

FSW Airb

1. Remarkable part women are playing today against oppression and for equality. One of the most heartening signs in our country is the forward movement of our women, particularly African and Indian. They are showing that they have a very clear understanding of the position.

2. This forward movement is not a sudden development. It has been prepared for by the spread of trade unionism amongst women since the 1930's and the steady and large increase in the number of African, Coloured and Indian women in the professions, such as nursing, teaching and in factory work.

What we are seeing is a change in the position of woman in society itself. She is not just a housewife or domestic worker but she is playing an important part in production and profession.

3. There are other reasons why women should and have been drawn into public life. They are wage earners, heads of households - wives and mothers and therefore very deeply aware of the hardships of poverty. It is they who have to make ends meet. They are like working women all over the world. The fact is that working women in South Africa have not only welcomed trade unionism but have accepted responsibility of leadership in the trade unions.

Our women are equally mindful of the injustices and indignities they face due to our oppressive system.

If it is possible to differentiate it is the woman that suffers most from the inhuman and barbaric migrant labour system that takes the husband and father away from home and prevents the woman from joining the husband, which results in the misery of broken homes. There are something like 250,000 surplus women in the reserves who are cut off from normal family life and there are so many surplus men in the towns away from the wives, children and mothers.

4. The women feel directly in their own person the cruel sections of the laws that prevent them coming into towns. There are special sections in the Native Urban Areas Act that prevent a woman coming from the country areas to the towns unless she has the permission from her guardian, Native Commissioner and Municipal Council from whom she must get a permit. A woman has no right under the notorious section 10 to join her husband. Hundreds of African women have been deported and sent away from their husbands and children. We are all here mindful of our Comrade Annie Selinge, a foundation member of the Federation of South African Women. Annie Selinga was convicted and sent out from Cape Town where she lived for 13 years with her husband and three children.

It is not only the men who suffer when they get exiled to Frenchdale, like Lengisi, Gwentshe - whose families have been left to fend for themselves.

5. The woman as wife, as mother, as citizen, is affected directly and indirectly by the system of oppression - the known colour bar system that produces one of the highest rates of disease and crime

in the world. One out of ten South Africans get convicted for some crime or other and that includes women and children.

There are 3,000 people who meet their death every year from violent and unlawful cases - victims of unlawful assault and murder. It is the woman, the mother's heartache, whose children are murdered or sent to the scaffold.

6. Our record of health is no better. South Africa has the highest known death rate from tuberculosis in the world. Our children die from poverty before they have a chance to experience life. Between 40% and 50% of our African children die before they reach maturity. Women who bring their children into the world in pain, who nurse and care for them whilst they are small and helpless are compelled to see them die from preventable causes.

What is it that kills our children? Starvation which has made pellagra one of the major causes of death and disease in this country.

The terrible shanty towns, the miserable substitutes for homes that are responsible for gastro-enteritis, tuberculosis, etc. that kill our people in many thousands.

7. The poverty which causes this is not just the same poverty which prevails in other countries. Our poverty is not just the one that is as a result of a system where there are rich and poor. Our poverty is a poverty of the poor as elsewhere plus a poverty forced upon us by colour bars preventing us from education which we want; not Verwoerds Bantu Schools which are there to prevent us from getting sufficient education; colour bars preventing us from buying land, so we always have to pay rent. Our children are not allowed to attend all Universities and Technical Colleges and in general ~~are~~ to do skilled work.

Section 77 of the New Industrial Conciliation Act which has been passed in the last Session of Parliament, is to bring the whole of the Non-European population to be discriminated against in jobs in the same way as on the mines. A foretaste of things to come is the action of the Cape Municipal Employees, Firemen and Transport workers who have appealed to de Klerk to reserve these jobs for Europeans and Mr. de Klerk's promise to do so.

8. We women know what this discrimination means. As women we have been discriminated against, not only as Non-Europeans but as women.

The scandalous position in the Nursing Service where there is gross discrimination against Coloured, African and Indian nurses who have to pass the same examinations and have the same qualifications, do the same work, can assume the same responsibilities but for less pay. The African qualified nurse gets less than the European probationer. Nor are they employed in positions of responsibility. Non-European women in hospitals are not given supervisory posts and yet are accused of lacking in responsibility.

Even in the factories, there is usually less pay for women than for men.

9. This inequality and discrimination have been suffered by women not only here but elsewhere. History has proved that these discriminations are removed only when women get full political rights.

Even in our country citizenship rights are discriminated not only on account of race and colour but also on account of sex. Some African and Coloured men have a kind of parliamentary vote in the Cape but not the women.

The emancipation of our women is bound up with the emancipation of our men. The men will not get freedom for themselves unless we struggle together and get freedom for all of us.

10. There is vast room for the improvement of the status of women as a whole. Women here as in many other backward countries are held back by custom and traditions. Women will not be emancipated until they and the men break with the old traditional belief that women are men's inferiors, and that their role is in the kitchen and with children - they have nothing outside it.

We must demand the right to free marriage, free divorce, the right to guardianship of our children, the right to own property - the rights men fought and won for themselves.

The days are past when women could just leave it to the men to defend their interests. We know that today there are many African women who suffer injustice because of the laws that give men the exclusive right to own and inherit land and when the husband dies the mother and child are at the mercy of the son or the dead man's surviving brother. Under the present African custom, if a man does not leaving a will, his property does not go to his wife or daughters - if he has no son, it goes to some male member of his family, who very often squanders it and leaves the widow and the daughters destitute.

The need for an organisation to struggle against discrimination and injustices and to win real freedom and equality is great. That is why our Federation has received such a response amongst all the oppressed and freedom loving women.

Women who wish together with men to build a society where their children should grow up in peace and be useful citizens and live a full and prosperous life.

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FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN 1954-1963

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