



launch an organisation - the Women's Action Group (WAG) - to fight for women's rights across the political barriers.

WAG collected stories from women who had been arrested and wrote protest letters to newspapers and magazines. When most of the women were freed at the end of 1983, WAG demanded the Zimbabwean government pay back the women for their suffering. They said many women who had been arrested had reported being raped, abused or insulted by police. They asked the government to promise there would never be another "Operation Clean-Up".

The government never met

these demands. Even today, before big conferences, police sometimes round-up prostitutes saying they give Zimbabwe "a bad name".

"Members of the police and army have a bad attitude towards women," said one woman after Operation Clean-up. "They go with prostitutes while their wives are at home in the rural areas, so they look at all women in town as dirt."

Another woman said: "We fought for this Zimbabwe together with men. At Independence the new government officially recognised women as an oppressed group. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was set up to promote women's equality

and to change customs and laws which oppress women. Now, we are being arrested and punished for being women."

Since its launch, WAG has continued to grow and to fight for women's rights. WAG now has about 1 000 members.

**W**AG has members from the rural areas, trade unions and community organisations. The group publishes a magazine, *Speak Out/Taurai/Khulumani*, in English, Shona and Ndebele. The organisation also has a health information project, works closely with AIDS groups and has an outreach programme for women in the rural areas.

Although women in Zimbabwe still have a long struggle ahead, WAG has managed to win some battles.

In 1985, 23 women in jail for abandoning their babies were freed after WAG wrote to the government. WAG said: "These women are suffering punishment alone, even though the fathers of their babies are guilty of baby-dumping too."

WAG has also challenged the bad way some newspapers write about women - particularly prostitutes. Last year 500 women marched through Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, to protest this. They said: "Human rights are for women too! It is not a crime to be a woman!"

WAG works closely with other women's organisations in Zimbabwe. ●



Photo by WAG

Director of WAG, Salina Mumbengegwi, with a copy of their magazine