

Why Women Rebel: a Comparative Study of South African Women's Resistance in Bloemfontein (1913) and Johannesburg (1958)

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When the South African government began issuing passes to African women in 1956, the ensuing resistance campaign focused on the theme of insult to female dignity and motherhood. The women's fear of arbitrary arrest by physically abusive policemen in search of the new identity documents fuelled an unprecedented surge of popular protests and demonstrations. The impressive nature of this struggle has invited sweeping judgements on the amazing ability of women to protest, with the attendant tendency to oversimplify their motives.¹ A closer look at these events raises some important questions. Although quite widespread, the resistance of the fifties was not uniform. Its intensity varied considerably from place to place and time to time. Certain types of women were more active than others and some did not take part at all. Why? Clearly certain women felt there was much more at stake than simply the dignity of womanhood. Further, if passes alone did not consistently provoke resistance, then what made the women's response so much more militant than men's?

To answer these questions, I have chosen to focus on two particular case studies of women's anti-pass resistance. A useful historical precedent to the 1950s' style of rebellion occurred in the Orange Free State in 1913. Both the Bloemfontein 1913 campaign and the Johannesburg women's passive resistance of October 1958 stand out as incidents in which the women's determination was carried to a startling extreme: eager and voluntary imprisonment. What generated this kind of commitment? Why did it happen in these particular places and not in others? Since the details of these two episodes of resistance are not generally known, a brief summary of the events and their political background is in order.²

¹ For other works on women's resistance of the 1950s, see Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1982); Hilda Bernstein, *For Their Triumphs and for Their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa* (London, 1975); and Nancy Van Vuuren, *Women against Apartheid, the Fight for Freedom in South Africa 1920-1975* (Palo Alto, 1979).

² Both are treated far more extensively in my Ph.D. dissertation, 'The History of South African Women's Resistance to Pass Laws 1900-1960', Columbia University-Teachers College, 1982.

Summary of Events

In 1913, the Orange Free State was the only province in South Africa to require urban residential passes for female Africans and 'coloureds'. Women first protested against these passes in 1898, but after the Anglo-Boer War ended in 1902 the crusade was taken over by all-male political organizations. For a decade, the Orange Free State Native Vigilance Association (later a part of the South African Natives National Congress, SANNC) and the African Political Organization (APO), rooted in the Cape Town 'coloured' community, regularly sent petitions to authorities ranging from the mayor of Bloemfontein to the king of England asking for a repeal of women's passes.³ With the Act of Union in 1910 it became clear that legally only an act of parliament in Cape Town could change the law.

New hope for relief from women's passes came in 1912 with the formation of the SANNC. Meeting in Bloemfontein, African political leaders from all over the country soon became acquainted with this local problem. The location women were involved with the SANNC proceedings primarily as caterers and hostesses. It is likely that their determination to take matters into their own hands was stimulated by the presence at this meeting of Charlotte Manye Maxeke, the first black South African female university graduate and a member of the SANNC executive. At that time a teacher from the Eastern Cape, she was no doubt familiar with the machinations of politics in the Cape Province, where qualified blacks had the vote. Within two months of this meeting the Free State women had successfully circulated a petition throughout the Free State towns, collecting five thousand signatures in protest against women's passes. A delegation of six women then travelled to Cape Town where they were hosted by Walter Rubusana, a veteran black political figure. They presented their case and their petition to the Minister of Native Affairs, H. Burton, winning from him an assurance of the government's sympathy for their cause and that he would take action to eliminate pass regulations.⁴

A year later, when no changes had been made in the way pass laws were enforced, the women resolved on a much stronger course of action. The escalation of pass arrests in May 1913 finally triggered off the passive resistance.⁵ At a community meeting on 29 May 1913, the location women pledged to refuse to carry passes any longer and expressed their willingness to endure imprisonment. After initially demonstrating their intentions in a boisterous march into the centre of town and tearing up their passes in the face of the police, they won the mayor's agreement to suspend further arrests until the matter could be investigated. Two weeks later, when location police broke their promise and tried to arrest one woman for being without

³ Wells, 'History', ch. III.

⁴ Burton did write to the Provincial Administrator of the Orange Free State, who in turn sent a questionnaire to all municipalities asking their opinion of women's pass laws. They virtually all claimed that passes were beneficial and knew of no cases of abuse caused by them. Provincial Administrator, Orange Free State, Letter to Minister of Native Affairs, 26 Sept. 1912, Orange Free State Archives, Bloemfontein.

⁵ During May 1913, four times as many women were arrested for pass offences as in the previous month. Bloemfontein Criminal Record Book, 1913, Orange Free State Archives.

a pass, a brawl broke out. Thirty-four women then suffered appalling conditions. Others were arrested and served somewhat shorter sentences.

Once the campaign was taken over by the SANNC or APO for their own purposes, the Orange Free State Native and Coloured Resisters and their families were organized. Realizing that the ultimate goal was to win the town, they appealed especially in Winburg, where white women were arrested with blacks.⁷

The decision to undertake passive resistance was ever tried by the non-traditional, cosmopolitan nature of the town. The fourteen 'coloured' and African women whose resistance was first refined in the Orange Free State province, beginning with the women of Winburg, were limited to the Transvaal by the interest of Dr A. Abdurahman. From 1909 when he started to champion the use of passive resistance by Indians, 'coloureds' and Africans in Bloemfontein and no doubt elsewhere. The concept of passive resistance was first used by the SANNC.

A further significant development in the coverage of the activities of the passive resistance campaigns had reached the stage of imprisonment and forced labour of black women, who repeated their protest for the cause if necessary. Some were even quoted as shouting slogans. The female passive resisters were dutifully reported in the press.¹¹ In 1913 the women's campaign was covered through the OFS Women's Association. The media coverage for their cause

⁶ *Tsala ea Batho*, 10 Aug. 1913. See also the Orange Free State and Coloured Women to Viscount Balfour, 1913, Orange Free State Archives, Pretoria.

⁷ *Friend*, 11 Oct. 1913.

⁸ Bloemfontein Criminal Record Book, 1913.

⁹ *APO*, 4 Dec. 1909, 26 Feb. 1910.

¹⁰ *Tsala*, 14 June 1913.

¹¹ *Friend*, 26 Aug. 1913.

a pass, a brawl broke out between the police force and crowds of angry women. Thirty-four women then served two months' imprisonment with hard labour under appalling conditions. Others persisted in defying the pass laws for the rest of the year and served somewhat shorter jail sentences.

Once the campaign was under way, however, the women did not rely on either the SANNC or APO for their organizational support. They formed their own Orange Free State Native and Coloured Women's Association to raise material aid for the resisters and their families and to advocate the cause to the general public.⁶ Realizing that the ultimate authority for changing Free State pass laws rested in Cape Town, they appealed especially to sympathetic whites for support. In the campaign in Winburg, white women even advocated their own march in solidarity with the blacks.⁷

The decision to undertake passive resistance was a bold departure from anything ever tried by the non-traditional black community before. This was partly due to the cosmopolitan nature of the black community in Bloemfontein. During the resistance fourteen 'coloured' and African ethnic groups took part.⁸ The concept of passive resistance was first refined and tested by Mahatma Gandhi in the adjacent Transvaal province, beginning with his first campaign in 1906. Although those campaigns were limited to the Transvaal Indian community, they were followed with great interest by Dr A. Abdurahman, the 'coloured' leader of the APO in Cape Town. From 1909 when he started publishing the APO newspaper, he enthusiastically championed the use of passive resistance by the combined black community of Indians, 'coloureds' and Africans.⁹ His newspaper was popular reading in Bloemfontein and no doubt helped promote the idea in the minds of the women there. The concept of passive resistance was also stressed at the inaugural meeting of the SANNC.

A further significant inspiration to the women came through local newspaper coverage of the activities of the British suffragettes. In 1912 and 1913 their campaigns had reached a particularly militant stage, resulting in brutal imprisonment and forced feeding. This had a dramatic effect on the Bloemfontein black women, who repeatedly expressed their willingness to go to jail and even die there for the cause if necessary. At the height of their public demonstrations some were even quoted as shouting, 'Votes for Women!'¹⁰ Throughout the Free State, the female passive resisters adopted blue ribbons as a sign of their participation in the campaign and were dutifully dubbed 'our local black suffragettes' by the white press.¹¹ In 1913 the women's tactics ultimately produced the desired result. Through the OFS Women's Association, the resisters successfully gained national media coverage for their cause and won the sympathy of Union government officials

⁶ *Tsala ea Batho*, 10 Aug. 1913; *APO*, 11 Oct. 1913; and Petition of the Orange Free State Native and Coloured Women to Viscount Gladstone, 27 Jan. 1914, Governor General, South African State Archives, Pretoria.

⁷ *Friend*, 11 Oct. 1913.

⁸ Bloemfontein Criminal Record Book, 1913.

⁹ *APO*, 4 Dec. 1909, 26 Feb. 1910.

¹⁰ *Tsala*, 14 June 1913.

¹¹ *Friend*, 26 Aug. 1913.

in Cape Town. The outcome was a relaxation of the rigour of pass law enforcement for women in the Free State and the eventual exclusion of women from pass laws on a national basis in 1923.¹²

As in 1913, the question of women's passes had already been a hot political issue for several years prior to the passive resistance of 1958. The announcement in late 1955 that the government intended to start issuing passes to African women in 1956 tremendously boosted the enthusiasm and following of both the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) and the non-racial umbrella organization to which it belonged, the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). From then on, the ANCWL and FSAW successfully carried out an active campaign of public resistance to the very idea of passes for women. This took the form of two large mass marches to the administrative capital in Pretoria, supported by dozens of smaller marches to native commissioners' offices throughout the entire country. These demonstrations were boisterous, enthusiastic and well supported. Generally they provoked little official reaction and passes were issued on a voluntary basis regardless. For the most part, the women's demonstrations did not meet with severe police reaction.

However, by 1958 it was already clear that protesting against passes in the abstract and facing government coercion to take them were two different matters. Despite the enthusiasm for protesting against passes before they arrived, most women did accept them when their turn came. The FSAW and the ANCWL leaders in Johannesburg recognized that a different kind of strategy would have to be implemented if the issuing of passes was to be slowed down. Initially, they planned to send batches of from twenty to thirty women to each pass-issuing office to persuade other women not to accept passes. So enthusiastic, however, was the women's response, that the first 'batch' numbered over one thousand. When the marching women refused to disperse on police orders, five hundred were arrested and taken to jail. Although the first arrests might have been unexpected, subsequently arrest was deliberately invited by other women who responded enthusiastically to a call from the ANCWL and the FSAW. Initially most were from Sophiatown, the black freehold area nearest Johannesburg's city centre.

At the end of the first week, one thousand women were sitting in jail. Then, in an unprecedented move, women from Alexandra township to the north of Johannesburg enthusiastically volunteered to join them. After making arrangements for the care of their husbands and children, the women hired five buses to carry them into town. By the time all these women were arrested the total came to two thousand. The next step was unclear. After some disagreement between male and female leaders in the ANC, it was eventually agreed to ask the women to stop courting arrest, seek bail and come out of prison. Unlike the Bloemfontein demonstrations, the goal at the outset had not been to seek imprisonment. The eager pouring forth of volunteers should be seen as a relatively spontaneous response to the initial arrests. But in the absence of an overall strategy for resistance, the women's anti-pass campaign lost its momentum and African women reluctantly took passes.

¹² Pass law provisions of the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act applied to African males only.

The Economic Context

These incidents, forty-five years apart, reflect the growth and evolution of white domination over black labour in general and the economic incorporation of black women in particular. They embody crisis points of a struggle to define the role of black women within South Africa's industrializing society. The genesis of the Orange Free State pass laws can be traced to the chronic shortage of black labour for white farms, homes and local commerce, dating back to the earliest days of white occupation of the region. It was not an area of heavy black settlement, having a black/white population ratio of two to one, while the national average was four to one.¹³ Consequently, extra-economic measures to control the flow of black labour were devised, primarily taking the form of stringent pass laws. From the inception of the urban pass requirements, women were included on the same basis as men. The demand for women's labour was highest in the domestic service sector where female employees outnumbered men two to one.¹⁴

Major demographic changes in the black population of Bloemfontein over the years just prior to the resistance greatly aggravated an already chronic shortage of labour. The Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 sent Bloemfontein's black population soaring from a pre-war figure of 1,302 in 1890 to 18,382 in 1904, an astonishing increase of nearly fourteen times the original number. After this tremendous boom, the population then gradually declined to such an extent that the 1911 census reported only 10,475 black residents, a forty-three per cent loss over seven years. During the same period the white population declined by only five per cent.¹⁵

The very stringency of the pass laws designed to control labour in the Free State probably drove large numbers away, contributing to the shortage. Most black men required passes to move virtually anywhere in the Free State and enforcement was notoriously harsh, often including lashings. In the towns, special permits and passes were required for a wide range of 'privileges', from owning a dog to working on one's own behalf. Every Free State town had a separate residential 'location' for its black citizens, administered by municipal officials and often under the authoritarian control of a location superintendent. Strict rules laid down the conditions of housing, such as whether one could entertain friends or be out of doors beyond certain hours of the night. No other province in the Union of South Africa applied such strict control over black lives, encouraging many people to leave the Free State altogether and seek better prospects elsewhere.

No doubt the essence of the pass struggle was a battle for whites to establish tighter controls over the terms of domestic service in the face of the shrinking labour supply. Although complaints about shortages of servants were common throughout the decade prior to the resistance, the situation in 1913 was particularly serious. In 1910 unhappy white citizens of Bloemfontein called a special meeting to discuss the

¹³ *Union of South Africa Census 1911*, Vol. I Populations of the People, Table 1 – Union of South Africa.

¹⁴ *1911 Census*, Vol. V, Occupations of the People: Census Districts According to Classes.

¹⁵ *1911 Census*, Vol. I, Table XVII – Return of Population: Urban Centres; and *Orange River Colony Census, 1904*, Population of Chief Towns, vi.

servant problem. Among the grievances expressed was the need to compel domestic workers to live in on the employer's premises, to prevent the frequent changing of jobs and 'to keep the servants much more reserved'.¹⁶ Their solution was the establishment of a labour bureau to regulate and monitor all prospective servants more carefully, keeping detailed records of employment histories. This would prevent those who changed jobs because of unfavourable working conditions from easily getting another job. The project ultimately failed when the black population utterly refused to cooperate with the bureau's regulations, which could not be made legally compulsory. It is unlikely that the situation improved for the employers between 1910 and 1913.

Another important aspect of the crisis of 1913 was white fear of black competition in the urban areas. In the years immediately following the war, many educated blacks who came to Bloemfontein were more successful than poor whites at getting jobs. The skilled and the entrepreneurs were particularly capable of carving out a comfortable existence for themselves.¹⁷ Whites perceived this as a grave threat and moved to eliminate those points in society where black competition might threaten white prosperity. From 1903 onwards the Bloemfontein Town Council passed a series of restrictions on the free trading rights of black craftsmen and skilled workers. This aspiring petty bourgeoisie quite strongly felt itself to be under attack. In fact, when the mayor of Bloemfontein initiated discussions with the black residents in response to the women's resistance, the prominent men from this group spent far more time arguing over and clarifying their own loss of rights than discussing women's passes.¹⁸ Since the surnames of virtually all the town's leading black citizens appear on the list of women arrested in the struggle, it must be assumed that the womenfolk of this group shared their husbands' frustration.

Much though municipal authorities in the Orange Free State sought tighter controls over black labour, they were ultimately thwarted by conditions in the larger national economy. First, less stringent pass laws and more remunerative employment opportunities elsewhere siphoned off a certain segment of the labour force. Secondly, in 1913 the central government was dominated by the mining sector, whose primary concern in 'native affairs' was to ensure a steady supply of black male labour to the mines from the reserves. Officials of the Native Affairs Department were unsympathetic to local labour conditions in the Free State and ultimately took measures to relax the enforcement of the women's pass laws. They could see no particular need for pressing black women into service when it was not done on a significant scale elsewhere in the country.

¹⁶ Bloemfontein Town Council Minute Book, 1 Dec. 1910, Orange Free State Archives.

¹⁷ The elite were noted for wearing silks and satins and living in houses with lace curtains, filled with photographs and knick-knacks. In 1906 a special location was built for the wealthier 'coloureds' which boasted lawn tennis, football and croquet grounds, a cricket pitch and a cycle track. See *South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5. Report and Evidence (SANAC)* (Cape Town, 1904-5), Vol. I, par. 380; Bloemfontein Mayor's Minutes 1906, Report of Native Locations, 68; and *The Mission Field*, Feb. 1915.

¹⁸ Bloemfontein Town Clerk Correspondence, Minutes of Interview between His Worship the Mayor, certain Ministers of Religion, and Representatives of the Natives, held at Waaihoek, Friday, 5th Sept., 1913 at 8 p.m., Orange Free State Archives.

The basic economic determinants in the 1913 case, however, took on increasingly significant proportions nationwide over the next several decades. Although the shortage of black labour in agriculture was not a primary factor swaying the Free State municipalities in 1913, over the years it played a dominant role in the evolution of urban policy.¹⁹ During the twenties and thirties a significant class alliance developed under the banner of Afrikaner nationalism, uniting the poor white urban working class with agricultural capital. Together they espoused a policy of 'influx control' to achieve the double goal of keeping an adequate supply of black labour on the farms and minimizing competition between black and white workers in towns. Until 1948 these interests, although vocal, were overruled by a government dominated by the growing industrial sector whose relatively high wages commanded the labour market. Those in control during the interim sought to keep black access to urban areas open and were not concerned about extra-economic controls over black women's labour. The shift in the balance of power in 1948, however, removed this obstacle and tighter controls were rapidly imposed.

The economic determinants which created the crisis in Sophiatown and Alexandra in 1958 were not locally rooted as in 1913. By this time the regulation of women's labour was a matter of national policy, reflecting the needs of a much more advanced industrialized nation. The philosophy of 'influx control' rested on a wide range of factors, yet many similarities with the earlier period remained. In the period of rapid economic growth after the Second World War, black women's labour took on fresh significance. Industrial expansion drew many women out of domestic service, creating a general shortage in the urban areas nationwide. In Johannesburg in 1949 commercial and industrial jobs for black women were filled as fast as they were created, while the City Council had to launch intensive but ultimately unsuccessful drives to recruit women for domestic work.²⁰ The municipalities of Durban and Odendaalsrust tried to initiate control over the registration of service contracts for black women in 1950 and 1951 respectively.²¹ Such moves highlighted the laxity of government policy regarding black women and no doubt influenced the passage of the Natives Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act in 1952. Although this piece of legislation provided for the issuing of passes (now termed 'reference books') to African women, it was not used until four years later. During the early years of the 1950s all sectors of the economy enjoyed healthy growth rates and full employment prevailed. By the mid-fifties, however, an economic slow-down contributed to a new vigilance within Nationalist government circles.

The era of prosperity brought with it a growing arena of competition between black and white workers in the urban areas as maximization of profits and efficiency were stressed. By mid-1955, with the first traces of a general economic slow down,

¹⁹ The farm labour shortage in the Free State in 1913 was addressed through the 1913 Natives Land Act. The displacement of labour tenants from farms is most likely to have resulted in an increase in the black urban population. Since the resistance started before the Act was passed, it is unlikely that there was a direct connection, other than the fact that the Act convinced blacks of the government's segregationist intentions and prompted the founding of the South African Natives National Congress.

²⁰ Johannesburg Native Affairs Department (JNAD), *Report for 1948-49*.

²¹ South African Institute of Race Relations, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1951-52*, 31, and *Survey 1949-50*, 61.

the government began warning of the tendency within skilled professions to replace white workers with cheaper black ones. A complex legislative wedge was created to separate white and black workers and firmly entrench whites in a position of privilege. Fear of recession and unfavourable competition between black and white workers prompted the government to speed up its implementation of apartheid policies.²² One of its first steps came in October 1955 with the announcement that passes would be issued to women, beginning in 1956. The long-sought influx control was to be fully enforced. This was followed soon after by the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956, strengthening job reservation for whites and creating racially separate trade unions; the Natives Prohibition of Interdicts Act of 1956, restricting the rights of Africans to appeal against forced removals from urban areas; the Native Laws Amendment Act in 1957, giving the Minister of Native Affairs vastly increased control over black municipal affairs with the aim of facilitating the administration of influx control policies; and the Native Laws Further Amendment Act of 1957, giving the government strengthened powers to imprison pass law offenders.²³ All of these laws entrenched white privilege, offering insulation from the effects of the recession which set in during 1958.

An equally aggressive policy to ensure controls of labour in agriculture evolved during this period. Although complaints of farm labour shortages have been a permanent feature of the South African economy, the process of transforming labour tenant relations into wage labour terms of service was actively accelerated at this time. The demand for farm labour increased during the fifties, as the area of land under cultivation expanded substantially. Although mechanization in agriculture eliminated the demand for certain forms of labour, the need for seasonal workers at harvest time remained high. The need for a part-time labour force contributed to its feminization and the ratio of women in farm labour grew from one in five in 1946 to one in three by 1952.²⁴ Various efforts were made in the early fifties to generate a larger labour force, from the cooptation of illegal immigrants from northern countries to the extensive use of convict labour. The Amended Native Labour Regulation Act of 1949 gave farmers the right to set up labour bureaux for recruitment and distribution, and stronger moves to implement the anti-squatting sections of the Native Trust and Land Amendment Act were made in 1955.²⁵ In this context, the unregulated flow of rural black women into the towns became especially threatening to farmers. The first female passes issued in 1956 were to women in quite small towns and rural areas. The combined pressures of domestic labour shortages, farm labour shortages and black/white competition in urban areas all added up to the demand that the black population be further controlled by bringing women under pass regulations.

²² Muriel Horrell (compiler), *Survey 1954-55*, 160. The Minister of Labour, warning of 'infiltration' of blacks into skilled jobs, ordered a survey of labour shortages and laid plans for special schemes to give white boys training in industrial skills. He also advocated efficiency drives and bonus schemes to encourage white workers to excel.

²³ For concise summaries of these pieces of legislation, see Horrell, *Survey 1955-56*, 179 and *1956-57*, 54, 60, 66.

²⁴ *Survey 1951-52*, 62.

²⁵ *Survey 1950-51*, 50 and *1954-55*, 148.

The Social Context

Although the array of economic forces favouring women's passes was quite compelling from the white point of view, in both 1913 and 1958 additional factors internal to the black community contributed to the intensity of the resistance in both cases. At the time of their respective episodes of passive resistance, both Waaihoek in Bloemfontein and Sophiatown in Johannesburg were communities undergoing profound transitions. The demographic changes in Bloemfontein have already been mentioned, but a strikingly similar fluctuation in population occurred in the Western Areas of Johannesburg, encompassing the black freehold suburbs of Sophiatown, Martindale and Newclare, just west of the city centre. Although there is no specific breakdown of figures for growth during World War Two, the population explosion was phenomenal. As the war was starting in 1939, the Johannesburg City Council reported a housing shortage of 143 units for black families. By 1949 the demand was 112 times greater, with a reported shortage of 16,000 units.²⁶ Until new housing could be provided, people crowded into the existing townships. As in Bloemfontein, however, the Western Areas experienced a substantial drop in population following this boom period, this time due to the forced removals engendered by the Group Areas Act. From a high in 1948 of 82,700 residents, the figure plummeted to 44,600 by 1957, a loss of 46 per cent.²⁷ This cycle of 'boom then bust' had a profound effect on the social, psychological and economic prospects of the remaining residents, especially women.

When the confrontations occurred both townships had been, within living memory, hubs of urban black culture. Their very size and diversity created a range of income-generating alternatives for women. Although class formation in the standard sense was immature, two distinctive strata of women existed in each case. A small but prominent aspiring petty bourgeoisie consisting of teachers, artisans, nurses (in the 1950s) and the wives and daughters of educated professional men formed an elite stratum. The majority of the women, however, were unskilled and either semi-literate or illiterate. The distinction between these two types of women was not always sharp, as all lived in close proximity to each other and shared many community, church and political organizations. The pass question and the transitional nature of these communities affected each stratum in a distinctive way.

The strong and direct economic pressure on the elite stratum of women forced them into dynamic leadership roles which stamped the 1913 anti-pass campaign with its very distinctive non-violent character. The elite felt especially affronted by the rigorous enforcement of the female pass laws. From the time of the British conquest of the former Boer republics, a system of differential pass requirements had been in effect. In each of the provinces, including the Free State, men who had acquired a certain level of education or property holdings were entitled to exemption from the

²⁶ JNAD, *Report, Dec. 1944-June 1948*.

²⁷ There are no figures available for 1958, but the population loss was even greater by then, as the government was engaged in a vigorous programme of forced removals. Figures are from JNAD *Annual Reports* for 1948 and 1957. No figures are available for Alexandra since it was not officially part of the Johannesburg municipality.

pass laws which applied to the masses. Black women, however, were not entitled to such exemptions, making the elite stratum particularly resentful and bitter about their harassment by offensive police officers. Time after time the example of pass-related abuses given by the black media cited the plight of the wives and daughters of ministers of religion, and other 'respectable housewives'.²⁸ The lack of differentiation between them and the masses was a serious affront to their sense of dignity and social status.

During the boom period, both cities attracted the educated and skilled of the black aspiring petty-bourgeois stratum from around the country. In Bloemfontein there is clear evidence of a whole class of carpenters, bricklayers, cart owners, taximen, shoemakers, wagonbuilders, owners of rest houses and cafes, teachers, court interpreters, clerks and ministers of religion.²⁹ Johannesburg half a century later was equally a magnet which drew in the hopeful intelligentsia from throughout the subcontinent. To the skilled professions were added doctors, lawyers, scholars, small businessmen, social workers and journalists. With freehold land tenure in the Western Areas and Alexandra there was also a small class of propertied landowners.

In addition to a strong local market within the black community for professional skills, the relatively elite class benefited from its control over housing during the boom periods. In Bloemfontein in 1913 there was no land ownership for blacks. However, families who had settled there prior to the Anglo-Boer War rented stands from the City Council. As standholders, they were entitled to certain privileges, not least of which was the right to build their own homes and additional rooms or houses on their plots, which measured fifty feet by fifty feet. With the huge influx of people, they were in an excellent position to reap sizeable profits from subletting rooms. At a time when the average black worker's wage was £2 a month, the 'rent-grabbing capitalists of the location' were allegedly earning an extra £9 per month from sub-tenants.³⁰

In Johannesburg the black property owners in the freehold areas were in a similarly strong position. On a plot measuring fifty feet by a hundred it was not uncommon to find eighty people living as tenants. Frequently even tenants rented out space to sub-tenants.³¹ The greater the overcrowding, the higher the demand and the greater the profits for established residents. This opportunity for income was particularly significant for the wives of the elite stratum, as it offered them extra financial flexibility, including the option not to work outside their homes. Income from tenants and sub-tenants no doubt played a significant role in many household budgets, freeing women from the need to enter wage employment.

All of this contributed to the sense of well-being and prosperity of the relatively

²⁸ For example, see *Tsala ea Batho*, 10, 23 Aug.; 4, 25 Oct.; 15 Nov. 1913; and *APO*, 23 Aug.; 11 Oct. 1913.

²⁹ Bloemfontein Town Clerk Correspondence, 29 Oct. 1913, List of Africans holding shoemaking licences in Bloemfontein Location; 13 Nov. 1913, List of licensed tradesmen in Bloemfontein; and personal interviews with residents of Bloemfontein, 1979.

³⁰ *SANAC*, Vol. I, pars. 301, 326.

³¹ David Harris, 'Prices, Homes and Transport', paper presented to University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop 1981, Town and Countryside in the Transvaal: Capitalist Penetration and Popular Response, 33; and Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History* (London, 1963), 16.

elite stratum of black society during the boom periods. But they subsequently suffered as a result of the declining population. Since so many of the elite in Bloemfontein had skills relating to the building industry, they were badly hurt by the shrinking demand for housing. This was further aggravated by the Town Council's action in limiting black rights to practise their trades and professions. The market for tenants also slumped. For the women from this group, the shift was significant. With a husband or father's loss of income, more pressure was placed on women who had previously been housewives to engage in income-generating activity. Although women were probably not responsible for the full maintenance of the family, their extra income was needed to meet the expenses of educating the children, an opportunity most aspiring petty-bourgeois families would not readily forego. Many such women were forced to swallow their pride and seek work previously done exclusively by women of a lower economic stratum.

When the urban centres were booming, non-elite women also enjoyed a period of relative prosperity in informal-sector opportunities. For those who could manipulate the local market there were prospects for profitable economic activity in brewing, sewing, cooking food for sale, petty trade in fruit and vegetables, and selling used clothing. The population drops of over 40 per cent in these townships undoubtedly forced many women out of informal sector activities into wage labour. In Bloemfontein this was limited to domestic service where demand was high. Given the shrinking range of options in Bloemfontein, one significant alternative remained: laundry work. It was customary to take laundry out of white homes to be done elsewhere, either in the laundress's own home, or, in the case of Bloemfontein, in a municipal wash house. Washing, drying, ironing and returning the loads were all part of the job requirement. Although the work was hard and not very well-paid, it did offer a woman the chance to spend a good deal of her time at home, keeping an eye on the children or incorporating them into the work routine. It also left some freedom to take work only at the pace and level most appropriate to family needs at any given time. Part-time charring work also offered a similar degree of flexibility. By contrast, full-time domestic service, the primary occupation for non-skilled women, very often took women out of their homes entirely. Live-in domestic workers existed in isolation from family, friends and community. Consequently, if women felt they had a chance to bargain over their terms of employment, the part-time and take-home kind of work was preferred.

This was a prerogative for which the women were willing to fight and contributed to the intensity of the women's demonstrations. When whites experienced shortages of domestic workers, the black women were no doubt in a stronger position to negotiate terms to their own liking, such as doing take-out laundry and not living in, not to mention better wages and shorter hours. This may in part explain why the laundry women in particular were the most militant. The effect of passes undermined the advantages they were gaining on the open market of supply and demand for domestic services. Their protests came from a position of relative strength in the marketplace which only the extra-economic coercion of passes threatened. Indeed, in Bloemfontein the municipal wash house was a special target of policemen looking for women's passes. The *Bloemfontein Post* of 29 May 1913 reported that it was the

persistent police raids on 'the better class of native women' leaving the laundry house which ultimately triggered off the decision to take a course of passive resistance.³²

In some ways it is more difficult to establish the class identity of the participants in the 1958 demonstrations. Since the state archives are closed for so recent a period, the police records are not available to indicate who was or was not among those charged. Clues as to the identity of the resisters must, therefore, be gleaned from a variety of sources. The ANC had a tendency to minimize class differences and stress the unity of all Africans in the liberation struggle. Lilian Ngoyi, president of both the FSAW and ANCWL, claimed that 'The women who came into the ANCWL were mostly just women who could reason, both educated and uneducated'.³³ In describing the 1958 passive resistance, ANC leaders boasted of the wide diversity of participants, claiming, 'African women of all shades of opinion within and outside Congress had taken part in the demonstrations. It was the church women, the nurses, the factory women, domestic servants, housewives and professional women'.³⁴

There can be no doubt that all African women dreaded the notion of passes. It implied being stopped and arbitrarily arrested for not having the right document at the right moment, the inconvenience of overnight imprisonment, the risk of being sexually assaulted by the police, the cost of fines, or worse, receiving sentences which included jail or farm labour — all without the knowledge of one's family left at home, simply wondering and waiting. This fear was particularly emotive and certainly fuelled the enthusiasm for the large anti-pass demonstrations of the mid-1950s.

Closer analysis, however, reveals that the passive resistance campaign held special urgency for particular categories of women. The spokeswomen of the movement clearly came from the aspiring petty-bourgeois stratum. As a result of a follow-up protest organized by the Federation of South African Women, a special delegation met the mayor of Johannesburg. The women who made up the delegation were quite distinguishable as either professionals in their own right or as wives of professional men who led the ANC.³⁵ Unlike their predecessors in 1913, these leaders did not personally suffer a direct threat from the advent of passes. As married women in employment, their urban residential rights were not in question. Since severe economic pressure on this group is not in evidence, it must be assumed that their involvement came from a high level of political commitment and maturity in the

³² *Bloemfontein Post*, 29 May 1913.

³³ Personal interview, Lilian Ngoyi, Johannesburg, 1977.

³⁴ Federation of South African Women collected papers (FSAW), Executive Report of Transvaal ANC, Presented at Conference, 10 and 11 Oct. 1959, Eastern Native Township, Gubbins Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

³⁵ The African members of the delegation included Ruth Matsoane, a former teacher and officer of the ANCWL and FSAW from Orlando; Tiny Nokwe, a teacher and one-time full-time organizer for the ANCWL, wife of ANC leader Duma Nokwe; Maggie Resha, a nurse and wife of ANC leader Robert Resha; Kate Molale, a leading ANC activist from Sophiatown; Albertina Sisulu, a nurse and wife of ANC leader Walter Sisulu; Dorca Nxonga, one of the passive resistance leaders from Alexandra; and Mrs. A. Mokhete and Mrs. Edith Ntisa, who cannot be identified. The non-African members of the delegation were Hilda Walaza, Marcelle Goldberg and Lillian Naidoo from the FSAW. FSAW, Notes for Discussion of Protest Submitted to the Mayor of Johannesburg Nov. 1958.

struggle for national liberation. Indeed, many of these women subsequently went into exile to continue political work outside the country.³⁶

Although the spokeswomen of the movement may have come from a rather elite class, this does not necessarily imply that the mass of supporters shared the same social status. Press coverage of the resistance claimed the bulk of participants came from Sophiatown and Alexandra. Clearly several women travelled in from the other townships to take part, some even from long distances over the Rand, but their numbers were not large. One example is the level of support from Senoane, one of the newer townships in Soweto. In November, the Senoane Residents Association made a public appeal for financial assistance to pay bail for twenty-six women. Out of a total population of 7,168, this represented only three-tenths of 1 per cent of the people.³⁷ By contrast, neighbourhoods in Sophiatown and Alexandra were left so devoid of women that no neighbours could be found to care for the children. In the course of the resistance, the FSAW at one point called for stepped-up efforts to recruit more domestic workers and factory workers into the struggle, implying that their numbers also were not large.³⁸

The new passes affected different categories of women in different ways, which may account for the variation in response among the black communities. When the passes were actually issued and their full significance was more clearly appreciated, a new set of reasons for intensifying the resistance emerged. The documents being issued in the 1950s were designed primarily to enforce influx control, or the regulation of the number of Africans allowed to reside and work in the cities. As in the Free State in earlier times, the emphasis was on limiting people's free access to the job market and thus to any degree of choice. If one did not qualify for a pass, ejection from the urban area altogether became a menacing possibility.

Probably the vast majority of women living in the urban areas did qualify to get a pass. Anyone born in the city qualified; as did daughters under the age of sixteen and wives of men in legitimate wage employment; so did women who were themselves in wage employment, but only as long as they continued to work. People who had worked for one employer for ten years or those who had worked steadily for different employers for fifteen years also qualified. The townborn, housewives, factory workers and domestic workers all qualified. If they kept their passes in order and on their person at all times, they might not face a grave threat from the new female pass system.

Although these stipulations covered many people, other categories, particularly of single women, did not qualify. Relatively recent immigrants to the city could not prove they had been in steady employment for ten or fifteen years, especially if they had taken time off for pregnancy and childcare. People who had been in wage employment only intermittently were in jeopardy. They could remain in the city only as long as they stayed in employment, thus making it risky to try to change jobs. Perhaps most vulnerable of all were female heads of households, especially if they

³⁶ Tiny Nokwe and Maggie Resha accompanied their husbands into exile; Ruth Matsoane and Kate Molale remained career activists in exile; Albertina Sisulu is currently banned and living in Soweto.

³⁷ *Star*, 7 Nov. 1958; and JNAD, *Report for 1957-58*.

³⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29, 30 Oct. 1958; and *Star*, 27 Oct. 1958.

supported their families through informal sector activities and only casual employment. Single women were further threatened by passes due to the requirement that they produce the pass of a 'male guardian' before they could obtain their own.

Removals from Sophiatown began in earnest in 1955 under the terms of the Group Areas Act which declared all the Western Areas of Sophiatown, Martindale and Newclare for white occupation. The first to be removed to the new township of Meadowlands in Soweto were whole families comprising husband, wife and children. Although the ANC tried to organize mass resistance to these removals, the campaign never quite materialized. Most of those who were initially removed were actually gaining better housing conditions than the slum yards which they inhabited in Sophiatown.³⁹ Only families in which there was at least one full-time worker qualified for new housing, and only those who had been residents of Sophiatown for fifteen years. The authorities carefully screened applications to ascertain if all the technicalities were met.⁴⁰ In contrast with the unregulated life of Sophiatown, the new locations in Soweto consisted of small, uniform and poorly constructed houses and a thoroughly controlled lifestyle. By 1958 a large percentage of those who remained in Sophiatown were those who resisted the move out of political convictions, property owners who faced outright expropriation or those who could not meet all the qualifications for resettlement in Soweto. All had a great deal at stake. After three years of steady removals, terrifying night-time police raid, and the bulldozing of houses, the remaining population recognized that time was running out for them. Single women not in wage employment were in desperate straits. With the impending destruction of their old homes, they were confronted with the prospect of being ejected from the urban area altogether or quickly finding some form of wage employment.

The women from Alexandra faced another kind of problem. Since Alexandra did not officially fall within the boundaries of Johannesburg, they were not considered urban residents, no matter how long they had lived there. Their passes held the same status as those of any rural newcomers to town. From 1955 onwards, male residents of Alexandra were prevented from taking new jobs in Johannesburg under the requirements of influx control.⁴¹ The advent of female passes put women in a similar predicament. Those who had jobs would, therefore, be extremely reluctant to leave them, making them particularly vulnerable to any increased demands from their employers. As in the depleted Sophiatown, large numbers of women in 1958 did not have the full-time wage employment which could secure them the much-needed passes.

Laundry and charring work were common occupations among women living in Alexandra, directly adjacent to the wealthy white northern suburbs. The white homes were within easy commuting distance, reducing travelling expenses and

³⁹ See Tom Lodge, 'The Destruction of Sophiatown', paper presented to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop 1981.

⁴⁰ See Modisane, *Blame Me*, 18, for a description of how these tests were administered.

⁴¹ For an account of this restriction, see Trevor Huddleston, *Naught for Your Comfort* (New York, 1956), 25.

allowing much more unsupervised time in one's own home. The same was true for the conveniently located townships of Sophiatown, Martindale and Newclare. Since so many of the women were dependent on their casual part-time employment in the near-by white suburbs, the prospect of having to apply for a pass even to enter the city was not particularly welcome. For the non-resident domestic workers and laundresses, it became a question of whether employers would agree to sign their passes if they refused to live in, work longer hours or accept lower pay. Consequently, the laundry women of Alexandra gave distinctively strong support to the 1958 resistance. When many of the Alexandra women were fined for their part in the demonstrations, they persuaded the judge to grant them extra time to collect their money for fines because they were only poor laundry women. Also, at the height of the passive resistance an additional two hundred non-arrested laundry women from Alexandra agreed not to collect laundry from white households in solidarity with the jailed women.⁴² For the women of both the Western Areas and Alexandra, the new pass law posed a very real and grave threat to their lives and livelihoods.

Conclusion

Although the two cases under review represent episodes in which the women's militancy was especially intense, they illuminate factors which undoubtedly apply to all women's anti-pass resistance. It was essentially a struggle against full proletarianization. In both cases the resistance proved to be strongest among those women who had achieved a balance between responsibilities to family and generating income. Informal sector activities and part-time wage employment allowed women to carry out these dual roles, a right worth defending even at heavy cost. Such options were particularly viable in the communities considered here. Both the 1913 and 1958 resistance campaigns grew out of communities old and large enough to have a well-established pattern of home-based informal sector work as an alternative to full-time wage employment.

Although the majority of participants were neither highly educated nor skilled, the type of resistance offered was shaped by the participation of a much smaller stratum of elite women. Motivated by the economic difficulties and official non-differentiation of elite women in 1913 and by more political commitment in 1958, these women quite effectively transcended their class position. Those with the ability to read and write, use the media for sympathetic coverage, and converse and correspond with officials, led their less literate sisters in boisterous, but ultimately non-violent campaigns.

Both the Orange Free State Native and Coloured Women's Association in 1913 and the ANCWL/FSAW in 1958 provided the structure which united women of various economic backgrounds and races, albeit under the leadership of the relatively elite. Only by separating into exclusively women's organizations could the women express their grievances and take the decisions that culminated in actions

⁴² *Star*, 6 Nov. 1958; and *Mail*, 27 Oct. 1958.

previously untried by their male counterparts.⁴³ The pooled expertise of women sharing a common front injected the movements with a strong sense of moral certitude in their cause and their methods. Influenced by Gandhi and the suffragettes in 1913 and by international African nationalism in the 1950s, the women had an acute awareness that their struggle was legitimate and therefore worthy of every sacrifice.

Despite the strength of these campaigns, the results were quite different in 1913 and 1958. Although both episodes reflect efforts on the part of the white authorities to gain control over women's labour power, each represents a quite different phase in the incorporation of women into the South African economy. The conditions which placed a high premium on women's labour in 1913 were at that time only local and regional. In the national context, black women were still generally marginal to the wage labour force. Union government officials, when faced with defiant and rebellious women, found it acceptable to remove the source of the discontent by eliminating passes for women in the Free State. By 1958, however, the situation had changed dramatically. Total control over the black population was sought in order to minimize competition with whites and guarantee a cheap and adequate labour supply to those sectors in which economic incentives were inadequate. The control imposed through female passes was designed to secure the availability of black women for jobs in domestic service and farm labour. The needs and power of the state in 1958 were sufficiently strong to suppress all forms of black resistance.

The result of the lost battle became immediately clear. Many important freedoms of previously independent women were lost. Rumours circulated that unmarried men and women gathered at the pass offices, where officials helped them arrange marriages of convenience to qualify for housing in Soweto. Allegedly the men's hats were collected, lined up in a row on the floor and then chosen by a prospective 'bride'.⁴⁴ Others found their former way of life completely eliminated. Can Temba, a journalist for *Drum* magazine, writing in early 1959, described the removal from Sophiatown to Meadowlands of his favourite flamboyant shebeen queen (illegal liquor seller): '. . . she has lost the zest for the game. She has even tried to look for work in town. Ghastly.'⁴⁵

⁴³ It should be noted that the women's example in both cases served as a stimulus to the men, who followed with their own passive resistance campaigns soon after. The 1918 Rand anti-pass campaign can be seen as a response to the 1913 action and the 1960 anti-pass campaigns, which culminated in the Sharpeville massacre, as a response to the women's resistance of the 1950s.

⁴⁴ Personal interview, Motlalepula Chabaku, New York, 1982.

⁴⁵ Can Temba, 'Requiem for Sophiatown', *Africa South*, 3, 3, 1959, 50.

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¹ The present discussion over Production: Three Cases thesis about the Displacement Human Capital Development

² E. Colson, *Marriage* (1958) based on fieldwork on Men's and Women's Magoye Settlements in M 1980. I am also grateful 'Women in Agricultural Strategies, 1930-1970'

³ K. Vickery, 'The 1890-1936', unpub. Ph Change among the Plateau Oriental and African Studies

⁴ Information has been among the Plateau Tonga Livingstone Paper no. 14; District, Zambia', *Food*

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