

WHEN YOU STRIKE THE WOMEN YOU HAVE STRUCK A ROCK

The Story of the Federation of South African Women.

Hilda Bernstein

'Tired?', Frances Baard replies when asked if the long struggle of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as her ~~xxx~~ years in jail, have not worn her down. 'I don't know what you mean by "tired". I can't give up because the spirit is still there. I can't help it, even if I wanted to give up. Although I can't do everything physically, the spirit still wants what I always wanted.' (Quoted by Cherryl Walker in 'Women and Resistance in South Africa'.)

One strong concept - a basic idea - underlies the story of the Federation of South African Women: unity. For the FSAW, which began its existence in 1954, was founded on the principle of a national women's organisation that would be open to women of all races, and of any political, religious or other faith.

No easy task! In the first place, the very geography of South Africa constituted a huge hurdle. A country ~~times~~ times the size of Britain that had, at that time, a population of living in four different provinces, each one with its own characteristics; where the difficulties of meeting and of communication were fastly compounded by distance and aggravated, particularly for the women, by poverty, the lack of money for such luxuries as travel.

Then there was the ever-present class/colour divide, a great river that separated women of different racial groups, and that the women were seeking somehow to bridge.

Also the moving spirits behind the establishment of the FSAW were unmistakably radical and militant, placing the struggle for women's rights firmly in the context of the struggle against apartheid. This was to be no social welfare organisation, nor one aiming only to raise the status of women in South African society or to put forward polite requests for modification in discriminatory laws. From the beginning it was inspired by a twin need - indeed, siamese twins that could have no viable life of their own if separated: the need to rid women of all laws and customs that discriminated against them; and the need to organise women to play their full part, with men, in changing the nature of South African society, 'a common struggle', as their Charter states, 'against poverty, race and class discrimination, and the evils of the colour bar.'

It was a period in which the position of women was undergoing deep changes; economic changes that had arisen through the growth

of industry during the second World War had led to a growth of independence among women as they came to the towns to work in factories, in industry and commerce; ^{bringing} an increased ability to organise and a more pressing need for them to be organised.

At the same time attitudes towards women and what their place should be had scarcely changed. In 1954, the year the FSAW was brought into being, Drum, a popular pictorial weekly magazine for Africans put the question 'Should women have equal rights with men?' to the vote of its readership. Out of 159 replies, 101 readers answered no. The winner of the prize for the best letter said: 'Let us give them courtesy but no rights. They should continue to carry no passes for they are harmlessly inferior; put on their bonnets everywhere, for it is a shame for women to go bareheaded.' (Quoted in Cherryl Walker's book) This was, after all, only thirty-five years ago, and certainly represented a majority view. And it was these attitudes the women had to confront.

Women were caught in the contradictions imposed on them between their changing economic conditions and the static social customs. At the very moment when the thrust towards unity was gaining power, the gulf separating black and white women was increasing. White women certainly suffered from disabilities because of their sex, but they had the vote, and in their perception to improve their status they had to press for reforms in laws affecting marriage rights and employment. But for black women to change their status they were impelled to join the struggle to change the nature of the state itself. Thus, from the beginning, although the new organisation was deeply concerned with women's rights and women's oppression, the main political thrust was always in cooperation with organisations of men and women, such as the African National Congress, and the liberation movement.

The FSAW did not spring into being from nothing. ^{Women} ~~They~~ had engaged in organisation from the beginning of the 20th century; ~~but~~ their campaigns were based around local issues, questions that affected their daily lives, while in the earlier years the long-term political goals were the men's territory. But despite this, from the early years - and particularly in the historic anti-pass campaigns of 1913 onwards - women revealed an independence and militancy that was far in advance of their legal and social status.

During the post-war years, and especially during the 1940s and 1950s there was considerable organisation and many campaigns conducted by the women, ~~but~~ usually centred around pressing local issues, and through the physical problems already mentioned,

not coordinated on a national basis.

The women who were most active in organising this first conference to establish a national organisation on what were to be militant principles, were also motivated by an even larger view - the need for cooperation among women of the whole world, to eliminate wars, to make the world safe and peaceful for their children. In those days we did not call it 'sisterhood', but the feeling was very much of a network of women everywhere who together would work for a world free of wars, and for freedom and justice for all.

With these far-reaching and ambitious aims, an invitation signed by 63 women to a conference 'to promote women's rights', was sent out in March, 1954 to a wide range of women's organisations, to trade unions, Congress organisations, and to groups in the townships. From the beginning the preparations were marked by a relaxed and open attitude. We wanted all women to be welcome - not asking that they agree with us from the start, but to come and discuss; not only women in formal organisations, but, as was stated, 'any group of women, from factories or areas, can get together and send a delegate.' And from the first the response was enthusiastic and optimistic.

The inaugural conference took place on the 17th April 1954, in the Trades Hall, Johannesburg. The hall was decorated with banners setting out the women's demands: WOMEN WANT EQUAL RIGHTS OVER CHILDREN AND PROPERTY; calls for women to organise in trade unions, demands for homes, for education for all, for the right to vote. And on the platform, stretched out behind the speakers, in large letters: GREETINGS TO WOMEN OF ALL LANDS.

Most of the delegates were African; there were Indian women, members of the South African Indian Congress, who had already proved themselves in passive resistance campaigns against discriminatory laws; Coloured women; and a few white women, most of whom were members of the left-wing Congress of delegates. Many of the women were prominent in the Women's League of the African National Congress, and a number were activists from trade unions. The non-African women were quite small in number, but large in significance. There were no women's organisations that embraced all racial sections, and this racially mixed gathering 'was an important feature . . . for participants and observers alike., In a society where segregation, race purity and white baaskap were all key elements in the official apartheid ideology, the mingling of black and white women at the Trades Hall was a radical departure from prevailing norms and a clear political statement'. (Walker.)

Women came from all the main urban areas, and for many of them it was the first time that they had undertaken such a long journey from their homes. Such a simple statement of fact hides the enormous problems that had to be surmounted for them to come. Many of them had no income of their own, all but a few lived scarcely above the poverty line, most had families to consider - even to contend with. To travel the hundreds of miles to Johannesburg they had to raise the expensive fares among their own, equally poor communities; to find relatives or neighbours who would care for their children while they were away; to travel long distances to reach railway stations. Perhaps the fact that they had to surmount such practical problems, together with the release from them once they had left their homes, contributed to the holiday atmosphere that they brought with them.

There were no representatives from the farms and the reserves. There were no organisations in the countryside at that time from which delegates could have been drawn; and for the next decade, the FSAW drew its support mainly from the urban areas.

When discussing the arrangements for the conference - meeting the delegates, arranging accommodation, transport from the station to the black townships, collecting of food and catering - none of the women organisers wanted to miss any of the discussions through spending time in the kitchen. So it was decided to ask the men in the Congress Alliance to take over all the catering arrangements, 'not one woman in the kitchens' - and this the young men from the Youth Congress did. It was a gesture, not an indication of any permanent change of attitude, but it had real significance, and was a source of both amusement and delight to the delegates.

The inaugural conference set a style that pervaded all future meetings and conferences of the FSAW; they were always joyous occasions marked by much singing. The discussions were serious, often painful revelations of the suffering of poverty and deprivation, of injustice and oppression. But the women seemed to draw great strength and sustenance simply from coming together and being able to give voice to the daily hardships of their lives, unconstrained by the presence of men who tended to overbear them with their greater political experience and articulateness.

'It was not a gathering of "elite" among women in South Africa; most of the women were drawn from the turbulent world of the black townships. Their outlook was shaped by their lives there as married women with family responsibilities in a general situation of poverty, insecurity and rightlessness. Middle class women, black and white, were present, but did not predominate.' (Walker.)

While the main speakers from the platform put forward general principles and ideas, it was the speakers from the floor who, one after another, brought to the conference the reality of their lives. They spoke in direct and moving terms about the poverty, deprivation and hardships of their lives, their struggles to provide for their children; how they had to go to work and leave babies in the care of young children; of ~~work~~ jobs where they did identical work with the men and were paid so much less.

The conference adopted a Charter of Women's Aims, and thirty-five years on, women who were not born when the Charter was adopted are reprinting it, finding its declaration of the need to emancipate women from the special disabilities suffered by them and of removing all social differences which subordinated women, as apt and relevant as when the Charter was framed. The FSAW embodied both the idea that women have common interests, and also a strong political attitude.

'We women do not form a society separate from men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress'.

The preamble to the Charter declares:

'We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, African, Indian, European and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.'

The Charter went on to describe the harsh living conditions for women and their families; resolved to struggle against laws and customs that held women as perpetual minors without the right to their own earnings and even their own children. It spoke of the need for education and laid out the following aims: To strive for women to obtain:

- . the right to vote and be elected to all State bodies
- . the right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay
- . equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children and the removal of all laws and customs that deny women equal rights
- . free compulsory education for all; the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinic, and proper housing
- . the removal of all laws restricting free movement; that hinder the right of free association

right of free association
right of free association

- . to build women's sections in the National Liberatory movements,
- the organisation of women in trade unions
- . to cooperate with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa as well as throughout the world
- . To strive for permanent peace throughout the world.

The FSAW not only linked women's demands firmly with the struggle against apartheid laws, but also fought consistently for trade union rights and against racial divisions in the trade unions. 'We are women, we are workers, we stand together.' A number of the leading women in the Federation were trade union activists.

The FSAW provided women with an organisation that engaged in activity on a continuing basis; previously women had been very active, but in a more sporadic fashion, as issues arose.

The FSAW was central to the tremendous mass movement against passes for women. The campaign that was launched reached women all over the country.

In 1955 the government issued an edict stating that 'African women will be issued with passes as from January 1956'.

Central to the system of apartheid is migrant labour and territorial separation. Every person has to live in an area designated as their 'own area.' ~~While~~ For the white minority this means most of the country including the areas where almost all economic activity

7

is based. For the black majority it means living either in a 'bantustan' - reserve areas occupying 13% of the country, and on an ethnic basis, or on white-owned farms; or in a black township near a 'white' town. In a very few places in the largest towns there are now what is known as 'grey' areas, where blacks now occupy flats or houses in what is actually a 'white' area. To some extent this has ^{recently} been tolerated, but it effects a very small section of the black population.

Migrant labour was always controlled by the pass laws, applicable up to the 1950s only to men. The pass laws today do not operate in the same way, although everyone needs an identity document, and the movements of migrant labour are controlled by the availability of work and of accommodation in the urban areas. Every African family knew the effects of the pass laws, the constant raids, arrests and cruelties imposed. So that when the government decided to force women to carry passes, the struggle against this imposition became central to the FSAW. Women all their lives had witnessed the effect of pass laws on the men: the night raids, being stopped in the street by police vans, searches, jobs lost through arrests, disappearances of men shanghaied to farms, and the prosecutions.

The first big protest organised by the FSAW took place in 1955, when 2,000 women converged on the seat of the government in Pretoria. The movement against passes began to grow, and a year later, on August 9 1956 - the day that has since been celebrated as 'Women's day' by the liberation movement - 20,000 women assembled, overcoming tremendous difficulties to get to Pretoria to see the Prime Minister and hand in thousands of petition forms with hundreds of thousands of signatures protesting against the pass laws.

That day all processions in Pretoria were banned, so the women converged on Union Buildings (the seat of government) walking in twos and threes; all Pretoria was filled with women, thousands wearing green and black Congress blouses, Indian women in brilliant saris, Xhosa women in ochre robes. Slowly they converged and filled the amphitheatre of Union Buildings. Five women were permitted to take the petitions into the building, although, of course, they did not meet the Prime Minister. Afterwards they stood in complete silence in the winter sun for thirty minutes, then burst into magnificent harmony to sing the anthem: Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika: XNEXXNEXNEX and as they dispersed, a new freedom song echoed over the city with its refrain 'Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo, uzokufa' - 'When you touch a woman you have struck a rock'.

The protests spread all over the country, involving women in remote country areas and small towns. In the end the passes were imposed on women, but the whole campaign fundamentally changed the

8
INSERT HERE
PARA X (below)

position of women within the liberation movement / The displays of militancy by traditionally subordinate women had a profound effect on men - white as well as black, commented Joanne Yawitch:

Action by women was fundamental. For women are conceptualised as being the centre of stability and security. The arrest of the women radicalised the men, and in the case of the white men, rioting by African women was perceived as a threat to the entire social structure and order.

Dr. W M Eiselen, a government minister, stated that 'Recognition of the women's demonstrations on the lines that have found favour among the whites, that is, where women already have a status altogether different to that of Bantu women, can at this stage only have a harmful and dangerous effect which can undermine the entire community structure.' And he issued orders to officials 'not to have discussions with the masses of women and their so-called leaders, but to make it clear to them that they will always be willing to have discussions with the recognised bantu authorities, the tribal chief and responsible male members of the community.'

The authorities refused to listen to the women because to do so would have meant not only accepting their grievances, but also accepting women on an equal basis with men - an acceptance that threatened fundamental social and political assumptions. In this way, the activities of the women in the countryside, their revolt against the imposition of passes, had significance beyond the immediate issues that ignited them.

X
to go
at top

The primary feature of women's lives is their powerlessness, that is, their exclusion from authority. The courage and determination displayed by extremely poor, ill-educated, often illiterate women, their cohesion and the variety of tactics they used in their struggle, ~~radically altered the position of women within the male-dominated liberation organisations.~~

While the anti-pass campaign was the most spectacular, the FSAW was active in many other campaigns, both local and national. Women's participation was a key factor in 1955 in the campaign against the introduction of Bantu education, an inferior form of education of Africans. They organised township schools and when 'unregistered' schools were declared illegal, the schools became 'cultural clubs'. Inspectors were sent around to the clubs, many of which were held in the ~~xxxx~~ open air, and if there were any school materials - books, slates, pencils - the teacher would be arrested and charged. In court cases the evidence handed in would be a blackboard and chalk, the claim that the women were actually trying to teach the children to

9

read or do sums. Teachers would devise rhymes and games that would teach numbers and letters, and used a pointed stick to write in the dusty earth so that it could be instantly obliterated if the police arrived.

The Congress movement did not have the resources to provide a proper system of alternative education, but while these schools lasted they were an effective form of protest against one of the most pernicious features of apartheid; one that two decades later would impel the children into open revolt.

Much of the FSAW's activities took the form of local protests and demands, centred around local living conditions and women's needs. In the course of these struggles women gifted in organising, in public speaking, and of courage and militancy, came to the fore. If many of the major campaigns, such as the anti-pass campaign, were ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the onward march of apartheid, they were of lasting importance. The inspiration of the women's prolonged fight and the deeper understanding it produced were passed on.

'Among us Africans,' stated former ANC President and Nobel Prize winner Albert Luthuli:

'the weight of resistance has been greatly increased in the last few years by the emergence of our women. It may even be true that, had the women hung back, resistance would still have been faltering and uncertain. . .'

He spoke of how the women's demonstrations had made a great impact and given strong impetus to resistance, and furthermore that women of all races had far less hesitation than men in making common cause about things basic to them.

(1)

In her summing up of the FSAW's achievements, Walker describes it as a political organisation that broke new ground for the women of South Africa, three main aspects of its programme being its commitment to the emancipation of women, its commitment to the national liberation movement and its non-racialism. Its rejection of colour consciousness ^{that had} permeated other women's organisations was strengthened by its more developed feminist consciousness. Because women were seen to suffer serious disabilities on account of their sex, the FSAW could envisage the possibility of a universal women's movement aimed at removing those disabilities and cutting across existing colour lines. The legacy it left was one of an open-hearted belief in a free and non-racial society, a legacy of hope and courage. It was a legacy of both defiance and hope, that passed on to the new generations.

The massacre at the small town of Sharpeville in 1960 marked the end of an era of non-violent protests and ^{the beginning of} a new, more repressive time. At Sharpeville police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration, killing 69 and wounding 180. In the mounting protests the apartheid regime banned the African National Congress and with its banning, the Women's League of the ANC that had been the mainstay of the FSAW was also illegal. The Federation itself was not banned, but now it began to operate under extreme difficulties. All the leading women were put under bans prohibiting them from taking part in political activities and from meeting with other banned people.

For some time women in the Federation tried to keep active, concentrating more on immediate local issues as the difficulties of communication between areas increased. But ~~increasingly~~ the accelerating ruthlessness of the regime, of the police and security forces, meant that opposition to apartheid had to take new forms, and for some years the FSAW existed more in name than in activity.

This does not mean that women had withdrawn from the struggle, but that the mass organisations through which they had worked in the past no longer could respond to the increasingly violent oppression. Many women, as well as men, ~~have~~ suffered prolonged solitary confinement, indefinite detention without trial, torture and years of imprisonment. Women ^{were} ~~have been~~ prosecuted on a wide variety of political charges reflecting the range of their involvement in the struggle against apartheid: including treason, 'terrorism', sabotage, membership of or assistance to a banned organisation, helping people to escape from the country, recruiting guerillas, breaches of banning orders and similar charges. Among those who have served or are still serving jail sentences are women of all colours, ages, and religions. There are young girls, many mothers, and grandmothers, some over 70 years old.

For many women in prison the punishment is compounded by separation from their children and uncertainty about their fate.

Thus, while on the surface women turned to activities to ease the burdens of life under apartheid, forming self-help committees and establishing day-care centres and children's feeding programmes, at the same time they were participating in underground organisations. But the need for a central, united women's organisation persisted. In December 1975 at a conference in Durban, the Black Women's Federation was founded, with similar roots to that of the FSAW, although in this case the new organisation was formed on the rising tide of the black consciousness movement. The BWF attempted to teach women to realise their own potential; it began literacy and health classes. But with other organisations arising from the black consciousness movement, it was crushed, banned in less than two years, with its

leading members detained.

As the years went by, with a new generation of women seeking ways to organise, to improve their status inside and outside political organisations and trade unions, moves were made to form a united women's organisation. The United Women's Organisation (UWO) was established in Cape Town in 1981, with a prominent former leader of the FSAW in her eighties, urging the younger women forward. UWO declared 'We cannot abstract ourselves from political issues because they are our daily life . . . Our place must be as part of the struggle for fundamental rights.' And once more the policy and constitution of the new organisation stressed the need for women to fight for 'the removal of all laws, conventions, regulations, customs, that discriminate against women' - the words of the Charter adopted by the FSAW twenty-seven years before.

In the Transvaal the FSAW re-emerged, based on the principles as before. At first, calling themselves FEDSAW, the intention was to build a national organisation. Many attempts have been made, and a national conference was ~~due to be held~~ ^{arranged}, but continuing States of Emergency ~~made~~ it impossible for such a conference to be held. The impulse is there, the need, but the total clampdown on such activities persists.

In the past thirty-five years there have been many superficial changes in South Africa as investment increased and the economy expanded. In the cities a black middle-class grew, more blacks now have higher education; some black people have been able to afford the building of proper houses in the segregated area of Soweto.

But this apparent prosperity touches a very small proportion of the urban black population. South Africa, one of the wealthiest countries of Africa, has about 7 million black people without formal housing. They live in backyard shacks, garages, self-built tin and plastic shelters and out in the open. Over 20 million South Africans do not have access to electricity. Measles kills three times as many black children as white. And a recent township survey showed that one in three are jobless, and children grow up in an atmosphere of daily violence. More and more women are the heads of ~~families~~ households, up to 59 per cent in rural areas and more than 30 per cent in urban areas.

On the women fall the greatest burdens of these conditions, with which they must contend daily. It is through the network of community help that they build that many are able to survive.

In a time of confrontation, South African women ~~understand~~, as ~~they have~~ in the past, ~~that they~~ reject the idea that women must demand equal rights with men ^{in order} to participate fully in the very system that brings them their oppression. They emerge with a feminism made more potent by the advances and understandings of women of other countries, but knowing that the struggle for women's rights is also the struggle to change the structures of their society. 12

We do not simply want to amend laws of just change male attitudes - although this is important too; but we want the fundamental ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ restructuring of a society based on the aims of freedom and justice for all.

In South Africa black 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 other~~s~~. There can be no change in the fundamental position of women, in their social and political 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 liberatory movement.

Collection Number: A3299

Collection Name: Hilda and Rusty BERNSTEIN Papers, 1931-2006

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: **Historical Papers Research Archive**

Collection Funder: **Bernstein family**

Location: **Johannesburg**

©2015

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the *Hilda and Rusty Bernstein Papers*, held at the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.