

(Aug 1 Sept 1956)

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STATEMENT FOR THE INFORMATION
OF CONGRESS OF DEMOCRATS
MEMBERS

Issued by the National Executive of the Federation of South African Women.)

The adoption of the Constitution at the National Conference of the Federation of South African Women held on August 11th and 12th has aroused considerable interest and in view of the divergence of opinion on this matter, the Federation wishes to clarify the position and particularly the procedure at Conference.

At the first National Conference of the Federation held in April, 1954, two and a half years ago, a draft constitution was read at Conference but not presented for discussion and adoption. That draft constitution was circulated to organisations in April, 1955, when the National Executive Committee of the Federation had invited national organisations to affiliate. At the National Conference of the S.A. Congress of Democrats held in June, 1955, on the eve of the Congress of the People, the request for the affiliation of women members of COD was discussed and Conference decided that COD should affiliate. Although the draft constitution had been submitted to COD with the invitation to affiliate, it was not submitted to that National Conference, nor, in fact, has it been considered at any time by the National Executive or circulated to Regions or branches.

At the recent National Conference of the Federation, the draft constitution was presented for discussion and adoption. After a few clauses had been read, a member of the NEC of COD asked permission to move a resolution. She stated that the organisations and groups which constituted the Federation had not had sufficient time or opportunity to circulate the draft constitution for consideration and discussion by the general membership and moved that the adoption of a Constitution be postponed either for six months or until the next National Conference.

The Regional Secretary of the Federation replied that the draft constitution had been circulated to organisations more than 12 months ago, and if these organisations had failed to discuss the constitution or circulate it, this must be laid at the door of those organisations. This, however, should not be allowed to hold up the develop-

ment of the Federation of South African Women. A national conference could be achieved only at long intervals. It was the second time that a draft constitution had been placed before a national conference of the Federation of S.A. Women. If the constitution were adopted today there would be provision for amendments at the next National Conference. The Regional Secretary moved a counter resolution that seeing all organisations had had ample time and opportunity during the past twelve months to circulate and discuss the draft constitution, it should be discussed and adopted as amended at this conference.

Several delegates spoke from the floor, stating that they had not seen the draft constitution and would prefer to take it back to their regions and branches for discussion before adoption. Other delegates felt that this would hold back the development of the Federation and urged that the draft constitution be discussed, amended and adopted at this Conference.

Conference appeared to be divided on this matter and after many expressions of opinion the Regional Secretary offered to withdraw the counter resolution on the grounds that there would not be sufficient time left to discuss the draft constitution. Conference refused to allow the counter resolution to be withdrawn and the resolution and counter resolutions were put to the vote. Conference decided by 291 votes to 79 that the draft constitution be discussed and adopted as amended at this Conference.

During this discussion it had become clear that there were differences of opinion within organisations as to whether the Constitution should be referred back to the organisations or discussed at Conference. Members of each organisation spoke from the floor, ANC women were both

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for and against the discussion and adoption of the Constitution. One COD member had moved the resolution, one the counter resolution. SICPO delegates wanted the constitution deferred; Coloured delegates of the Food and Canning Workers and the Cape Housewives League wanted it discussed and adopted. Nor was there any clear agreement in specific areas. Women from Capetown spoke on both sides; from Port Elizabeth the Coloured leader wanted the Constitution deferred, the African leader wanted it discussed; delegates from the Transvaal spoke for and against the resolution. Discussion on the resolution and counter-resolution took up nearly an hour before the mover of the counter-resolution offered to withdraw it. The voting itself indicated that the Provinces were not unanimous in wanting the Constitution referred back, for although 137 delegates came from the Free State, Natal and the Cape, only 79 delegates in all (including some from the Transvaal) voted for the resolution.

Conference voted by a more than two-thirds majority to proceed with the Constitution, thereby indicating that, although the organisations had failed to circulate it to the Regions and branches, they had confidence that basically the Constitution would be acceptable to their organisations, subject to possible amending at the next Conference of the Federation. Almost five hours were then spent in discussing and adopting the clauses of the draft Constitution.

The Regional Executive Committee of the Transvaal had already considered the draft Constitution and had forwarded amendments to the National Executive, which were distributed at the Conference. Other amendments were moved from the floor. The proceedings of Conference during the discussion of the Constitution were conducted in English, Sesuto and Xhosa; each clause of the draft Constitution and all contributions to the discussion being interpreted into two other languages.

Conference decided to remain in session for the whole afternoon, and

when an appeal was made for volunteers to go to the mass meeting in Sophiatown, difficulty was experienced initially in obtaining sufficient volunteers because the delegates were intent upon full discussion of the draft Constitution. When the Constitution was finally put to the vote it was adopted unanimously.

The National Executive of the Federation is confident that when the Congress of Democrats is aware of the events of the Conference, it will be agreed that the procedure adopted was that decided upon by the vast majority of delegates. Differences of opinion there may still be as to whether it would have been preferable to have postponed the adoption of the constitution to the next Conference - for indeed 79 women held that opinion. But 291 women did not agree, and were determined that the Constitution should be adopted. Can there really be any question of right or wrong, correct or incorrect procedure? The fact remains that a two-thirds majority, after an hours discussion, decided to consider, amend and adopt a draft constitution, although most of the delegates had not seen it previously. There is provision in the Constitution for amendments at the next National Conference. There is no limitation to any such amendments. There is surely ample time and opportunity for every organisation to circulate and discuss this Constitution and to submit any amendments which it considers desirable to the next National Conference. The Federation in the meantime has a Constitution, a working basis upon which Regions can be correctly constituted, upon which women's organisations can be invited to affiliate and the work of the Federation can go forward.

Only time can determine whether this Constitution can meet fully the requirements of the Federation. The amendments that were adopted at Conference arose out of the experiences of the past two and a half years. It may well be that the experiences of the next year will demand further amendments, possibly drastic ones. The Federation is young and must be flexible, but at the same time it requires a framework within which to function, a foundation on which to build. It needs a Constitution, a need which was accepted by a more than two-thirds majority of delegates at Conference.

FSW

Depl.
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FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

P.O. Box 2706,
CAPETOWN.

31st July, 1956.

Dear Friend,

Enclosed please find a copy of the notice and agenda for our National Conference, to be held on Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th August, 1956, at the Trades Hall, Kerk Street, Johannesburg.

Our aims and scope are set out in the attached circular.

We sincerely hope that this Conference will be an occasion marking the growth of a democratic women's movement, and the important part it is playing and will play in the struggle against oppression and discrimination.

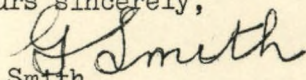
We are very anxious to obtain the cooperation of leading South African personalities who have themselves been closely identified with the struggle against oppression and race and sex discrimination.

We therefore cordially invite you to attend our Conference and take part in strengthening the women's demands for the right to vote, to be elected to all state bodies, the right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay, for the protection of our mothers and children and that there shall be peace and freedom for our children.

Please discuss the enclosed circular in any organisation of which you are a member, and try to get your organisation to send delegates to the Conference.

If you are unable to attend the Conference, we shall be glad to have a message from you.

Yours sincerely,



G. Smith,
Acting Secretary, Federation of S.A.
Women.

Communicate with the Secretary, Box 2706, Cape Town; or the Secretary, Tvl. Region, Box 10876, Johannesburg.

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FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN 1954-1963

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