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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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A remarkable feature of the liberation struggle in South Africa has been the high degree of participation of black, predominantly African, women as recently illustrated in the period leading up to the apartheid elections in early September 1989. In the defiance campaign undertaken by the mass democratic movement, women were found in the crowds who demonstrated to desegregate exclusively white hospitals, and beaches. Women were among the 2-3 million workers who stayed at home in protest at the charade of an election in which the majority of the population is denied a vote. Women placed under restrictions defied them and openly addressed meetings and rallies.

Despite censorship and restrictions, television screens have featured white male police wielding whips while pursuing women of all ages through the streets of the townships and on university campuses. We have seen scenes of women running away from tear gas, rubber bullets and shot gun pellets, and been shown the wounds of some who failed to escape: pictures of the red welts on the body of a 14 year old white girl beaten as she tried to enter a church with her family and newspaper photographs of the scarred face of a black woman assaulted by the police.

In the courts black and white women appeared charged for a variety of political offences. A month before the election, Phumula Williams was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for being a member of the ANC and its military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe. Lumka Nyamza and Jenny Schreiner are part of a group of 14 people facing trial on charges of treason. At the end of July Lumka married her fellow accused Tony Yengeni in Pollsmoor prison, but their five year old son was refused permission to attend the ceremony. 26 year old Daisy Modise has spent two years in the condemned cell of a prison in the Bophuthatswana bantustan, while a grandmother over 60 years of age Evelina D'Bruin was sentenced to hang in May 1989 and awaits execution.

On the diplomatic front, Albertina Sisulu, Joint President of the United Democratic Front (UDF), led a delegation including Sister Bernard Ncube a nun who is President of the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW) and a young activist Jessie Duarte, to western capitals meeting politicians

including President Bush and Mrs Thatcher, addressing rallies and making representations on behalf of the mass democratic movement.

These images are not isolated or token presentations, but an accurate reflection of South Africa today - the dominant images projected in a reality that also includes: white women flocking to vote for the conservative party, or abusing black domestic workers; black and white women operating within the structures of apartheid, African women ullulating in praise of Bantustan leaders and emmaciated ones living in the arid and eroded Bantustans with no time or energy to spare from the grim task of finding the means of survival for self and the children, the handicapped and the even older people the burden of whose care is imposed on African women; and women of all races, totally uninvolved, but not unaffected by, the struggles around them.

The active engagement of African women today, is not a recent phenomenon, but flows from a long history of involvement in the liberation struggle. The form and content of women's participation in resistance has been shaped by their particular experience of apartheid. At no stage however, can one speak of womens participation *per se*. Apartheid policies are applied differentially in terms of race and ethnicity, and the experience of women categorised by the state as African, Coloured, Indian or White differs significantly as does their response.

White women enjoy the franchise and thus have access to political power, unlike African women and men. White women workers enjoy more rights and are paid more than blacks. In all respects, white women rank above all blacks : women and men. Thus the young newly qualified Nelson Mandela on entering a legal firm, is informed by the white woman whose task it was to provide tea for the staff, that he could not use the same cups as the white attorneys, and moreover, that he would have to make his own tea as she could not be expected to do so. African women work in white homes, freeing white women from domestic labour and taking on a double domestic shift themselves. They have cared for generations of white children, but apartheid policies and the employment practices of white women women, often make it impossible for them to care for their own.

As in most countries, white women in South Africa are discriminated against as women, but the majority hardly appear to be conscious of it. White women within the democratic movement, or sympathetic to it tend to observe and remark on the oppression of black women but often fail to address or even study their own. On the other hand the proportionately greater involvement of white women in the democratic movement is not coincidental.

The divisions are not simply between black and white, or the oppressor and oppressed. Objectively, the dominated have a common interest in their liberation, yet they are divided by the state. Race, ethnicity and gender determine their residence and the opportunities, category, level and location of their employment. They have little or no common experience of school, play, or of community to help them overcome the state imposed racial and ethnic divisions. A pre-occupation with colour and ethnicity is the basis of the dominant ideology, which is both overtly patriarchal and endorses a racial hierarchy in which the

superiority of white (meaning Afrikaner) culture is equated with western culture.

In general Black women are more conscious of racial, national, and class oppression than they are of oppression as women, though they do note that national and racial oppression bears more harshly on them. However there is growing awareness and demands that the issue of gender oppression be addressed, especially among younger women of all racial groups. Non-racial women's organisations have to challenge both the hierarchical racial order and the patriarchal basis of South African society.

The physical separation of the different racial and ethnic groups and the restrictions on freedom of movement have aggravated the objective factors of varying status and conditions which mitigate against the development of a "sisterhood" of women that could bridge the divisions brought about by apartheid, and have deferred the emergence of explicitly feminist organisations. Yet as we shall see, the question of integrating women's emancipation into the struggle for national liberation is a major issue confronting both the mass democratic movement and the liberation movement.

This paper discusses primarily the involvement of African women in resistance with some reference to women of other racial and ethnic groups. The all embracing nature of oppression of the apartheid system results in a range of activity that could correctly be described as resistance. It has not been possible within the constraints of time and space to deal here with "political participation" in its full breadth.

### Early Struggles.

The early struggles in which African women engaged were usually independent of the established male dominated political organisations from which they were excluded. In contrast to the methods and style of these organisations, women's campaigns were militant, involved large numbers at grass roots level, and usually incorporated some form of direct action. But despite the scale and militancy their campaigns did not result in the establishment of enduring women's organisations, and for many years women's struggles were carried out in isolation. These characteristics were related to the issues around which women chose to mobilise - issues that were materially based and local.

In the aftermath of conquest, African women focussed on trying to retain economic independence for themselves and their households in the face of growing impoverishment. The African people were being dispossessed of their land in order to force them into wage labour for whites. Following the discovery of minerals, the demand was primarily for cheap male labour for the mines with the social and economic base of the migrant labour system being underpinned by African women remaining in the reserves and maintaining agricultural production for subsistence and generational reproduction. However, the land available to Africans for independent agricultural production declined sharply, and in 1913 was limited to 13% of the land area of South Africa. While the men worked as migrants, women were left with an increasing workload and bore an ever

greater part of the responsibility for ensuring their own survival and that of the family.

White settlers as distinct from the mining houses wanted pressure applied on the African people in order to secure labour for their farms and in their homes. But the concern of the state was meeting the needs of the mining houses, and control over women's labour was not a priority at a national level.

Wives and daughters in African families on farms now owned by whites were reluctant to provide the unpaid labour on the land and in settler homes that was expected of them. In the absence of any curbs on their mobility they frequently went to the urban areas. Once there, African women were not attracted to working in white homes under the harsh conditions and poor wages offered by settlers. Instead, they preferred to engage in independent economic activity such as making and selling food or beer, accomodating lodgers, providing services such as sewing or taking in washing.

Municipal authorities responsive to the demands of white settlers that African women in urban areas should be coerced to take employment as domestic workers, increasingly tried to limit the scope of independent economic activity, or imposed a total ban. In some cases they refused to allow anyone not in employment to live in the segregated locations set aside for Africans, or they required the purchase of lodgers permits or a hawkers licence, or payment of fees for use of the municipal wash house. In 1921, an official Committee on Pass Laws listed the following permits as required for African town dwellers in one South African province - the Orange Free State:

*"stand permits, residential passes, visitors passes, seeking work passes, employment registration certificates, permits to reside on employers premises, work on own behalf certificates, domestic services books, washerwomens permits and entertainment permits."*

The impact of these and other restrictions on economic activity was harsh and provoked a militant response from women. They made representations, and if rejected, they organised resistance in the form of boycotts, or defiance of the regulations. Rarely were special organisations set up, usually mobilisation was through existing organisations, such as the *manyanos* which are the equivalent of the "mothers unions" of European Christian Churches. Women acquired skills and experience of organisation and mobilisation through their involvement in the *manyanos*, and used these most effectively. The issues directly affected all women: those who took in washing as well as the wives of the most prosperous location residents. It was therefore possible to mobilise widespread support and participation in any demonstration or campaign. But the measures taken by Town Councils depended on local conditions and varied from region to region, making it difficult in the absence of a national organisation to co-ordinate protest action over a wide area or nationally. As a consequence most campaigns against such regulations were local and isolated.

A notable exception to this pattern was the Anti-Pass Campaign in the Orange Free State, where women had begun protesting against having to carry passes in the 1890s. In 1913, they organised a province wide campaign, in which they refused to buy passes or permits and courted arrest. On occasions women bearing sticks as weapons confronted the police. Many were imprisoned under grim conditions. The campaign won admiration and support from other provinces, where women were not required to carry passes, and from the provincial Congress as well as the newly formed South African Native National Congress (later ANC). The male political leaders facilitated women's representations to Parliament. Eventually, the women's protests succeeded, (\*) and African women were not required to carry passes until the 1950s

However, throughout the 1920s and 1930s and into the 1940s African women had to continue to resist curbs on their economic activities. They organised many local campaigns (some successful) against restrictions on their freedom of movement. Though they had been exempted from carrying the general passes under the Native Urban Areas Act 1923 attempts to impose restrictions on them continued, and increased as women were perceived as one of the key elements in limiting permanent urbanisation of the African population.

Families could not survive on the low wages being paid to Africans, and so women were forced to contribute to family income either through their independent economic activities, or by entering into employment. The only opportunities for women were domestic work or employment on the farms.

Restrictions on self employed women and the low wages paid to those in employment, united African women in protest against increases in prices and shortages of essentials that affected all members of the community - those who were struggling to resist wage employment as well as those in employment in both rural and urban areas, men as well as women. So campaigns on these issues were less isolated.

Women joined in the protests organised by the African National Congress (ANC) or the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU), and frequently succeeded in injecting their methods and style into the campaigns. In addition to joining in general protests and demonstrations in the 1920s women engaged in a variety of campaigns of their own which included mass direct action e.g. they boycotted shops and successfully brought down prices; they organised boycotts of mission schools; they burnt dipping tanks and protested against restrictions on the brewing of home beer.

African women found that they could gain support and unite with those women who shared their experience of oppression. When the anti-pass campaign started, Coloured women in the Orange Free State were also subject to the same restrictions and joined the protests. The women came

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(\*) In most cases, women's demands did not confront state policy at any fundamental level, and the authorities were frequently able to make concessions rather than face continued militant protest from the women.

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