten years *before* Walker published *Women and Resistance in South Africa* the magazine *Voice of Women*, published by the ANC women's section, reported that a growing number of black women were being forced to live in single-sex hostels and were classified as 'single' without regard for their marital status. Even when a married couple worked for the same employer, they could not live together unless no other accommodation was available. As soon as a space in a hostel opened up, however, either the husband or the wife would be forced to move there. This led to the unfathomable situation whereby hundreds of married African men and women were forced to live in singles hostels. As *VOW* explained:

In March 1972 two huge hostels in Alexandra township, each costing well over a million Rand, opened their steel doors and became the only place that 2,834 women and 2,642 men could call 'home'. Women and men live apart because they have been classified as single, although most of them are married and have children ... Wives live in one hostel, husbands in another,

52 Wells, *We now Demand*, 193.

53 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963), 11.

and children have to be farmed out to whoever will take them ...The regime's definition of single, as applied to Africans, is not guided by anything like marriage certificates or facts. A 'single' African woman, as distinguished from a spinster, is one who, because of the regime's restrictions, does not qualify to live in a particular area as a married woman with a family ... Whether or not she can produce a marriage certificate is irrelevant.<sup>54</sup>

It is these essential historical facts – the pass laws, migrant labour, residential segregation, political repression, and state violence – that give shape and texture to African women's political responses.

Thus, the way in which African women engaged the question of women's emancipation can be seen as having been profoundly conditioned by the manner in which apartheid and its laws (particularly around labour and mobility) produced them as *gendered* non-citizens. Indeed, the pass laws, influx control, and the industrial and agricultural labour markets relied on manipulating traditional gender categories like mother, widow, and wife in ways that supported black women's super-exploitation in the labour market and, further, entrenched the status of black people as a whole as non-citizens. We cannot even speak of concepts like the nuclear family, relations between the sexes, the institution of marriage, or women's reproductive role outside of the fundamental fact of life for African women – the brutality of the migrant labour system. It is impossible to understand patriarchy, gender subordination, and African women's responses to it without looking at how the migrant labour system shaped what it meant to be male or female, a mother or a father, and a wife or a husband for African people. As Marcus points out,

what the South African condition exposes is that it is not the family which is at the heart of women's oppression – although it is a very central site where their oppression is acted out – but rather it is the place of the family in social relations in general which is of particular importance to women's oppression. In other words, it is how women are placed in relation to social production, rather than reproduction, that is of primary importance.<sup>55</sup>

Hilda Bernstein made this observation as early as the 1950s when she wrote:

In the special language of apartheid, blacks are not ordinary human beings. They are labour units, who are productive or non-productive; who are temporary sojourners in towns even though they may spend their whole lives working there; or illegal immigrants within the borders of their own country; whose wives and children are superfluous appendages – non productive, the women being nothing more than adjuncts to the procreative capacity of the black male labour unit. Only through this process of de-humanisation is the application of inhuman laws possible. Migrant labour

54 'Life under Apartheid', *VOW: Special Issue on International Women's Year* (1976), 6.

55 Marcus, 'The Women's Question and National Liberation', 100.

exerts a powerful force on the lives of South African women. The system itself makes it virtually illegal for the majority of African women to live with their husbands, except during the annual two week holiday when migrant workers may go to visit their wives in the reserves. It makes a mockery of family life, cutting an impossible chasm between husband and wife.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the life story of Adeline Pholosi, who was interviewed by Beata Lipman in 1984, illustrates Bernstein's points precisely. According to Pholosi her marriage was adversely affected by apartheid policies, like the Bantu (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945, which dictated the conditions Africans had to meet to secure residence in an urban area. Her life illustrates the 'relentless invasion of an African woman's private life under apartheid'.<sup>57</sup> As she put it:

I was married by lobola to Mr Mohaka in 1960. I grew up in Soweto, so I'm a 'Section 10' person – I've a right to be here. They can't make me leave at the moment unless I take a foreign nationality. I'm a Christian and a believer, but I got married by tribal custom because I was afraid about this nationality business: Mr Mohaka is a Sotho – would I have had to leave straight off if I took his nationality? Now my parents were very upset that I did not get married properly, as a Christian should, but to this day we have not done so. It's even more important now than it was in 1960. He's a foreign passport holder, like someone from the Transkei or Bophuthatswana; and I'm still wanting my children to be South Africans. So, if after all these years, if I were to marry him by civil rights as my parents still wish (and he now does as well) I would have to carry a foreign passport too. That would mean I can't have a house; I won't have what I want. I don't like to stay in Lesotho, I like to stay in South Africa. We've been married 21 years and we've never had a house together ... It means I haven't got, really, a life with my husband. He sleeps in the mines – he's a clerk there, but there's no room for us there. If I want to go see him ... I must go to him to discuss where we can go and get the room outside the location, next to the mines ... My whole married life has been like this – we have never stayed together in 21 years.<sup>58</sup>

Given these facts it makes sense that women's protest actions 'tended to emphasise the destabilisation of African households rather than gender-based inequality within those households'.<sup>59</sup> When we consider the ways in which migrant labour and the pass system dislocated and destroyed families, it would have been perfectly understandable had African women aspired to 'an idealised nuclear family, in which family members

56 Hilda Bernstein, *For their Triumphs, for their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1975), 13.

57 United Nations, *The Plight of Black Women in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: UN, 1981), 10.

58 Lipman, *We Make Freedom*, 8–9.

59 Seidman, 'No Freedom', 295.

live together, and the husband's wage supports them all'.<sup>60</sup> To explore what actually happened requires us to understand the historical context within which women's ideas about family, gender, community and resistance developed.

## Reassessing the history of the Federation of South African Women

A major issue that needs to be clarified is: how did women in FEDSAW and like-minded activist networks understand the relationship between women's emancipation and the national liberation struggle? And, furthermore, based upon this understanding, how did they then choose to structure the relationships between the various progressive organisations, trade unions, etc.?

FEDSAW had an affiliate structure which was 'open to any organisation which had women as members (irrespective of whether they also had male members). For example, Congress of Democrats, the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the South African Indian Congress did not have women's sections but they were free to affiliate to the Federation – and did – because they had women members and supported the aims of the Federation'.<sup>61</sup> In the run-up to the first meeting, letters of invitation were sent to a wide variety of organisations, not all of which were strictly women's organisations. Thus, trade unions, the South African Coloured People's Organisation, the ANC, township vigilance associations, and the South African Congress of Democrats were all solicited. The letter described the envisioned organisation as one that would:

[B]uild and bring together in joint activity the various women's sections in the liberatory movements, and other women's organisations; participate in the struggles of the working and oppressed peoples for the removal of class and race discrimination and for full and equal citizen rights.<sup>62</sup>

According to Cheryl Walker, the ANC forced FEDSAW to adopt a particular organisational structure – that of an affiliate organisation – so that the ANC could better control its actions and make it adhere to an agenda that was more nationalist than feminist. As she put it:

The agenda for the FEDSAW was structurally, not just by choice of its members, submerged in that of the ANC; its structure made it that much more difficult for those struggles 'that have no name' to be identified and inserted in the agenda of liberation as legitimate political issues.<sup>63</sup>

60 Ibid., 301.

61 Jenny Schreiner, 'Forms of Organisation Adopted by the Federation of South African Women in the Western Cape', BA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1982, 80.

62 Cited in Ibid., 72.

63 Walker, *Women and Resistance*, xvii.

Walker makes a strong distinction between women who wanted FEDSAW to be an organisation that individual women could join and those who advocated that FEDSAW be an affiliate organisation – meaning that individual women joined organisations (like for example the ANCWL or the FCWU) and these organisations affiliated to FEDSAW. She suggests that women who were more committed to women's autonomy and a feminist agenda were the ones who supported individual membership whilst those who favoured an affiliate structure were less committed. She concludes that 'it is significant that one of the staunchest advocates of individual membership was Ray Alexander, a committed feminist'.<sup>64</sup>

The ANC was concerned, given the political conditions at the time, not to dissipate the energy and effectiveness of the national liberation struggle by allowing organisations to proliferate. However, the ANC did not want to structurally submerge FEDSAW so as to control it ideologically. Indeed, in her biography, *All My Life and All My Strength* Alexander explained the concerns of the ANC leadership in this regard:

Comrade Moses Kotane was anxious about us forming a women's organisation, so I went to see him to discuss the matter. It turned out that he was worried we would diminish the power of the ANC Women's League, but I explained that I felt that we would strengthen it in that we would all help one another, and he finally admitted that he was confident that I would lead the women in the right direction.<sup>65</sup>

In a letter dated 6 November 1954, Dora Tamana, the acting national secretary of FEDSAW, addressed the issue of how membership in FEDSAW should be structured – individual membership or affiliated bodies of national groups – and underscored the importance placed on working with the liberation movement:

We believe that the opposition to individual membership is due to a fear that if our organisation becomes a mass organisation, it will draw women away from the ANC and perhaps lead to divided loyalties. We do not think that there is any justification for this fear, but we might not be able to dispel it easily or quickly. It is only through our work that we shall be able to prove that we have no wish to compete with other organisations and that our sole aim is to strengthen all organisations in the fight for peace and liberation.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the strongest disputation of Walker's claim can be found in the autobiography of Helen Joseph, one of FEDSAW's founding members, wherein she explained:

There was not real support ... for individual membership and it was settled and written into the constitution that the FEDSAW would be composed of affiliated organisations or groups. Years later historians and researchers, some with a feminist bias, resenting the domination of the ANC, were to

64 Ibid.

65 Ray Alexander, *All My Life and All My Strength* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 79.

66 University of Witwatersrand Archives (hereafter Wits), FEDSAW Papers, FEDSAW Executive Correspondence, AD 11371/AD 1.1.



criticise this decision. My view was, and still is, that in the heavy and growing pressure of the times, the Federation could not have stood as a unitary women's organisation. It needed the strength of its affiliated organisations – particularly that of the Women's League of the African National Congress.<sup>67</sup>

Official organisational statements like the Women's Charter, a document that articulated the specific demands women put forward for inclusion in the Freedom Charter, seem to indicate that FEDSAW clearly indicated its desire to achieve its aims within the confines of the liberation struggle and its lack of interest in breaking away to form an autonomous women's organisation from its inception. As Helen Joseph explained, the Charter

reflected very clearly the direction of the thinking of the women of the Federation. The stress was on the struggle for liberation of men and women together. Separationist feminist liberation did not feature strongly beyond the call for the vote for women, election to state bodies, equal rights in marriage and guardianship, and equal work for equal pay.<sup>68</sup>

The sixth clause of the Women's Charter dealt specifically with the issue of the relationship between women's emancipation and national liberation. It stated that:

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.<sup>69</sup>

Ray Alexander, one of the founding members of FEDSAW, described herself as a committed feminist. As she put it:

Organising women workers [it] became clear to me that women workers are the most exploited of all the working class. And that they have to be freed from paternalism and from patriarchal attitudes, because what I really noticed in the homes [was] the way the husbands, some husbands, treated the women workers. [This] strengthened my idea that I must bring about what is now called 'genderism'. Or people call it 'feminism' or whatever you like to call it. But as far as I was concerned, women must be on an equal footing with men. They are the majority of the population and they have to see that they have the same rights as workers – to organise and also for opportunities. In factories, you had the man as foreman. And you had white women as forewomen – but not coloured women and not African women. Our union struggled and we got coloured and African women to become forewomen. And the men who obeyed the white women didn't want to obey

67 Helen Joseph, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph* (Johannesburg: A.D. Donker, 1986), 20.

68 *Ibid.*, 45.

69 Wits, FEDSAW Papers, Freedom Charter, AD1137/CC1.5.4.

their own women. And I had to speak to the men very strongly, tell them that they must obey women.<sup>70</sup>

If we look closely at Alexander's trade union work (particularly her work organising women in the FCWU and the Chemical Workers' Union) we see that even though she had very strong feminist commitments, she was very clear that the ways in which she organised women would be determined by the women's actual experiences, rather than by theoretical constructs. As she put it:

I was determined to have a child, because talking to the women workers, about the hardships, and the struggle that women have, I felt at times that I'm a fraud – I'm talking from what I read, and what I see, but not what I myself have experienced. The difficulties of pregnancy, the difficulties of having a baby, and nursing a baby.<sup>71</sup>

Alexander clearly understood that 'the demands for women's emancipation must be related to the actual conditions in the country at a particular time and the level of political struggle.'<sup>72</sup>

Her feminist commitments notwithstanding, it was because of her experience with the National Council of Women that Alexander became aware that simply because an organisation was an autonomous woman's organisation, this did not necessarily translate into being an effective advocate for working class and African women. As Schreiner explains:

Some left wing women, amongst them Ray Alexander, saw the need for another kind of women's organisation in Cape Town – one that would draw on grassroots working class women. Others felt that there was not room for another women's organisation in Cape Town at that stage. One ex-Communist Party of South Africa member felt that black women should be encouraged to join the National Council of Women and work through those structures. However, in retrospect she agreed that Ray Alexander and her supporters were correct in their assessment that working class women would not join the National Council of Women. *It was from Alexander's trade union work and work with working class people in a number of campaigns that she had the direct contact that would have enabled her to make this assessment* [italics mine].<sup>73</sup>

Alexander related the following incident that took place in the mid 1930s, which further underscores Schreiner's point:

I started to organise the Commercial Employees' Union. I contacted the National Council of Women and I got these women to understand the

70 Mayibuye Centre Archives, Belville, Ray Alexander, unpublished interview, 36.

71 Ibid., 34.

72 Patel, 'South African Women's Struggles', 34.

73 Schreiner, 'Forms of Organisation', 64.

terrible conditions of the shop assistants. And we did improve [conditions] and get shorter hours for them. But whilst being with the Commercial Employees Union, I walked one day in the street with Schubert, who was going to an industrial council meeting and wanted me to accompany him. I saw three girls – shop assistants from Fletcher’s and Cartwright’s. One was a shop steward, an Afrikaans girl, and the other two were members of the union. And I greeted them and they went to complain that I insulted them, because I was walking with that Kaffir when I greeted them ... They asked me to resign – I wouldn’t resign. And then the Party discussed it and they say that I’m really wasting my time, spending it organising shop assistants. I should devote my time to organising coloured and African workers.<sup>74</sup>

This brings me to the third major criticism of FEDSAW, mainly that its membership base was dominated by the ANCWL and, as a result, the nationalist agenda prevailed – even when that ideological stance stood in direct opposition to the professed aims and goals of women in the organisation. As Walker put it:

[T]he basis of the FEDSAW’s membership was the ANCWL, whose priorities and internal organisational commitments inevitably exerted enormous influence over the new women’s organisation. The space for women to raise and address issues of concern that fell outside the agenda of the national liberation movement was, as a result, that much more circumscribed.<sup>75</sup>

This critique demonstrates a lack of understanding of what led women to join FEDSAW, what types of issue tended to galvanise them into action, and the ways in which they tended to frame what we might think of as gender or feminist issues.

It is critical that we understand that there has always been a high degree of what Kuumba calls ‘gender integration’ in South African progressive organisations. Kimble and Unterhalter concur that ‘the widespread organisation of people by the ANC during the 1950s had drawn many women into the ANC’.<sup>76</sup> The Defiance Campaign in 1952, for example, is notable for the strong presence of women in protest and the ferocity with which they engaged in collective action. As Anne Mager explains:

The Defiance Campaign was strongly supported by the older activists within the ANC as well as by the ANC Women’s League. The Women’s League, led by the educated wives of prominent ANC leaders, had a powerful impact on women in the area. Women were counted in their hundreds as defiers at Peddie, Alice, King William’s Town, Stutterheim and Queenstown. Generally keener to take action than to speak, women’s voices were occasionally heard at rural meetings, albeit confining themselves to

74 Alexander, unpublished interview, 26.

75 Walker, *Women and Resistance*, xvii.

76 Kimble and Unterhalter, ‘We Opened the Road’, 24.

addressing their own gender. *Imvo* summed up the unusual support of women and clergy for the campaign: ‘Never before have the African clergy independently supported a national cause and never before have African women taken such an active part in national affairs as they have in the present campaign’.<sup>77</sup>

According to Kuumba, gender-integrated movements like that of the ANC, ‘engage women and men in overlapping movement structures and tasks to achieve common social transformational goals’.<sup>78</sup> Gender integrated movements are thus characterised by high levels of involvement of both women and men as participants and rank and file members. Frances Baard, a founding member of both FEDSAW and the ANCYL, described the nature of the relationship between the ANC and the ANCWL in these terms:

Us women, even when we did things, we never used to work by ourselves, because we were part of the ANC as a whole. We used to have our own meetings, just the women, and talk about what we wanted to do and how to do it. Then we would go to the general meeting and tell them, ‘Such and such a thing is so and so, and we want to do this and this’. And we would tell them exactly what we wanted to do to put this thing right. We would discuss it together at the general meeting and decide on it, and we would get the mandate from them. We couldn’t do things by ourselves; we had to work together so that everyone knew what we were going to do, and everyone agreed.<sup>79</sup>

In a 1986 interview with *Unity Magazine*, Thandi Gcabashe, daughter of Albert Luthuli, confirmed that, ‘the ANC was founded in 1912 and one of its founding members was a woman, Charlotte Maxeke, and since then, we have really been involved parallel, alongside male and female’.<sup>80</sup>

There was a tremendous amount of reciprocity and exchange between ANC organisational methods and political practices and those of FEDSAW and ANCWL. As a result, both FEDSAW and the ANCWL adopted the programme of Unity in Action which meant running campaigns in conjunction with other organisations, including many non-Congress groups. Rather than one organisation structurally constraining the organisational agenda and consciousness of another (as Walker claims) there was, in actuality, always a great deal of synergy between groups. As Frances Baard explained:

It is very hard to say the ANC did this or the Federation [of South African Women] did this, or the trade union did this, because we worked so closely

77 Anne Mager, ‘The People get Fenced: Gender, Rehabilitation and African Nationalism in the Ciskei and Border Region, 1945–1955’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 4 (1992), 774.

78 M. Bahati Kuumba, ‘“You’ve Struck a Rock”: Comparing Gender, Social Movements, and Transformation in the United States and South Africa’, *Gender and Society*, 16, 4 (2002), 506.

79 Baard, *My Spirit*, 34.

80 Ellen Spears, ‘Involved from the Start: Women in the ANC’, *Unity Magazine* (1986), 12.

together. Chief Luthuli said that the ANC was the shield and SACTU was the spear, meaning that we work together like the shield and spear carried by a warrior. That is how we will win the battle. I know in Port Elizabeth we worked very closely together because one person, like myself, would be a trade union member and at the same time a member of the Federation and the ANC. So the same people were doing lots of work in different organisations ... And these organisations worked very closely together on many of the campaigns. And we also worked together with the trade unions. Some of the campaigns were especially successful in Port Elizabeth because we were so united and strong there.<sup>81</sup>

Liz Abrahams, a leader in the FCWU and FEDSAW agreed:

I joined the Coloured People's Congress (CPC) because the union wanted to take action but it couldn't strike and conduct campaigns because it was registered. Through the CPC we could assist the union a lot, for example if we wanted to conduct a boycott. The CPC and ANC supported the union a lot. If the ANC had a campaign the CPC supported it and vice versa. The feeling was that if there were many organisations supporting one another we would be stronger than just one organisation.<sup>82</sup>

Alexander was one of the founding members of both the FCWU and FEDSAW. Her experience with organising women in the FCWU profoundly shaped how FEDSAW was organised and run. Her experiences demonstrate that the call for an autonomous woman's group would not have been in keeping with the political and social conditions that determined women's day-to-day lives. Throughout the 1950s, for example, the African Food and Canning Workers' Union (AFCWU) and the FCWU provided FEDSAW with its membership base and many women joined FEDSAW through FCWU or AFCWU. FEDSAW and the unions also shared key leaders. Activists like Mary Mafeking and Liz Abrahams became prominent figures in both labour organising and FEDSAW. In her autobiography, Abrahams recalled how the union was a conduit for her involvement in FEDSAW:

While I was working in the factory the union helped other organisations in launching FEDSAW. I was elected to represent our union and felt proud that so many women came together to build a strong organisation to bring relief to women.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed it was that experience in labour organising that trained a number of female activists to be active and vocal activists in FEDSAW. According to one author, 'although black women were active to some degree in South African organisations

81 Baard, *My Spirit*, 38–9.

82 Liz Abrahams, *Married to the Struggle* (Cape Town: University of the Western Cape Press, 2005), 28.

83 *Ibid.*, 16.

dedicated to social justice, it was the trade union movement that produced women organisers and served to politicise them'.<sup>84</sup> As Alexander explained:

If I organised workers I developed one of the workers to become their own secretary ... I really forced the women to take on leadership. If women workers didn't want to become branch secretary or another position I would say to them: 'Look, I do it. You can do it. And there's no reason why you shouldn't do it.' ... Our union branches, most of them, had women branch secretaries. And we developed such women as Liz Abrahams, Mary Mafeking and Francis Baard and others.<sup>85</sup>

Frances Baard echoed these sentiments when she said:

It was Ray who helped us to start the trade union in the canning factories in Port Elizabeth. She taught us how to run the union, and we learnt administration and taking minutes, how to chair a meeting, and about shop stewards and so on, so that the union should be properly run ... After a time we decided that we must now have our own somebody to look after the workers, we must have a committee and a secretary for ourselves, a person who can organise the workers. So we had a meeting in a big hall and many of the workers were called to that meeting. When the workers got there, we decided someone must be elected for the office. I was the first person to be elected as organising secretary in Port Elizabeth for the African Food and Canning Workers' Union. Then I had to leave the factory and go to work at the trade union office.<sup>86</sup>

When we consider the question of women's consciousness – specifically the question of whether or not women failed to develop what Hassim termed 'feminist ideological and procedural frameworks for politics' – we must not proceed from the basis of theoretical abstraction. Rather, we must deal with the actual political and social conditions that structured women's lives and thus exerted a profound influence both on their chosen methods of activism as well as on the ways in which they perceived their experiences.<sup>87</sup> According to Berger, the FCWU faced the challenging, but not unique, problem of trying to organise seasonal workers who were predominantly female. As Frances Baard, a prominent member of both FEDSAW and the FCWU explained:

The biggest problem that we had in organising at these factories was that they are seasonal ... When the season comes back again the workers go back to the factory. But it was not the same people working at the factory each year, they hire anyone who comes to look for work ... And so each year we must start educating the workers again.<sup>88</sup>

84 UN, *The Plight of Black Women*, 21.

85 Alexander, unpublished interview, 36–7.

86 Baard, *My Spirit*, 23.

87 Hassim, *Women's Organisations*, 28.

88 Baard, *My Spirit*, 25.

The canning industry tended to rely on seasonal workers in order to reduce costs. If the union hoped to keep workers engaged during the off season, they had to focus on fighting issues relevant to women as members of communities and families, rather than merely as workers. In other words, the unions were most effective when they 'conceptualised gender concerns as family issues'.<sup>89</sup> As Ray Alexander put it:

Sometimes we would say we are fighting for women, but of course we were fighting for women to get higher piece work rates; for women to get crèches for their children, in the place or cloakrooms and so on. But, by fighting for the women and getting improvements for the women, we improved the whole setup of life for the family. We made them feel that they are part and parcel and therefore they were sitting together. Wives were sitting together with their husbands at our shop stewards' and committee meetings. And sisters and brothers, or sons and mothers. So we brought this about. We were outstanding in the developing of women workers.<sup>90</sup>

The success of the union thus lay in its ability to mobilise women around community and family issues and encourage them to view their struggles at work and at home as political rather than personal issues. As Alexander said, 'we were fighting for homes and for schools and for clinics and a district nurse and surgeon to come more often'.<sup>91</sup> Thus, women became 'active supporters of an organisation whose leaders understood the broad ranging conflicts and tensions in their lives and worked actively to address them, both inside and outside the workplace'.<sup>92</sup> Because the AFCWU, the FCWU and other unions provided the federation with its members and organisational strength in the Western Cape, 'politically aware women in the food and canning industry [began] to perceive the connections between workplace concerns and national and local issues and created a climate that encouraged all women workers to become involved in these struggles'.<sup>93</sup> An extremely effective method of mass mobilisation involved politicising people around bread-and-butter issues – housing, schools, food prices – which were typically domains of female concern. When these issues entered the realm of politics, however, they were seen less as sectarian gender issues and more as broad-based political issues. The focus on community issues meant that 'union officials did not conceptualise women's distinct interests as an impediment to class unity'.<sup>94</sup> As Liz Abrahams explained:

There were always people who said you cannot mix unions with politics and politics with unions. But as time went on people saw that the two cannot be separated. Because, if you're a union member then you're fighting for bread

89 Iris Berger, 'Gender, Race, and Political Empowerment: South African Canning Workers, 1940–1960', *Gender and Society*, 4, 3 (September 1990), 417.

90 Alexander, unpublished interview, 37.

91 *Ibid.*, 69.

92 Berger, 'Gender, Race, and Political Empowerment', 400.

93 *Ibid.*, 407.

94 *Ibid.*, 412.

and butter rights but when you're outside you're fighting for your whole life to improve. You must be a member of the community to lend a hand if the problem is poor housing, or high rent which also needs to be addressed. If you only improve your bread and butter on one side and do not build on the other side then it doesn't help because the one side will weaken. Today workers realise that it is also important to belong to a political organisation.<sup>95</sup>

The influence of FCWU is clearly evidenced in FEDSAW's actions and organisational strategy. Women in FEDSAW and the ANCWL adopted a 'particularly militant way of fighting for bread and butter issues, which made the linking up of these types of issues to broader political issues relatively easy'.<sup>96</sup> Oliver Tambo is widely reported to have drawn two lessons for the ANC from FEDSAW's anti-pass protests. It illustrated, he said, 'how the people's daily needs can become the kernel of a united protest campaign and recruit more people into the liberation movement'.<sup>97</sup> Ruth Mompati, an active member of FEDSAW, the ANCWL, and an ANC NEC member, likewise recalled how mobilising around community issues, many of which were of particular concern to women and mothers, helped to make masses of people interested in joining the ANC during the 1950s:

Before the conference in Kliptown, the ANC decided there would be street committees. We went round organising people, on their demands and the issues they wanted to be resolved. We were not saying: 'Join the ANC'. We were saying we want to call up a very big conference. We want this government to know that we, as the black people of South Africa, demand our rights. We were bringing in more people, more women, we were concentrating more on women.<sup>98</sup>

Often activists used house meetings to publicise the objectives and campaigns of FEDSAW or the ANCWL. In this way they could 'avoid a lot of police harassment while at the same time successfully telling women about their organisation, and getting new recruits for affiliate organisations'.<sup>99</sup> Emma Mashinini, secretary of the Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers' Union, explained, for example, how *stokvels* and social events paved the way for political discussions and organising:

Another important aspect of *stokvels* is social. Women in the townships are very lonely because their husbands tend to leave them at home when they go to soccer matches, or to the movies, or to taverns to have a drink with the boys. The *stokvel* meetings change from one member's house to another, and you are obliged to serve tea or drinks. After the money has been collected the women start conversing about current affairs, sharing their problems, which

95 Abrahams, *Married to the Struggle*, 28.

96 Schreiner, 'Forms of Organisation', 68.

97 Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), 224.

98 SADET, *The Road to Democracy: South Africans Telling their Stories, Volume 1* (Hollywood: Tsehali Publishers, 2008), 310.

99 Schreiner, 'Forms of Organisation', 117.



leads them to politics. And that is why African women are often much more politically aware than their coloured and Indian counterparts, who do not have the opportunity of meeting in such a way.<sup>100</sup>

The community issue that most galvanised women – and which demonstrates the ways in which gender, race and class shaped women’s consciousness as well as their activism – was that of passes. In 1952 the government passed the Native Laws Amendment Act which extended influx control to all urban areas and for the first time included women under the section 10 provisions of the Urban Areas Act. The Native Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents Act further entrenched the extension of the pass laws by bringing women under their jurisdiction. The consequences for women of these actions on the part of the state were dire. As Harsch explained:

Burdensome as these restrictions were on African men, they were doubly oppressive to women. In the ‘white’ areas of South Africa, not only is there sexist oppression. African women suffer as women, coupled with the national oppression that all blacks are subjected to, but women also face special discriminatory measures. They encounter much greater obstacles in moving to the towns, and they are liable to immediate expulsion from them upon the death of a husband or the loss of a job. Those African women who work in the ‘white’ cities are barred from many occupations through sexist and racist discrimination and receive wages much lower than those of African men.<sup>101</sup>

The way in which the pass laws were formulated and enacted clearly had a profound impact on African people’s consciousness of the interrelation between race, gender and class. Passes could never be viewed only as a ‘race’ or ‘gender’ issue or a workers’ issue, for the simple reason that ‘the oppression of African women [was] integral and vital to sustaining African national oppression in changing political, economic, and social conditions’.<sup>102</sup> The extension of passes to African women in the Cape, for example, ‘formed an important aspect of the effort to expel the region’s black population in order to create a Coloured Labour Preference Area’.<sup>103</sup> For the women of FEDSAW and the ANCWL, feminist activism was never a concept that existed outside of this political and economic context. There was always a strong recognition of the fact that the utility of feminism for them lay in its ability to engage critically with issues of race and class. Theirs was a specifically anti-colonial feminism that aimed to unite racial and gender ideologies and strive for liberation within gender and racially integrated nationalist organisations. They did not see their feminism

100 Emma Mashinini, *Strikes have Followed Me All my Life* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 17.

101 Ernest Harsch, *South Africa: White Rule, Black Revolt* (New York: Monad Press, 1980), 61.

102 Marcus, ‘The Women’s Question and National Liberation’, 98.

103 Berger, ‘Gender, Race, and Empowerment’, 408.

as a maidservant to nationalism, but rather as a strongly integrated and inseparable component of it. Thus, Lilian Ngoyi, in a 1956 speech before the Transvaal ANCWL, emphasised that the pass laws were a fundamental cornerstone of the cheap labour system in South Africa and thus were of concern to all sections of the population:

The Congress has always regarded the pass laws as the principal target of the struggle for freedom ... It is because of this fact that the Congress has seen the extension of the pass laws to African women as a major issue of national importance. The issue is perfectly clear ... when the rights of a people are taken away from them and even liberties are being crushed, the only way that is open to them is to mobilise the masses of the people affected to stand up and fight these injustices. The immediate issue facing us, therefore, is to organise all the various organisations of African women and individuals against this inhuman and wicked decision of the government, only direct mass action will deter the government and stop it from proceeding with its cruel laws.<sup>104</sup>

The commitment of women in FEDSAW and the ANCWL to ANC organisational methods and the manner in which these organisational methods determined their political practice has been misinterpreted by many. They see these women as having simply acquiesced to the whims of patriarchal nationalist leaders. We might take, for example, an event that has been much written about – the response of the ANC leadership to women having taken the lead in organising the pass campaigns in 1956 and again in 1958. The response of many scholars to the actions of the male leadership is so coloured by the predominant conception that ‘the political family, like the domestic, remained patriarchal’ and that there was no way that ‘women’s entry into politics might unsettle male dominated African nationalism’,<sup>105</sup> that they see every action of the ANC leadership as emanating from a knee-jerk patriarchal instinct, rather than reflecting a well-thought-out strategy.

For example, the decision not to abide by the credo ‘no bail, no fines’ in the case of women jailed after the pass demonstrations has been viewed by scholars like Tom Lodge as indicative of a patriarchal desire to exert control over unruly women. As he put it: ‘It is possible to interpret the ANC’s restraining influence at this point as the assertion of patriarchal attitudes emanating from a political leadership chiefly composed of men.’<sup>106</sup> If we look at the historical record, however, a very different picture emerges. Lilian Ngoyi directly addresses the issue in her 1956 presidential address. She indicates that even though the response of the women was strong and should be admired, it would have been too hasty to view the popularity of the march as indicating that the goal of mass mobilisation had been achieved and to formulate strategy and tactics on the basis of this erroneous belief. As she put it:

104 Transvaal ANCWL, presidential address delivered by Lilian Ngoyi, 11 November 1956, 3.

105 Mager, ‘People get Fenced’, 775.

106 Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London: Longman, 1984), 146.

In spite of the remarkable victories that we have won, there are still some serious weaknesses in our movement. 50,000 women is still a very small number in a population of 12½ million. More women must be brought into the anti-pass movement in order that the fight should be organised and concerted ... We strongly condemn and reject the passes and shall fight it with all the resources at our disposal to the bitter end [but] at the same time we must as far as possible avoid reckless and isolated action. Action taken in one isolated place and without sufficient work being done and without proper coordination may be disastrous to the movement.<sup>107</sup>

Likewise, Ruth Mompati recalls that:

We decided that we would have the pass march to Pretoria. First of all the ANC was not very supportive, actually they felt as women we would just mess things up if we now march to Pretoria. They didn't think women would organise a meaningful crowd. It was not that they didn't want us to go, but I don't think they had confidence that we would be able to organise women, enough women who would really make a difference.<sup>108</sup>

In her autobiography Helen Joseph recalled how senior ANC leaders reacted to reports that as many as 20,000 women might march to Pretoria:

In the week before the protest, reports began to come in from all quarters showing a massive response by women. Even the media began to speak of 20,000 women from all over South Africa. The senior Congress leaders became apprehensive, doubting our ability to handle the situation. Lilian and I were summoned to a secret meeting of the Congress leadership, mostly banned people, and asked if we knew what we were doing. Had we realised the enormous responsibility of gathering thousands of women together in the face of possible police interference? What would we do if all the leaders were arrested? Lilian replied that if that happened, other leaders would take our places. The women would know what to do and we had confidence in them.<sup>109</sup>

Likewise, on the issue of bail and fines with regard to women, the decision of men to bail out women was not simply motivated by the fact that 'the absence of wives and mother from a household threw extra responsibilities on fathers and husbands'.<sup>110</sup> Nor did it reflect the fact that 'the ANC leadership was unprepared to deal with the militant energy generated by the FEDSAW'.<sup>111</sup> Rather, the decision stemmed from a careful analysis of the likely impact of growing state repression on the future strategy

107 Ngoyi, presidential address, 1956, 4.

108 SADET, *Telling their Stories*, 311.

109 Joseph, *Side by Side*, 19.

110 Kimble and Unterhalter, 'We Opened the Road', 27.

111 Kuumba, 'You've Struck a Rock', 508.

and tactics of the ANC. As the NEC report to the annual conference in December 1958 explained:

It is obvious that the policy of the government is to arrest [and] whenever possible to exhaust all the resources of the liberation movement. More and more arrests are going to take place; the problem of defence, bail, and fines is mounting by the day. These are problems facing this conference; they should be properly examined and the discussions must be objective if we are to find a way out. It is easy of course for someone to stand up and say, 'No defence, no bail, no fine', and by that the house may be under the impression that it has solved the problem ... The problem is much deeper than that ... The question to be considered is the advantage to be gained by the movement of any step we take and the concrete conditions prevailing at any given time. On the question of the women's demonstration some people simply said, 'no bail, no fines': this approach did not take into account the actual conditions. A large number of women went to jail not in the same way as people died in the Defiance Campaign, i.e., having prepared themselves to serve. Many women did not expect arrest; this created a problem ... When a spontaneous movement takes place, the duty of the leadership is not just to follow spontaneously, but to give it a proper direction. We hesitated to do this in the women's demonstration and the results were not of the best. These lessons are useful for preparing ourselves for what is to be done from now on, in the light of the government policy to arrest and in the light of the defence and money problems. Even when we decide that people must be prepared to stay in gaol without bail and fines, there may be cases which will require proper defence, bail, fine. This brings us to one important political problem, that is, new methods of struggle must emerge; they must be found.<sup>112</sup>

This extract demonstrates that the issue of 'no defence, no bail, no trial' was undergoing questioning and possible transformation not for women exclusively, but rather for the whole movement. Years later Helen Joseph reflected upon the ANC's response to the women's activism and concluded that although she hadn't agreed with the ANC leadership at the time her own experience in jail and the aftermath of Sharpeville led her to think differently. She wrote:

Chief Luthuli emphasised the need for popular training in non-violent action and the danger of 'reckless haste and impatience which might be suicidal and be playing into the hands of the government'. I remembered the women's gaol protest in 1958 and how the Congress leaders had insisted that the women were not prepared and would not be able to sustain a long

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112 Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, eds, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1964* (Stanford: Hoover, 1977), 443–4.

stay in gaol. I had come to see the wisdom of this but I did not foresee the terrible consequences of the ill-prepared PAC defiance.<sup>113</sup>

From the beginning, protest action on the extension of passes to women reflected the fact that ‘the activism of women and their organisations sprang from and intersected with their positioning within systems of multiple oppressions, for example, simultaneously experiencing racial ethnic, class, and gender oppression’.<sup>114</sup> The 1950s activists are notable, therefore, for their expressed desire to work towards women’s emancipation within, rather than outside of or simply alongside, the national liberation struggle. It is clear that these activists realised that ‘obtaining rights for women would have little impact on their social status as long as white racial imperialism automatically denied them full citizenship’.<sup>115</sup> This stance towards feminism and nationalism rested on the knowledge that it would not make sense for African women to fight for equality with black men, who themselves were wholly oppressed under apartheid.

These struggles opened up space for broader transformation in the liberation movement. The prevailing view is that the nationalist movement and the movement for gender emancipation were antagonistic because nationalism tended to put fetters on feminist organising and ‘women leaders remained unrecognised by the ANC’.<sup>116</sup> What the actual historical record points to, however, is something quite different. Starting with the anti-pass movement, women’s struggles and women’s activism within the ANC actually tended to have a radicalising effect on the organisation as a whole. The energy, passion and militancy that the women brought to the anti-pass campaign provided important lessons about which protest actions were feasible and what goals were achievable. This is not to say that African men in general and men in the ANC in particular did not have patriarchal attitudes. Surely they did. However, these patriarchal attitudes did not automatically translate into hostility towards the anti-pass marches. In her autobiography Helen Joseph describes how the women had to raise their own money to travel by rail, and how ‘the ANC branches rallied to the support of the women, calling public meetings ... to raise the extra money’ after the Transportation Board refused to grant licences for the buses the protesters had hired to take them to the Union Buildings’. She further recalled that ‘the men went themselves to the railway station to purchase the train tickets’.<sup>117</sup> After the march, ‘in the townships, African men were waiting to welcome the women home. They gathered in crowds at the railway stations and the bus stops, even with their own local bands, in demonstration of their pride, in tribute to the courage of their women’.<sup>118</sup>

While there were no doubt some men who objected to their wives and daughters attending – with 20,000 participants it would have been impossible for every

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113 Helen Joseph, *Side by Side*, 80.

114 Kuumba, ‘You’ve Struck a Rock’, 505.

115 bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 172.

116 Hassim, *Women’s Organisations*, 26.

117 Joseph, *Side by Side*, 11.

118 *Ibid.*, 13.

family to react the same – we must also recognise that there was a willingness on the part of the ANC leadership to see the women’s protests for what they were – valuable opportunities to catalyse the mass movements for racial justice and national liberation that ‘catapulted these movements ... to higher levels’.<sup>119</sup> For example, many of the demands of the Women’s Charter are present in the Freedom Charter, a fact which ‘bears witness to the women’s own struggle and the space they had created for themselves’.<sup>120</sup> Oliver Tambo was led to remark that ‘the Women’s League is not just an auxiliary to the ANC and we know that we cannot win liberation or build a strong movement without the participation of the women’.<sup>121</sup> His remarks reflect his growing realisation that the women’s campaign, and its focus on struggles at the household level, had the potential to revolutionise people’s consciousness and draw them into the national liberation struggle.<sup>122</sup> He was also led by the success of the campaign to reflect on the need for transformation at both the level of the household as well as the level of the state. In a speech at the 1956 ANC conference Tambo said the following:

We must make it possible for women to play their part in the liberation movement by regarding them as equals, and helping to emancipate them in the home, even relieving them of their many family and household burdens so that women may be given an opportunity of being politically active. The men in the Congress movement must fight constantly in every possible way those outmoded customs which make women inferior and by personal example must demonstrate their belief in the equality of all human beings of both sexes.<sup>123</sup>

When we look at the positions articulated by FEDSAW we see an example, not of an organisation that hinders women’s development of a consciousness of their oppression, but rather an organisation that ‘produced a gendered construction of what it means to be a worker and a citizen’.<sup>124</sup> In other words, even though women may not have been continuously referencing it, ‘class and national consciousness were shaped by a profoundly gendered movement’.<sup>125</sup> The strong connections between the FCWU, the ANC, the ANCWL and FEDSAW meant that their members would tend to immediately sense the interconnected nature of race, gender, and class oppression. This basic attitude can be seen as a thread that runs through the struggles of the 1960s and especially through the 1970s and into the 1980s.

119 Kuumba, ‘You’ve Struck a Rock’, 505.

120 Kimble and Unterhalter, ‘We Opened the Road’, 28.

121 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, 257.

122 Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo*, 224.

123 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, 257.

124 Seidman, ‘No Freedom’, 294.

125 *Ibid.*, 293.

## Feminism and nationalism in the 1980s: The continuing legacy of the 1950s

During the 1960s mass organisations experienced a tremendous amount of repression. Many leaders were banned or forced into exile. The apartheid regime enacted a sweeping range of discriminatory laws that crippled organisations like FEDSAW and the ANCWL. When many of the major liberation organisations were banned and the underground movement began, the impact on the women's movement and women's roles in the struggle was immense. The banning of the major affiliates of FEDSAW necessitated major alterations in strategy. As Helen Joseph explained:

The Federation...[was] severely affected by the ban on the ANC Women's League ... This deprived the Federation of the greater part of its affiliated membership. It was all too clear that we should be, to some extent, crippled by the loss of the African women. There was only one thing to be done and that was for African women to start organising clubs for women, to be affiliated to the Federation ... It was a bold scheme, but once the 1960 emergency was over, we set to work with suggestions for discussion clubs, co-operative vegetable clubs, sewing and knitting clubs, even running all day training conferences for club leaders, much as we had done in the days of the Bantu Education schools boycott.<sup>126</sup>

According to Anne Silinga, a major figure in the 1950s anti-pass protests,

from the early seventies, which from the government's point of view was a quiet period in South Africa, the latent opposition was kept alive by women ... [T]hose who could speak certainly spoke out. Those who could not speak were substituted by other women who really spoke out and in many ways challenged the men with words such as 'If you're not interested in doing anything about liberating our husbands from Robben Island, we may have to take over the leadership'.<sup>127</sup>

Ruth Mompati likewise recalled that

when the ANC was banned, with the Women's League, we decided that we are going to form women's clubs that we are not going to go down, that our branches would remain. They would just be called women's clubs and they would do different things. That's how we got the Women's League going even during the State of Emergency.<sup>128</sup>

Activist women thus turned their energies to the vital issue of raising funds. As Dillies Maboshane Mahlatsi explained:

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126 Joseph, *Side by Side*, 118.

127 Lipman, *We Make Freedom*, 74.

128 SADET, *Telling their Stories*, 312.

I joined the ANC in 1961. I was recruited by a lady called Mrs Nan Thlapane into the women section of the ANC. So by that time we didn't do much activities, we were raising funds ... to be able to function because there was no money to be able to run ANC functions efficiently ... I belonged to the Mofolo branch, Women's Section. We used to raise funds by making tea, baking cakes, selling them, sometimes we used to sell old clothes just to get some funds to let the work of the ANC go on.<sup>129</sup>

When the ANC went into exile, it also set up the ANC Women's Section, which operated differently from the way the ANCWL operated in South Africa. The Women's League was an independent body with its own constitution and laws, and it could make its own decisions. However, the ANC felt that there should only be one organisation in exile, and that work should be carried out collectively. The ANC Women's Section was thus charged with the task of mobilising women inside and outside the country. Outside of Lusaka, the ANC Women's Section was organised on a regional basis. If there were five or more women who wanted to join the ANC, they could form a unit of the ANC Women's Section, elect a secretary and a chairwoman and follow the Women's Section programme. All women who belonged to the ANC-in-exile automatically belonged to the Women's Section.

After 1961, women and their former organisations 'became part of the underground resistance and the general preparations for armed struggle to end apartheid'.<sup>130</sup> Mahlatsi, for example recalled how she was given political education and training on 'how to handle arms, how to go about preserving these arms, how to recruit people inside the country, especially for underground work. From 1972, that's when I did the most dangerous work of the ANC, the underground work'.<sup>131</sup> Although there were fewer women than men in the underground, women were subject to many of the same gruelling jobs as their male counterparts. Mahlatsi recalled the effort involved in smuggling arms from Botswana:

I used to go to Botswana, fetch arms, bring them into South Africa. ... I would go at midnight, especially if there were clouds because there is no traffic cop that time. The driver would drive as if he were driving a plane – we would go there during the night and come back when people are still sleeping. I am telling you. You would never know I went to Botswana. The next day, go out, midnight, make some trenches where we are going to store them. Before we store them, we grease them, fold them and then store them. It's a whole night's work.<sup>132</sup>

From its inception, MK was 'organised in terms of individual recruitment and this included both men and women as militants'.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, women in MK demanded

129 SADET Oral History interview, Denise Maboshane Mahlatsi, Orlando West, Soweto, 11 January 2001.

130 Bernstein, *For their Triumphs*, 54.

131 Mahlatsi, Oral History interview, 12.

132 *Ibid.*, 14.

133 Kimble and Unterhalter, 'We Opened the Road', 29.



‘there should be no *Umkhonto wabafazi* [of women] or *wamadoda* [of men]’.<sup>134</sup> By the 1970s, there were many women saying ‘we are comrades, we are patriots, we are in the struggle, we want full equal rights in a meaningful sense, inside the organisation and outside’.<sup>135</sup> In 1982, *VOW* devoted a special issue to Women in MK. Many of the women interviewed indicated their readiness and willingness to fight alongside men, with no distinction. One unnamed MK woman claimed that ‘within the trained ranks of the army there is no role, there is no task from which women are barred’.<sup>136</sup> Another soldier agreed that ‘the movement and MK in particular are schools of equality. We proved this during the 1967–1968 Wankie battles. When the main force was engaged in battle, there were units who moved supplies nearer to the battle lines. Amongst these units were women’.<sup>137</sup> *Outwrite*, a British feminist newspaper, ran a special issue called ANC Women Speak in which one woman recalled:

I remember a phrase that one of the [MK cadres] used about the struggle in Lamontville (which started with an anti-rent increase protest). She discovered that the bullets of the Boers did not discriminate between men and women and that ... made her determined to join our people’s army.<sup>138</sup>

This is not to say, however, that women in MK did not face particular problems as women. As Ruth Mompati explained:

I dealt a lot with MK cadres when they came because I was trained so I could be involved ... We spoke to them ... it became necessary to visit the camps. You had to be there to talk to the women [and] they also had to know they could talk to us.<sup>139</sup>

Many women faced problems due to the sexism of men they served with. Albie Sachs described the situation of the women as ‘far from brilliant’. He went on to note that

in the military camps, women were simultaneously and contradictorily cushioned from military rigours, and disempowered by this protective attitude. They tended to be excluded from military and even intelligence issues, or deployment inside the country. Then there was the strain of being outnumbered, which skewed power relations and complicated gender relationships.<sup>140</sup>

Indeed, Mompati also recalled that women were put under pressure to begin romantic relationships. ‘The greatest problem’, she observed, ‘was the fact that I don’t remember how many men [there were but] about 200 or so, and only five women. The

134 ANC Women’s Section, *Report of the Proceedings of the Second National Women’s Conference*, 42.

135 Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo*, 439.

136 ‘Women in MK’, *VOW*, 16 December 1982, 2.

137 *Ibid.*

138 ‘ANC Women Speak’, 11.

139 Ruth Mompati, Oral History interview, cited in SADET, *Telling their Stories*, 19.

140 Cited in Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo*, 439.

problem was with the men ... Not that all our men were really problematic, but this was life and everybody wanted a girlfriend and there were only so many'.<sup>141</sup>

In exile, women were often given tasks that clearly coincided with gender stereotypes such as cooking, cleaning, and emotional support roles. However, it would be simplistic to simply see these activities in a one-dimensional way. Although these were sex-stereotyped functions, everyone was in agreement about how vital they were to the survival of the organisation and how central they were in helping to sustain it during a time of immense difficulty. Thandi Lujabe-Rankoe, who worked for the ANC office in Lagos, recalled how

following the ... Soweto rebellion, some of the youth arrived in Nigeria from South Africa to escape violence, seek refuge, and continue with their education. Zanele Mbeki accompanied them to take charge of their needs in exile ... Life in Nigeria turned out to be extremely difficult for these adolescents. Their ages ranged from 15 to the 20s, and most of them had never spent any time away from their parents. Now the only home they had was my small house, and the only mothers that they saw were Zanele Mbeki and me. Many students felt disoriented and lonely. They suffered severe homesickness, and [even] ... depression. Some of them suffered nervous breakdowns, and this required urgent medical attention. All these problems made it a very hectic period, but we managed to contain the situation and get the children out of danger.<sup>142</sup>

In exile, women worked incredibly hard to develop a welfare system for the movement. They set up crèches, clinics and schools, and organised the distribution of food and clothing. 'The sphere of reproduction was of course traditionally the concern of women, but in exile, in the absence of formal employment, with the majority of cadres in training or in camps, it was even more vital for survival.'<sup>143</sup>

Joyce Sikakane-Rankin, for example explained that

I continued working with the ANC in the communities because it was important for the ANC to have families within the communities in the frontline states ... I ran a sort of playgroup for ANC children because a number of combatants had children, others were arriving with children. So, I ran it at home, employed women who looked after the children there.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, while women were quick to criticise men for their sexism, they were also aware of the opportunities they could carve out and create for themselves and the movement even when they were performing so-called 'women's work'.

141 Mompoti, Oral History interview, 19.

142 Thandi Lujabe-Rankoe, *A Dream Fulfilled* (Houghton: Mutloatse Heritage Trust, 2006), 60.

143 Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo*, 438.

144 SADET Oral History Project, interview Joyce Sikakane-Rankin, Pretoria, 16 May 2001, 16.

## The motherism vs feminism debate revisited

In a 1989 interview that appeared in *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa*, Ruth Mompati reflected on how women's identities as mothers influenced their work with FEDSAW:

Working with women in the federation enabled us to realise that there were no differences between us as mothers. We were all women. We all had the same anxieties, the same worries. We all wanted to bring up our children to be happy and to protect them from the brutalities of life. This gave us more commitment to fight for unity in our country. It shows us that people of different races could work together well.<sup>145</sup>

Women's agitation against the pass laws has been criticised in some quarters for its failure to be appropriately feminist because of the manner in which ideologies about motherhood were used to ground legitimate protests. Cheryl Walker, for example, assesses women's resistance against the passes in this way:

It is worth noting here that in the 1950s women in the anti-pass campaign rallied ... in defence of their roles as mothers. It was the impact of the pass laws on their children ... that was the main focus of concern, as reflected in FEDSAW and ANCWL speeches, reports and pamphlets condemning the new legislation.<sup>146</sup>

Julia Wells is even stronger in her criticism. After characterising the 1950s social action against the passes as 'motherist' she goes on to assert that:

Motherism is clearly not feminism. Women swept up in motherist movements are not fighting for their own rights as women, but for their rights as mothers ... Motherist movements must be recognised as limited in scope, duration, and success in achieving their goals.<sup>147</sup>

Wells's statement that 'motherism is clearly not feminism' assumes that we know what feminism is when we see it or, alternatively, that there is only one type of feminist consciousness. The notion that when a woman fights for her rights as a mother she inevitably sacrifices standing up for herself as a woman assumes a uniformity in women's experiences that we should open to further analysis. As Chandra Mohanty reminds us, feminist consciousness cannot be specified a priori. Rather, it must be defined with reference to the historical experience and political context of a particular society.<sup>148</sup> When considering feminisms, it is important, as bell hooks points out, to 'make a clear distinction between revolutionary feminist politics and the more widely

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145 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 114.

146 Cheryl Walker, 'Conceptualizing Motherhood in Twentieth-Century South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 3 (1995), 432.

147 Cited in *Ibid.*, 420.

148 Chandra Mohanty, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

accepted version of feminism that has as its primary agenda achieving for white women of privileged classes social and economic equality with men of their class'.<sup>149</sup> While one hesitates to use such imprecise terms and binaries like 'western' and 'Third World' or 'black' and 'white', nevertheless it is essential that we underscore that while all feminisms have a particularist focus, the type of feminism that has historically been associated with white British, white American and white South African women who are located in particular types of activist and academic settings has tended to define a feminist consciousness as primarily oriented around challenging male control in the household, the sexual division of labour, and patriarchal ideologies and attitudes around women's appropriate sphere of activity. As Kimble and Unterhalter explain:

In the conditions of full employment, mass consumption, the nuclear family and state welfare that characterised the post-war boom of western capitalism, a new strand in feminism pressed harder to explore the manifold characteristics of women's subordination and marginalisation ... Arguments were made for the specificity of women's oppression, linked to their reproductive role and the sexual division of labour. Using the insights of studies in ideology and psychology the new feminists probed the hidden areas of the nuclear family, relations between the sexes and the institution of marriage ... They focused on sexual repression and raised demands for the rights of homosexuals and for free sexual expression outside marriage.<sup>150</sup>

Kimble and Unterhalter conclude that 'women of the ex-colonial world have seen much of the substance of these struggles as irrelevant to them'.<sup>151</sup> And indeed, in the section that follows I will show that the type of analysis offered by Wells and Walker fundamentally misunderstands the material conditions under which African women lived and worked and how these material conditions led women to become politicised around some issues more than others and thus shaped the content of their feminist consciousness.

Very often critiques of motherism, particularly as it was articulated by women in the national liberation struggle, centre around African women's supposed failure to question or criticise the patriarchal ideologies and assumptions that are embedded in the concept of motherhood. For example, Hassim argues that:

The articulation of concerns about sexual and reproductive rights is particularly illustrative of the tensions between nationalism and feminism. In seeking to place the right to freedom of sexual choice on the political agenda, feminists were not simply reflecting a difference in emphasis from that of the national liberation movement; they were also questioning its

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<sup>149</sup> hooks, *Killing Rage*, 98.

<sup>150</sup> Kimble and Unterhalter, 'We Opened the Road', 12.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

normative assumptions about the nature of the family and the primacy of women's roles as wives and mothers.<sup>152</sup>

Likewise, Posel specifically criticises the anti-pass campaign because although it 'usurped some of men's legitimate powers (authority) as head of household' these powers were 'depicted and defended as necessary extensions of their roles as *mothers* – in other words, within the discourse of patriarchal relationships'.<sup>153</sup> Such critiques fail, however, to properly appreciate the fact that 'the state, shaped by a complex of social forces, has itself given a different content to motherhood according to race and class'.<sup>154</sup>

In the 1950s African women, particularly those in the ANCWL and FEDSAW, first began the 'strategic use of gendered images of motherhood [to] claim a voice for a population that would otherwise be ignored'.<sup>155</sup> If we look at the opening paragraphs of the FEDSAW pamphlet, *A Call to All Mothers*, which implores 'every mother, every woman, to come to the Congress of Mothers' it might appear that women only see themselves in traditional feminine roles.<sup>156</sup> Rather than adhere to traditional images of mothers as nurturing and passive, however, motherhood was seen as a source of power for women that 'encompassed caring for all the children of their community and fighting for a better future for the community'.<sup>157</sup> It was thus that the 1956 FEDSAW pamphlet, *A Call to All Mothers*, opened by placing all mothers, black and white, on equal footing when it came to the issue of what they hoped and dreamt for their children.

What is the first thing a mother thinks of?

The answer is simple – a mother's first concern is for her child or children.

She wants her children to have good food, proper clothes, a pleasant home; to be educated; to have opportunities for happiness and development. No mother will rest content until she has won these things for her children.<sup>158</sup>

Helen Joseph, FEDSAW's national secretary, likewise stated that 'as women and mothers we take our place in the struggle for the liberation of the non-white people of South Africa, for the removal of all forms of apartheid, for the end of racial hatred which poisons our country'.<sup>159</sup>

152 Hassim, *Women's Organisations*, 39.

153 Cited in Walker, 'Conceptualizing Motherhood', 421.

154 Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation', 59.

155 R.L. Einwohner, J.A. Hollander and T. Olson, 'Engendering Social Movements: Cultural Images and Movement Dynamics', *Gender & Society*, 14, 5 (2000), 687.

156 Wits, FEDSAW Papers, FEDSAW, *A Call to All Mothers*, AD1137/AE 2.21, 1955, 1.

157 M. Rivka Polatnick, 'Diversity in Women's Liberation Ideology: How a Black and a White Group of the 1960s Viewed Motherhood', *Signs*, 21, 3 (1996), 680.

158 FEDSAW, *A Call to All Mothers*, 1.

159 Wits, FEDSAW Papers, Executive Correspondence 1956–1963, AD 1137/Ad 1.3: Helen Joseph to Ruth Khama, 29 October 1956.

Einwohner et al. make the key point that gendered images can be a powerful cultural resource for social movement actors. ‘Gender can be used by social movement participants who wish to construct their image in a certain light, frame an issue in a particular way, or claim legitimacy in a given arena.’<sup>160</sup> Gender is a uniquely flexible cultural resource that can be put to a wide variety of ideological uses. As they put it:

What is important is that the range of possibilities is more or less available to all members of a culture for use either in staging or evaluating protest activity. The entire set of meanings may be understood as a set of cultural tools or a repertoire on which individuals may draw in service of various ends.<sup>161</sup>

Indeed, when we look at documents produced by the collective energies of FEDSAW, like the Women’s Charter or the pamphlet *A Call to All Mothers*, it is clear that ‘motherhood is less the universal and biological quintessence of womanhood than it is a social category under constant contest’.<sup>162</sup> It is simply untrue that ‘the tone of appeals by both the FEDSAW and the ANC was to women in their traditional roles as mothers and wives [and] the content of these roles was not questioned’.<sup>163</sup> African women have ‘embraced, transmuted and transformed the ideology in a variety of ways, working strategically within traditional ideology to justify untraditional public militancy’.<sup>164</sup> For example, *A Call to All Mothers* dispensed with the idea that mothers were weak and passive and instead represented mothering as a ‘bridge into social activism’.<sup>165</sup> In answer to the question: How can we get what we want for our children? *A Call to All Mothers* offered this reply:

The time when women sat at home and wept or wished for better things for their children has long since passed. Women are now at the forefront of the fight in our country for a better life for all, particularly for our children ... Our children’s future depends on the extent to which we, the mothers of South Africa, organise and work and fight for a better life for our little ones.<sup>166</sup>

The critiques offered by Wells and Walker ignore the type of militancy that African women grafted onto what might appear, at first glance, to be a simple-minded embrace of traditional roles. Colleen O’Brien makes the important point that:

There seems to be a myth surrounding the nature of South African women’s participation in the struggle against apartheid. It is one which erroneously assumes that women, who must undertake almost complete responsibility

160 Einwohner et al., ‘Engendering Social Movements’, 680.

161 Ibid., 683.

162 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 381.

163 Kimble and Unterhalter, ‘We Opened the Road’, 26.

164 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 381.

165 Polatnick, ‘Diversity in Women’s Liberation Ideology’, 697.

166 FEDSAW, *A Call to All Mothers*, 2.

for the welfare and survival of their families, are so limited by being passive, nurturing, and motherly that they cannot at the same time be powerful, independent, and politically active.<sup>167</sup>

Hassim's assertion that 'the emphasis on motherhood was a successful idiom in many ways ... [but] it denied the very real differences in the experiences of mothering and motherhood that emerged from different class and race positions' completely ignores historical evidence.<sup>168</sup> Many activist women stated quite clearly the differences that separated black and white mothers. Emma Mashinini, for example, observed that:

While white mothers have problems of their own, such as having to see one of their boys leave to fight on the border, we can understand them, because we must also lose our children – to the security forces, or to fight against apartheid. But white mothers in this country do not have to suffer anxiety over what we call breadline problems. There is no other word for them. Breadline problems are questions of who will care for the children when their mother goes to work? Who will pay the bills when the grandmother or friend cannot come one day and the mother must stay at home, even though she is not paid enough to be able to afford to lose that one day's money? Who will pay when she has to spend a day at the hospital waiting for an appointment? No. Our problems are not the same.<sup>169</sup>

African mothers were acutely aware of the ways in which their roles as workers introduced fundamental differences between them and their white compatriots. Mashinini, for example, spoke of the horror she felt when she realised how her work in a clothing factory made her an unwilling accomplice in the apartheid system:

Henochsberg's was one of the largest factories in the clothing industry, with almost a thousand workers. We were producing uniforms for the navy, the air force, police and traffic cops. At a later stage we started production of a type of uniform totally unknown to us, which I came to realise was a camouflage uniform. These particular garments I saw on people for the first time in 1976, when on June 16 we had the uprising of youth in Soweto, and then their massacre. At the onset of the peaceful protest there arrived in Soweto unusual types of army vehicles, from which hundreds of troops flowed out and littered the streets, all dressed in those camouflage uniforms, uniforms used for the slaughter of my people and which I personally had helped to make. I felt horrified.<sup>170</sup>

An unnamed organiser of domestic workers expressed a similar sentiment when she said:

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167 Colleen O'Brien, 'The Search for Mother Africa: Poetry Revises Women's Struggle for Freedom', *African Studies Review*, 37, 2 (1994), 147.

168 Hassim, *Women's Organisations*, 77.

169 Mashinini, *Strikes*, 40.

170 *Ibid.*, 20.

Has it ever occurred to employers what their domestic workers think about troops shooting their children? Does it ever occur to them that if a domestic worker washes the uniform and sees a stain of blood, that blood belongs to a black person? Do they think she bears all this passively?<sup>171</sup>

Indeed, they did not. Women from the Uitenhage women's organisation, which was formed in response to the massacre at Langa in 1985 wherein 29 people died, released this statement:

We women work in the white homes in Uitenhage. Every day I go there and look after a white baby. I do so with no harmful thoughts in my heart. I care for that baby and bring him up. And when that baby grows up, he comes into the township and shoots my very own children, playing in the street where I have had to leave them to earn money for their food.<sup>172</sup>

Instead of jumping to the conclusion that using a traditionally gendered image like a mother necessarily implies capitulation to patriarchy, rather we can, in the words of Einwhoner, think of gender as a 'cultural resource that actors in a social movement arena can use to further their goals'.<sup>173</sup> Even highly stereotyped cultural images – like that of the mother – are open to multiple interpretations. Meanings are neither unitary nor static and 'claiming gendered identities does not necessitate allegiance to traditional roles ... There are many possible representations of gender, even within a single culture. Movement actors may therefore draw on different elements from the set of cultural meanings available to them'.<sup>174</sup>

In white nationalist discourse, black mothers were simply non-entities. They were seen as overly fecund producers of subject and inferior races that threatened to swamp the white citizenry. They were not seen as sentient human beings, capable of having or expressing mother-love. Black children, likewise, held absolutely no importance until they were old enough to act as units of labour power in service to the apartheid economy. They were deemed objects that neither needed nor deserved parental affection and care. As Caesarine Kona Makhoere, who was imprisoned for six years after her activism in the 1976 student rebellion, put it in her memoir *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid*:

You know, they treat us as though we are not human, as if our mothers just picked us up off the trees, like picking a fruit. The way they treat us, you would think our mothers never felt the pain, that they did not suffer at all bringing us up. For them it is only whites in South Africa whose parents care when they brought them into the world.<sup>175</sup>

171 Mayibuye Centre Archives, Bellville: Anon., 'The Struggle of Black Working Class Women in South Africa Today', 1986, 1.

172 ANC Women's Section, *Women on the March for Freedom: 1956–1986* (London: ANC, 1986), 6.

173 Einwohner et al., 'Engendering Social Movements', 681.

174 Ibid., 687.

175 Caesarina Kona Makhoere, *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (London: The Women's Press, 1988), 97–8.



Thus, in the context of apartheid, for a black South African woman to claim equality with her white counterparts on the basis of their shared role for motherhood was anything but a confirmation of patriarchy. When, for example, the women of FEDSAW drafted a letter to white housewives urging them not to force their domestic workers to take out passes and spelled out the consequences of the pass system by explicit reference to its deleterious impact on African children and prevailed on them to answer if ‘in the name of humanity can you as a woman, as a mother, tolerate this?’ they were actually performing a revolutionary act.<sup>176</sup> For, as Hilda Bernstein explains,

while the black woman may be able to serve a useful function in the economy as a domestic servant, both in town and countryside (and to a limited amount in service and secondary industry in the cities) the black child is totally useless as far as the white regime is concerned, the most superfluous of all the worker’s appendages.<sup>177</sup>

Lilian Ngoyi expresses the brutal reality of this in her unpublished autobiography wherein she reflects on her childhood experiences as the daughter of a domestic worker:

Sometimes I would be absent from school to attend to my younger brother, and my mother would take me with her to her place of employment. We would never be allowed into the house of her employers, we would remain under a tree, whilst my mother was ironing in the beautiful house and she was not allowed to breast feed her child in that house, she would come to us outside under the tree. At the same time I could see a big cat roaming in that house, even their big dog would roam up and down the house.<sup>178</sup>

During the 1980s, black women’s use of ‘motherism’ as an ideology to build bridges across race and class reached its apogee. Motherhood became the basis for a powerful critique of the ideologies and mobilisational tactics that underwrote the militarisation of South African society. This non-racial appeal to mothers was also an important component of the movement’s strategy for mass mobilisation; drawing large numbers of people into campaigns to lend weight and legitimacy to the demands of the leaders. I will turn to a discussion of this in the next section.

## **Militarism, motherhood and the fight to end apartheid in the 1980s**

No one can deny that defining women as mothers has been used to justify denying them representation and voice in the public sphere. However, we must never forget that nationalist regimes, particularly *racist* nationalist regimes have been able

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176 Cited in Kimble and Unterhalter, ‘We Opened the Road’, 26.

177 Bernstein, *For their Triumphs*, 30.

178 Wits, Lilian Ngoyi Papers, A2251, Unpublished autobiography, 1972

manipulate the concept of motherhood in ways that define motherhood as having important public dimensions. Specifically, mothers and ideologies about motherhood have often been closely tied to the defence of racial privilege and put in the service of protecting the sanctity of whiteness. As early as 1903, members of the white South African medical establishment began using eugenics to promote the idea that the first duty of white mothers was to engage in what was then called ‘empire-building’ which meant producing healthy white children who were the foundation of the white race. ‘Nation-building was understood by these doctors to mean that whites as a “race”, and British origin whites in particular, were productive, intelligent and fit enough to maintain dominance over the majority of Africans and other non-white “races” with whom white South Africans shared a common territory, if not a common national identity.’<sup>179</sup> White mothers and white children thus stood at the centre of the white supremacist social project. Indeed, eugenicists were preoccupied with the issue of motherhood. As Klausen explains:

From 1907 doctors who contributed to the *South African Medical Record* identified white infant mortality and child welfare as issues crucial to those of their profession who were committed to constructing a strong Union: it was clear that the future of the Union depended on the white children of the day. If strength was found in numbers, these doctors argued then children were imperial assets.<sup>180</sup>

White women were valorised because of their role as producers of future white citizens of empire and ‘one important aspect of English South Africa’s nationalism was formulating a role for women as “imperial mothers”’.<sup>181</sup>

According to McClintock, the concept of the *Volksmoeder* played a similar role in the ideological consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism. It encapsulated the notion that:

Afrikaner motherhood [be] mobilised in the service of white nation-building ... As such they were complicit in deploying the power of motherhood in the exercise and legitimation of white domination. Certainly white women were jealously and brutally denied any formal political power but were compensated by their limited authority in the household. Clutching this small power, they became implicated in the racism that suffuses Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>182</sup>

The incorporation of white women in the South African Defence Force (SADF) aptly illustrates the continuing saliency of the gender/race/nation power-dynamic that McClintock and Klausen identify as conflating the defence of the white family with

179 Susanne Klausen, “For the Sake of the Race”: Eugenic Discourses of Feeble-mindedness and Motherhood in the South African Medical Record, 1903–1926, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23, 1 (1997), 28.

180 *Ibid.*, 43.

181 *Ibid.*

182 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 379.

the upholding of apartheid. In the 1980s, civilian white women were incorporated into the SADF and began playing a major role in the commandos in urban and rural areas. In the cities, women in industrial commandos were guarding strategic industries like ISCOR and the Modderfontein dynamite factory. In rural areas special organisations were formed to mobilise women into the commandos, like the Women's Defence Organisation in Grahamstown. Botha also began to use women in the apartheid regime's propaganda to counter the struggle of the war resisters. *VOW* reported that 'Botha himself said last year that women volunteers in George and in the new Permanent Force army school for women in Voortrekkerhoogte, should serve as an example to all those who refuse to do national service'.<sup>183</sup> After a series of landmine explosions in the Soutpansberg area, Minister of Defence Magnus Malan 'intensified the process of making the areas military zones by integrating white farmers' wives on the borders into the South African Defence Force. They were trained in handling grenades, taught how to shoot and told to report suspicious characters in the area to the nearest police station'.<sup>184</sup>

The way Botha was manipulating race and gender ideologies and identities did not go unnoticed. In response to the question: 'The enemy is intensifying its recruitment of white women. How do you view this?' an unnamed, female, MK cadre replied:

What do Botha and Malan want white women in their racist army for? They want to recruit white women into active defenders of white privilege – not to fight for freedom but to fight to prevent freedom.<sup>185</sup>

Apartheid militarism worked by simultaneously invoking notions of family and incorporating family members into the regime such that defence of themselves and defence of the regime became inseparable. An article that appeared in a 1983 edition of *VOW* pointed out that:

It is white women who will be among those who will be hardest hit by Botha's plan for increased war against the people of S. Africa. The white government and churches like the racist Dutch Reformed Church, are constantly calling on white women to have more babies. White women are in fact being called upon to produce more cannon fodder for the racist army, the South African Death Force.<sup>186</sup>

Yet another article in *VOW* concurred that:

Even white school children are victims of militarisation. White mothers must be mobilised to resist the evil cadet training system at white schools which prepares children for their national service later on. Even in the

183 'No Glamour or Honour in Dying for Racist Oppression', *VOW*, 4th Quarter 1982, 3.

184 'Farmers' Wives Beware!' *VOW*, 1st Quarter, 1986, 6.

185 'Women in MK', *VOW*, 16 December 1982, 2.

186 'No is Not Enough', *VOW*, 6 (1983), 7.

police, Botha is using white schoolboys as cannon fodder in police stations during their school holidays as ‘junior police reservists’.<sup>187</sup>

When P.W. Botha began to aggressively campaign for the integration of white women into the SADF during the 1980s he did so under the guise of promoting gender emancipation. As *VOW* explained:

Botha’s military propagandists are trying to persuade us that the involvement of white women in the fascist army is in the interests of women’s ‘liberation’. They tell us to emulate women in the fascist armies of the US and Israel! They wish to use us just as they used us in 1930 when we were given the vote, not just because it is our right as women but to increase the white electorate to crush black resistance, in the then multi-racial Cape parliament.<sup>188</sup>

An unnamed female MK cadre concurred when she remarked:

The enemy thinks it can learn from us. They are mistaken. The fighting tradition of our women, the need for us to occupy the front trenches of MK arises from our oppression and exploitation, from our burning love for freedom ... We want to say to those white women joining the SADF: You might consider that your involvement in the SADF means an elevation of your status to that equal with your men – if it is suicide then it is correct. Despite your privileges you are now being drawn into the offence ... you are being hoodwinked and diverted from recognising the subordinate position that you occupy in your privileged society.<sup>189</sup>

The ANC quickly became aware of the larger implications of the apartheid regime’s strategy, namely that ‘the blurring of the distinction between civilians and military personnel is of the Boer’s making and one which is opposed to our principle that we are fighting the regime and its armed forces, not civilians’.<sup>190</sup> An interview with an unnamed female MK cadre made the case even more plainly:

They want to hide behind the skirts of their women. Because, tomorrow in battle, when a woman in that racist army is killed, they will let out howls and screams and scream that MK is killing women.<sup>191</sup>

What we see above is black women activists’ deep understanding of three things. First, the ideology of motherhood and women’s public participation and emancipation was already in use by the apartheid regime. This necessitated that they engage with ideologies that were already in play so that they might challenge and rearticulate them. Second, they recognised the urgency of engaging with these ideas from both

187 ‘No Glamour or Honour’, 3.

188 ‘Oppose the Apartheid War!’, *VOW*, 1 (1984), 8.

189 ‘Women in MK’, *VOW*, 16 December 1982, 2.

190 ‘No Glamour or Honour’, 3.

191 ‘Women in MK’, *VOW*, 16 December 1982, 2.

an ideological and a practical standpoint. The apartheid regime was prepared to represent white mothers simultaneously as liberated and capable of protecting the apartheid state *and* as weak, dependent and needing white male protection. They were prepared to represent fighting for the apartheid regime as a step forward in terms of gender emancipation. At the same time, however, they were prepared to mobilise traditional race/gender stereotypes about the sanctity of white womanhood and the inherent threat that blackness posed to it as a way to further discredit the anti-apartheid movement *and* provide a readymade justification for an intensified assault against it. They were well aware of the fact that depicting the anti-apartheid activists as posing a threat to 'innocent' white women and children would give the apartheid regime licence to respond in the most brutal ways imaginable. Indeed, what Ida B. Wells Barnett observed about the links between the rape of white women, lynching and intensified racial violence in the American South can easily be applied to the South African situation. As Wells-Barnett put it:

No matter that it leaves a certain class of individuals completely at the mercy of another class; no matter that it encourages the criminally disposed to blacken their faces and commit any crime in the calendar so long as they can throw suspicion on some negro, as is frequently done, and then lead a mob to take his life; no matter that mobs make a farce of the law and mockery of justice; no matter that hundreds of boys are being hardened in crime and schooled in vice by the repetition of such scenes before their eyes – if a white woman declares herself insulted or assaulted, some life must pay the penalty, with all the horrors of the Spanish inquisition and all the barbarism of the Middle Ages. The world looks on and says it is well.<sup>192</sup>

Black activists' knowledge of the double standards that existed with respect to violence against women led the UDF to try to make white women visible in some of their campaigns. Mary Burton, a member of the Black Sash, explained that 'the presence of white women, it was hoped, would reduce the levels of violence ... [They were] not so easy to detain or arrest as it was a black woman nobody knew'.<sup>193</sup>

Because these were the ideologies that needed to be simultaneously challenged and re-articulated, the strategy adopted by black women activists was to encourage white women to think critically about how they were being engaged in the apartheid regime's master plan *as mothers* and in so doing rethink their roles as *mothers* and as *citizens*. Thus, an editorial in *VOW* proclaimed:

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192 Ida Wells-Barnett, 'Lynch Law in America', in Beverly Guy Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 71–2.

193 Barbara Hutmacher MacLean, *Strike a Woman, Strike a Rock: Fighting for Freedom in South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 148.

Let it be clear to all white mothers – once your son or daughter signs up, they are the enemy! Once your husband goes to a three week commando camp, he is the enemy! Once you yourself go to shooting lessons and join Botha's civil defence ... you are the enemy! ... White mothers, there can be no compromise with the murdering SADF who murder not only our children, but also slaughter those of Namibian and Angolan mothers! Protect your future and that of your children and urge your sons to follow the example of thousands of young resisters who refuse to fight to defend apartheid.<sup>194</sup>

As we can see from the above, motherism was an ideology that was formed with reference to both the participants in the movement and its opponents. In incorporating white mothers into their calls for social reforms, black women were using a very culturally specific idea about motherhood to shape the interaction between themselves and a community that traditionally stood in opposition to them. The gendered meaning they sought to attach to white mothers was not one of 'empire builders' as the apartheid state had, but rather as people with compassion and a moral duty to fight against injustice. They thus hoped to re-organise white mothers' experiences and in so doing guide them into action – whether individual or collective – and empower them to actively work to solve South Africa's problems in ways that would remain closed to them if they remained collaborators with apartheid. In other words, they worked to create a story about South African society that shifted the responsibility for social action onto white mothers in a radically different way. Albertina Sisulu made just this point when she said:

I have been talking to people in the white suburbs. Some of them don't know what is happening in our townships. Some white women shake their heads and whisper to each other, 'Is she telling the truth?' My approach to the white sisters is: 'Our children are dying in the townships, killed by your children. You are mothers. Why do you allow your children to go train for the army? There is no country that has declared war on South Africa. Do you want your children to come and kill our children? ... that is what is happening. We want to know from our white sisters why there is not a word from them about this. Our children are being killed mercilessly, but what do they say? How do they, as mothers, tolerate this? Why don't they support us?'<sup>195</sup>

Thus, when we assess the black women who appealed to a 'racially inclusive image of motherhood in their campaigns to fashion a non-racial alliance with white women' we must view them as having made a radical statement about equality.<sup>196</sup> Their strategy represented less an affirmation of patriarchy than an attempt to re-articulate the meaning of motherhood in such a way as to challenge its race and class exclusive character.

194 'VOW Talks to President O.R. Tambo', *VOW*, 3rd Quarter, 1982, 2.

195 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 152.

196 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 381.

## Motherism and worker militancy: The roots of working class consciousness

According to a 1987 ANC publication, during the 1970s and 1980s ‘the militancy of South Africa’s black working class [shook] the Pretoria regime to its very foundations’.<sup>197</sup> Luckhardt and Wall make the point that strikes and boycotts were a major means whereby the apartheid order was undermined. As they put it:

An increasingly evident trend in the latter years of the decade centred on a new form of struggle – combining both the economic and political, involving the workplace and community in strike actions. This form of action manifested itself in strikes organised by workers concentrated in certain union organisations, although other forms of strike activity continued as well. All strikes ... by African workers were in effect an expression of defiance, of resistance to any new means of control imposed by the apartheid regime in whatever form. And because of the nature of state repression in South Africa, issues involved in a single strike can easily be linked with the struggle against the entire social order, not just the individual employers.<sup>198</sup>

What Wall and Luckhardt fail to note, however, is the central role that women workers played in these efforts. Many mothers were the heads of families, so rather than shutting down women’s consciousness and making them passive ‘motherist’ ideals, organising practices actually helped to foster an even stronger commitment to their roles as workers. As Emma Mashinini, secretary of the Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers’ Union (CCAWU) of South Africa, recalled:

In 1956, when I was 26, I had started work in Johannesburg, at a clothing factory called Henochsberg’s which provided uniforms for the government forces. It was my first job, apart from working as a nanny to white children when I left school, and I had not begun to develop any political awareness. But I was already angry. The hours my father had been forced to work had contributed to the break-up of my family, and my own need to earn money had put an end to my schooling. And now, when my three children were still young and I could have done with being at home to look after them, I was having to go out to work to earn a tiny wage, which we needed in order to survive ... You were working for a target. You’d know there was a target you had to meet, and at the back of your mind you were concerned about the welfare of your children. You would be torn in two, because you were at work and in your mind you were at home. This is the problem of the working mother: you are divided. You are only working because you have to.<sup>199</sup>

197 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 20.

198 Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, *Working for Freedom: Black Trade Union Development in South Africa Throughout the 1970s* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), 78.

199 Mashinini, *Strikes*, 13–14.

How do we explain what Berger described as the ‘militant, politically aware female component within the black working class?’<sup>200</sup> The composition of trade unions such as the CCAWU, for example, was between 60 and 70% female during the 1980s.<sup>201</sup> They were ‘the first union in South Africa – black, white, or coloured – to have an agreement that protected women’s maternity rights’.<sup>202</sup>

A number of studies have noted that not only were a high percentage of black South African female industrial workers unionised ‘but in strikes and political actions were often far more involved than men’.<sup>203</sup> Thus, not only were these women committed and effective – they often outpaced their male counterparts. They were, in the words of United Women’s Congress and UDF member Gertrude Fester, ‘much more militant than their male comrades’.<sup>204</sup> According to Rita Ndzanga of the General and Allied Workers’ Union, ‘women have been active in all the trade unions except the old mineworkers’ union from the beginning – and we would have been there too, if we had worked in the mines! ... The men were a bit afraid of getting into the trade union movement because of the pass laws; they thought they might lose their jobs and were afraid their passes might be cancelled. Even today, in the distributive and clothing trades especially, there are more women organisers than men – we’ve kept the head start!’<sup>205</sup> Emma Mashinini agreed: ‘I’m 54 ... and I must say I’ve never had any difficulty because I’m a woman and a trade-union organiser ... in fact there’s a saying that women can explain things better to the workers than men!’<sup>206</sup> In her autobiography, Mashinini recalled how a spy for management was discovered at a meeting in Khotso house and was ‘punched and kicked by the workers and even hit on the head by some women, with their shoes, until one of our officials stepped in and rescued him!’<sup>207</sup>

Beginning in 1973 African workers began to organise semi-legal trade unions which black women joined in large numbers. The labour movement became a key component of resistance against the state and the years 1973–1974 witnessed a wave of strike action in the garment, textile, and food processing industries – many of which had predominantly female workforces. Despite their relative under representation in industrial occupations, black women were ‘active and prominent in the field of labour organisation’.<sup>208</sup> In 1973, 1,000 workers at the Veka Clothing Company in Charlestown went on strike for increased wages. Four days later 700 workers at Trump Clothing Company, also in Charleston, followed. In Johannesburg during March and April of 1973, 4,608 black garment workers took part in a combined 21 work stoppages. Later

200 Iris Berger, ‘Sources of Class Consciousness: South African Women in Recent Labour Struggles’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16, 1 (1983), 51.

201 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 20.

202 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 187.

203 Berger, ‘Gender, Race, and Political Empowerment’, 400.

204 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 242.

205 Lipman, *We Make Freedom*, 81.

206 *Ibid.*, 89.

207 Mashinini, *Strikes*, 103.

208 Bernstein, *For their Triumphs*, 38.



that year in August, 1,000 workers struck at the Frame Group's Wentex Factory in Durban after 600 workers lost their jobs following their demand for higher wages. By January of 1974, 10,000 Durban textile workers in 11 mills were on strike demanding wage increases. In 1974, 300 women workers at the Turnwright Sweet Factory walked out over a dispute over working conditions.

The period following the Soweto uprising witnessed a great deal of labour unrest as workers used work-stoppages as a method for expressing their political grievances. Garment workers were particularly active in these struggles and women, no matter the industry, expressed 'overwhelming support' for the 1976 stay-at-homes.<sup>209</sup> They brought the garment industry to a halt during a protest in August of 1976. The stoppages were organised by 300 African shop stewards, the majority of whom were women. Likewise, women led the September stay-at-home in the Cape 'during which the clothing industry, whose workforce of 50,000 was 90% female, lost two days of production'.<sup>210</sup> A metalworkers' strike at Heinemann's in 1976, where fired workers successfully challenged employers and police in court, involved over 100 women workers. In response to the company's refusal to negotiate with the registered union on behalf of 200 coloured women workers, a strike broke out at the Eveready Electrical Company in Port Elizabeth in 1978; an international boycott followed. And in 1979 in Saldanha Bay, 700 women went on strike at the Sea Harvest fish factory.

The 1980s were a time of tremendous strike activity as well, much of it initiated and sustained by women. Mashinini recalled that 1980 '... was a good year. The power of the unions was now coming on and for the first time we were saying to employers – this or that must not happen to members of our union'.<sup>211</sup> Rita Ndzanga also remarked that 'in 1980 and 1981 we had more strikes than usual and the mood of militancy seemed to be growing'.<sup>212</sup> According to Luckhardt and Wall, SACTU called 1980 'the Year of Mobilisation of the Workers against Racism and Exploitation'.<sup>213</sup> Indeed, the years 1980–1982 witnessed a series of industrial strikes that 'concentrated on the link between the workplace and the community'.<sup>214</sup> In 1980, 1,500 textile workers went on strike in Butterworth. In February and March of 1982, there was a series of clothing strikes on the Witwatersrand culminating in a strike of 1,800 workers at 20 factories in March of 1982. In the months between May and October of 1982 there were strikes at Edgars (May), Woolworths (August), OK Bazaars (August), and CNA (October). In 1983 workers at Pep Stores and Checkers also went on strike.

The militancy of women in such strikes was not random or accidental. Kimble and Unterhalter claim that in this period much more explicit attention began to be paid to

209 Berger, 'Sources of Class Consciousness', 65.

210 Ibid., 57.

211 Mashinini, *Strikes*, 48.

212 Lipman, *We Make Freedom*, 82.

213 Luckhardt and Wall, *Working for Freedom*, 92.

214 Ibid., 93.

the question of the emancipation of women and the role of women in the national liberation struggle than was ever the case formerly. This development has gone in line with an increasing discussion and awareness of the role of the working class in relation to the liberation movement.<sup>215</sup>

Indeed, we can make a connection between their militancy and (i) the close connection workers forged in their minds between class consciousness and nationalist consciousness, (ii) the increasing discussion and awareness of the role of the working class in the liberation movement, and (iii) the heightened awareness of the role of women in the national liberation struggle.

### **Black women workers: The critical link between workplace and community**

According to Berger, the South African case demonstrates that ‘family cannot be viewed simply as a force antithetical to class consciousness’.<sup>216</sup> Berger’s analysis of strikes that occurred among women in the textile industry reveals that women workers’ militancy was the result of the burdens they bore as household heads. Indeed, her study found that

women who are heads of households are more prone to develop a stronger commitment to their work role because they become the principal breadwinners for their family ... Women who are the sole support of their families are more likely to develop class consciousness than women who are still primarily dependent on men to support them.<sup>217</sup>

African women were at the forefront of this initiative, expressing their class consciousness by taking the issue of unions into communities and, at the same time, bringing the problems of the community onto the shop floor. Starting in 1976, women began to participate in stayaways and work stoppages to protest the violence engulfing township communities. In 1980, 70% of the workers in the Western Cape observed a two-day stayaway to commemorate the 1976 uprisings. Because black female workers had to assume primary responsibility for the maintenance of the family and the household in both economic and emotional terms, they came to see domestic issues as having a strong political dimension and when their ability to support their households came under threat, they were willing to take political action. As Seidman explains, a broadly defined class consciousness where labour movements ‘take up issues beyond the workplace is a gendered process in which female workers domestic responsibilities have made them more likely to raise community issues than their male counterparts’.<sup>218</sup> Indeed, at a August 1984 National Women’s Day meeting at

215 Kimble and Unterhalter, ‘We Opened the Road’, 30.

216 Berger, ‘Sources of Class Consciousness’, 66.

217 Berger, ‘Sources of Class Consciousness’, 51.

218 Seidman, ‘No Freedom’, 308.

Wits University, Cape UDF secretary, Cheryl Carolus, reminded the audience that 'it is women who struggle to feed and clothe the next generation in the poverty-stricken Bantustans. The women reproduce the working class and experience the greatest economic exploitation'.<sup>219</sup>

This political consciousness and orientation can be seen as having had its genesis in the 1950s. The clause 3 of the Women's Charter, 'Women's Lot', for example, frames just such an understanding and exemplifies the manner in which black women in South Africa have traditionally 'interpreted gender concerns as family issues'.<sup>220</sup>

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 hungry and sick. It is our lot to keep and care for homes that are too small, broken and dirty to be kept clean. We know the burden of looking after children and 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 pondokkies, shanties, or in overcrowded one-room apartments. We know the bitterness of children taking to lawless ways, of daughters becoming unmarried mothers while still at school ... [children] growing up without education, training, or jobs at a living wage.<sup>221</sup>

This emphasis on family, rather than simply reinforcing traditionalism,

helped to build up a sense of women's common experience on the basis of class; for as working-class wives and mothers, they faced far different circumstances than middle-class South African women, who rarely held paying jobs and had domestic workers to relieve them of responsibilities for child care, cleaning, and cooking.<sup>222</sup>

Because the overwhelming majority of repressive labour laws and regulations were exclusive to Africans, they were also seen as direct threats to African people as a whole. Many of these repressive pieces of legislation were both gender and race specific, thus African women's class and nationalist consciousness could not escape having a gender component. For example, industry attempted to regulate the fertility of African women very rigidly in response both to profitability demands and the objectives of the apartheid state, which made control of African fertility a major cornerstone of its rule. According to a 1987 ANC publication:

In 1973, following hot on the heels of a series of major strikes and combined with a growing white awareness of the scale of black unemployment – the Pretoria regime launched a massive family planning programme. At clinics and in advertisements Africans were told: 'A small family is a big future'. But

219 'On the March to Freedom: Report on 9 August', *Sechaba*, October 1984, 9.

220 Berger, 'Gender, Race, and Empowerment', 400.

221 Wits, FEDSAW Papers, Women's Charter, AD 1137/ AC1.5.4.

222 Berger, 'Gender, Race, and Empowerment', 417.

at the same time whites were told to have large families for the Republic. White mothers of ten children are even rewarded with a special medal from the racist State President. By 1978 the Health Department boasted that its family planning programme was the eighth biggest in the world, and taking population size into account, was surpassed only by China. Over the next five years, expenditure on family planning increased three-fold.<sup>223</sup>

Likewise, women interviewed in the British women's journal, *Outwrite*, described how fertility, racism and economic issues were intertwined in the lives of African women.

There is more or less enforced sterilisation or enforced use of Depo Provera as the only contraceptive offered. You get stamped in your pass book if you've been sterilised or if you're on Depo Provera and you stand more of a chance of getting a job.<sup>224</sup>

In one engineering factory women were forced to take the pill daily under a nurse's supervision. A 1984 edition of *VOW* thus declared that: 'The racists' "family planning system" which is aimed at the systematic reduction of the black population, is therefore one of our major targets of attack, in 1984 and in the future'.<sup>225</sup> In attacking these laws, women advanced a 'gendered understanding of what working class political organisations should demand'.<sup>226</sup> It was this type of consciousness of the manner in which race, gender, and class oppression were intertwined that led women in Port Alfred to organise a week-long stayaway from work in protest against the lenient action taken by police against a known rapist.

The close interconnection that women drew between labour and community issues might also be seen as having played a key role in the emergence of a more broadly based and coherent nationalist consciousness in African working-class and poor communities. Emma Mashinini was asked about the political involvement of unions when she was called to testify before the Wiehahn Commission in 1979.

I was questioned about political involvement in the trade unions, and I didn't pretend there wasn't any. I insisted that the trade unions have got to be very much involved in politics, and that even if trade unions anywhere else in the world are not involved politically, in South Africa they must be, because this is a country where everything around us is politics. As they say, touch a black person and it's politics. So we cannot simply say we want to fight for our rights as workers, because politically we are not even recognised as workers.<sup>227</sup>

223 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 15.

224 'ANC Women Speak', 11.

225 'The Genocide Drug', *VOW*, 1 (1984), 12.

226 Seidman, 'No Freedom', 294.

227 Mashinini, *Strikes*, 42–3.

Women's militancy, Berger explains, stemmed from the close connection in workers minds between class consciousness and nationalist consciousness. '[A]lthough the stated grievances of most strikers centred on their position as workers in a capitalist economy, their struggles also reflected black discontent in a white dominated society.'<sup>228</sup> As an article entitled, 'The Cost of War', that appeared in a 1982 edition of *VOW* explained:

It is we the oppressed, the poor, and the hungry who are being forced to carry the burden of SA war economy. Retrenchments are one of the most vicious results of militarisation. ... We women are the first to lose our jobs when retrenchments take place. This means we must step up the organisation of women workers.<sup>229</sup>

This type of political consciousness was expressed in many ways, including how workers addressed each other. Mashinini explained how workers began to greet one another with *Amandla* – a development that their bosses found extremely disturbing.

Even when the workers went back the employers were not happy. I would receive phone calls from them complaining that when the workers walked in they did not say, 'Good morning, sir, good morning, Mr Joseph', and so forth. So I said, 'What did they say?' They told me the workers were saying, 'Good morning comrade,' and they did not accept this as a form of address to them ... Another thing which offended them was that some of the workers when they walked past, instead of saying 'Good morning' at all, said '*Amandla*' ... This was driving them crazy, because they knew that immediately the workers withdrew their power from work that whole place would again be at a standstill. What with this and the comrade war we had phone calls and phone calls, from the most senior industrial relations personnel in Cape Town.<sup>230</sup>

According to the chairperson of the Natal Organisation of Women, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, 'NOW had also joined hands with working women in COSATU ... They believed that the struggle for better working conditions could not be separated from the struggle for national liberation and the struggle for women's rights'.<sup>231</sup> It was thus that Phozo Zondo, a NOW organiser, began working for the Transport and General Workers' Union, helping to further infuse the workers' movement with a gendered perspective.

The government responded to worker militancy by arresting and detaining ever larger numbers of union officials. When union leader Liz Abrahams was detained in June of 1986 she found that

<sup>228</sup> Berger, 'Sources of Class Consciousness', 65.

<sup>229</sup> 'The Cost of War', *VOW*, 4th Quarter, 1982, 4.

<sup>230</sup> Mashinini, *Strikes*, 102.

<sup>231</sup> Madlala-Routledge, 'What Price for Freedom?', 67.

there were many problems within the Food and Canning Workers' Union ... Our union was very hard hit because so many of our organisers and our secretaries were detained. Every morning, when you woke up, you would see a new branch secretary in gaol. When you went to the exercise yard in the morning and the branch secretary from Grabouw was detained. The next morning there's another one from Saldanha Bay, and so on.<sup>232</sup>

A strike wave of protests against the detention of unionists swept the commercial and catering outlets. Most of the strikers were workers organised under Mashinini's union, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (CCAWU).

Just as was the case in the 1950s, unions were important vehicles for community organising. Women played a critical role here, because their struggles on behalf of the families led them to make crucial connections between personal, community and national issues. It was largely because of women that

a feature of worker organisation in South Africa has been the close links between trade unions and community organisations. Issues taken up have revolved not only around struggles at the point of production but also around matters such as fares, rent, and food prices which are of concern to workers and their dependents in the wider community.<sup>233</sup>

According to the pamphlet *A Woman's Place is in the Struggle, Not Behind Bars*:

As heads of households, in many cases, they have taken decisions to support the rent boycotts which have been launched to hit out against segregated and inferior municipal authorities whose authority they reject. They have similarly supported consumer boycotts of white-owned businesses, designed to push the business sector into taking a meaningful stance against apartheid.<sup>234</sup>

Thandi Nkosi, an MK member, was interviewed by *VOW* in 1984 about the struggles waged by women in Chesterville and Lamontville. She concurred that, 'in all these struggles, women in the townships were very active. They were always in the forefront, rallying everyone with the slogan AMANDLA NGAWETHU!! When there were strikes or boycotts, they were always among the first to take up the cudgels'.<sup>235</sup>

Women were quick to make the connection between the costs associated with the apartheid military apparatus and their declining wage packets. As Alfred Nzo explained in a 1982 interview in *VOW*:

It is a well known fact that South Africa, like the rest of the capitalist world, is going through a very deep economic crisis. As usual when this kind of

232 Abrahams, *Married to the Struggle*, 61.

233 Unterhalter, 'Women in Struggle', 892.

234 FEDTRAW, *A Woman's Place is in the Struggle, Not Behind Bars!* (Johannesburg: Zambezi House, 1988), 2.

235 'No Matter How Dangerous it can be', *VOW*, 1 (1984), 5.

crisis invades these countries, the ordinary man and woman in the street, the workers, are made to bear the burden. That is why in fact there is this spate of rent increases all over South Africa today. This has had the effect of people learning to organise themselves.<sup>236</sup>

Albertina Sisulu, speaking at a National Women's Day rally in August of 1984, explained how the general sales tax was 'raised from seven percent to ten percent to finance apartheid. GST is used to buy guns to kill our children'.<sup>237</sup> A good example of how the struggle for better working conditions was linked to the struggle for national liberation and the struggle for women's rights can be seen in the bread boycott of 1985, initiated by the United Women's Organisation. According to Gertrude Fester, a member of UWO, the bread boycott was an important moment for political education.

With the bread boycott, analyses were made of how government allocates our money. The bread subsidy was decreased but at the same time white farmers were heavily subsidised. Increased militarization meant more repression for us and an increase in the defence budget. The slogan 'Bread for people and not for profits' linked our struggle to labour issues. The increase in bread prices was also an attack on children's health.<sup>238</sup>

Women in South Africa recognised that it was they who bore much of the brunt of the declaration of the state of emergency. One way in which they did so was through the payment of basic services. As Tsebanang Bagaetsho, executive member of the Federation of Transvaal Women and the UDF, explained:

We organise women on high fares and the cost of living. The past year the regime increased taxes, the general sales tax on basic commodities. Obviously that money is feeding defence. So we are campaigning against this sales tax. We are saying we can't be subsidising our own death. Women are thus drawn into the Federation.<sup>239</sup>

During the state of emergency, women became the 'pulse of the oppressed in the struggle for a socio-economic order in South Africa where equality without discrimination' was the order of the day, according to an ANC pamphlet released to commemorate 1984 as the Year of South African Women.<sup>240</sup> This development occurred not simply because women were so heavily oppressed by apartheid, but also because of the changes in strategy brought on by the state of emergency. Because the emergency restrictions targeted official bodies, the response was to 'go underground

236 'VOW Talks to Comrade-Secretary Alfred Nzo about the Burning Issues in our Rent Struggle', *VOW*, 3rd Quarter, 1982, 2.

237 'On the March to Freedom', *Sechaba*, October 1984, 10.

238 Gertrude Fester, 'Women's Organisations in the Western Cape: Vehicles for Gender Struggle or Instruments of Subordination?', *Agenda*, 34 (1997), 48.

239 'Women Fight State of Emergency', *Sechaba*, April 1987, 30.

240 ANC, 1984: *Year of South African Women*, 7.

and develop different ways of getting together which [were] the beginnings of a form of people's power'.<sup>241</sup> In his 1984 New Year message, Oliver Tambo discussed how to identify and attack the apartheid regime's weaknesses:

You are aware that the apartheid regime maintains an extensive administrative system through which it directs our lives. This system includes organs of central and provincial government, the army and the police, the judiciary, the Bantustan administrations, the community councils, the local management and local affairs committees. It is these institutions of apartheid power that we must attack and demolish, as part of the struggle to put an end to racist minority rule in our country. Needless to say, as strategists, we must select for attack those parts of the enemy administrative system which we have the power to destroy, as a result of our united and determined offensive. We must hit the enemy where it is weakest. The goal we are setting ourselves today is dictated by the logic of our revolution. Its realisation is made possible by the fact that in our millions, we have already laid the basis for its accomplishment.<sup>242</sup>

Tambo went on to detail how the mobilisation of the people had weakened the entire bantustan system, noting that at the end of 1983 there was a 'massive rejection of the local management committees and community councils'.<sup>243</sup> He also drew attention to the 'determined resistance ... in the Western Cape [that] made it impossible for Koornhof to carry out his schemes', as well as the 'heroic struggle' against the Sebe administration in Mdantsane. He quoted a South African political observer who described the resistance as having moved beyond its initial goal of resistance to the bus fare increase and become 'a conflict of will between the Ciskei puppet administration and its many opponents'. He also made reference to the tremendous resistance effort that was mobilised to fight the incorporation of some townships into the KwaZulu Bantustan, which he described as sowing the seeds of a 'nationwide offensive against the Pretoria regime'.<sup>244</sup>

Women were at the forefront of many of these campaigns due to organisations like the United Women's Organisation (UWO) and the Federation of Transvaal Women. 'The strategy of both [was] to organise women with the intention of involving them in broader struggles such as rent protests, consumer boycotts, the anti-Republic Day and anti-Ciskei campaigns'.<sup>245</sup> In places like the Western Cape, the 'UWO was largely instrumental in the formation of the UDF'.<sup>246</sup> According to Ruth Mompati, in the UDF it was the women who 'did most of the work at the grassroots level'.<sup>247</sup> As the ANC-authored pamphlet, *Women on the March for Freedom*, explained,

241 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 9.

242 ANC, *1984: Year of South African Women*, 15.

243 Ibid.

244 ANC, *1984: Year of South African Women*, 16.

245 Unterhalter, 'Women in Struggle', 893.

246 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 250.

247 Ibid., 130.



The conditions imposed by the emergency have laid the ground for the flowering of new forms of resistance. People's committees, which are mainly composed of women members, have been set up ... [S]treet committees were everywhere, a measure taken because public leaders were being locked up ... Women are in the forefront of these new developments.<sup>248</sup>

The regime's strategy was to create community councils in the townships; they were given small powers such as collecting rents, allocating houses and issuing trading licences. Many communities rejected these councils and boycotted them. According to Ruth Mompati, 'the community organisations inside the country have organised alternative structures ... an infrastructure has been created by the people, and our women are the strength in these structures'.<sup>249</sup> Women's intense involvement in these struggles was encapsulated in the ANC slogan: Women Unite for People's Power! In a speech before the ANC Women's Council in Lusaka, Zambia in February of 1983, Gertrude Shope, head of the Women's Section, explained the fundamentals of this strategy:

We have to address ourselves to the question of strengthening our movement and increasing its striking power. The struggle has to be waged around problems of unemployment, mass removals, increased prices, and high rents, increased persecution of our people, the President's Council proposals and other repressive acts of the racist regime, with a view to forging a united front for united action.<sup>250</sup>

The 1980s were years that witnessed exactly the type of mobilisation that Shope described. During this decade, community-based mass formations were revived and moved to the forefront of the liberation struggle. Many women's organisations, such as the UWO (which united with the Women's Front to become the United Women's Congress, UWCO), were central to the formation of UDF area committees. For example, three women on the UDF executive, Cheryl Carolus, Zou Kota and Mildred Leisa were all UWCO members. Struggles in the townships near Durban, especially in the communities of Clermont, Lamontville, and Chesterville, centred on their resistance to incorporation the KwaZulu homeland. Women, according to Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, were 'centrally involved' in these struggles.<sup>251</sup>

Issues like rent increases were staging grounds for mass resistance, particularly on the part of women because paying rent was primarily their responsibility. After it was announced that rents in Soweto would go up in three stages between September of 1979 and September of 1980, more than 500 women, accompanied by their husbands and children, demonstrated outside the community council offices. Eventually the ranks of protesters swelled to 5,000. The statement they held aloft read:

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248 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 9.

249 Russell, *Lives of Courage*, 117.

250 ANC, *1984: Year of South Africa's Women*, 3.

251 Madlala-Routledge, 'What Price for Freedom?', 67.

We the women of Soweto hereby ... reject vehemently the increased rents which aid racist organisations like SABRA [South African Bureau of Racial Affairs]! We have no citizenship in the land of our birth! Therefore, we reject the honoured citizenship conferred on Dr Piet Koornhof.<sup>252</sup>

In another incident, a group of 100 women marched into the Durban City Council meeting in 1980 and informed officials that they would 'rather take their families and squat in the bush' than pay more for housing.<sup>253</sup> Similar protests took place in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein, Sharpeville and Pietersburg.

Women also took strong action against the presence of SADF troops in the townships. In November 1985 in Mamelodi near Pretoria, for example, 4,000 women marched together in protest against the presence of the SADF, demanding their withdrawal and a halt to their reign of terror. 'Their action forced supporters of the system to resign from the posts they occupied.'<sup>254</sup> That same year, women in the townships around Uitenhage, where a notorious police massacre had taken place in March, formed the Uitenhage Women's Organisation in protest. Women began running self-help classes in first aid 'so that people injured by the police and military on the streets would not have to go to the hospital for medical assistance and run the risk of being detained'.<sup>255</sup> The Chesterville Women's Guard was formed in 1986 to keep a state vigilante group called the A-Team at bay and protect UDF-affiliated activists in the area.

Framing the defence issue in motherist terms also reflected the nature of the terror the regime was enacting upon communities. As one ANC pamphlet put it, 'children have been a prime target of the regime'.<sup>256</sup> According to reports by the Detainees' Parent's Support Committee, 40% of those jailed under the state of emergency were under 18. During the first declaration of emergency in September 1985, 1,200 children from one school in Soweto were arrested in a single raid. In March of 1987, it was reported that there were more than 2,200 babies imprisoned with their mothers. Thus, when black women appealed to white women as mothers, and urged them to reject apartheid and its conscription of their children, they did not seek to efface the very real differences in the experience of mothering but nevertheless wanted to highlight the mutually deleterious impact of such a heavily militarised society. As Bagaetsho put it: 'You know, lots of white children at the age of 17–18 are conscripted into the army. This is a real problem in white families. It affects women a lot. They really are against that.'<sup>257</sup>

Women also played a key role in anti-incorporation struggles in Lamontville against their incorporation into KwaZulu; and in Braklaagte against forced incorporation into Bophuthatswana. According to Lydia Kompe, a union activist and member of the Transvaal Rural Action Committee:

252 ANC, *Apartheid: You shall be Crushed*, 14.

253 *Ibid.*, 15.

254 ANC, *Women on the March for Freedom*, 2.

255 *Ibid.*, 5.

256 *Ibid.*, 8.

257 'Women Fight the State of Emergency', *Sechaba*, April 1987, 30.

The women's group that formed there set up a *stokvel* ... by 1988 they had a fund of more the R2 000. When the successive crises broke over the community (and they were many and bitter), the women's financial resources were used to assist members of the community. The women's group was approached by the *kgotla* to assist with transporting wounded youths to hospitals, pay bail for people charged with public violence in conflicts with the police, and for trips to consult the lawyer. Their resources immediately gave the women a higher status in the community.<sup>258</sup>

Women were also key players in resistance movements around squatter camps and forced removals. As an unnamed ANC member told the woman's newspaper, *Outwrite*, in 1985:

For a lot of women who are dumped in the bantustans and so on, their resistance is to leave those areas and come and squat in the squatter camps around the cities. They fight and they keep on coming back no matter how many times they are removed.<sup>259</sup>

In a 1984 interview with Beata Lipman, Alexandria Luke, a Crossroads resident, explained that

when they try to send us to Transkei we just drop down at Bellville or Parow and come straight back ... I think we have been stronger than men in this struggle. Our women's committee holds its meetings in the open – we are using our loudhailers, 'Ya, come, come, there's a meeting today'. They run all over Crossroads ... But the men: I can't understand the way the men are acting, their actions are always in night times, it's a meeting – but in the morning you don't hear what the meeting is for.<sup>260</sup>

Thus, women's struggles in the 1980s were marked by a strong commitment to what Gertrude Fester calls a 'specific South African feminism'. While issues of patriarchy within the home are never excused, they are 'contextualised by the unemployment and frustration that people experience'.<sup>261</sup> The approach to combating these ills, therefore, is one that does not prioritise one form of oppression over another so much as set out the fundamental preconditions for human emancipation in general and women's emancipation in particular. As Tandi Gcabashe, an ANC member, explained:

In a way it is good that these struggles are going on at the same time, and that is again happening mostly because of the very prominent and important role that the women have played in our struggle. And so, if we are struggling along together I see no reason why, when freedom comes, we should not

258 Janet Small and Lydia Kompe, 'Organizing Rural Women: The Experience of TRAC', *Agenda*, 12, 1992, 15–16.

259 'ANC Women Speak', 11.

260 Lipman, *We Make Freedom*, 53.

261 Fester, 'Women's Organisations in the Western Cape', 48.