

## FOREWORD - CELEBRATING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY AND HERITAGE



Minister Angie Motshekga.

Source: Department of Basic Education.

It gives me great pleasure that since I took office as Minister of Basic Education, my Department is, for the first time, launching a publication that showcases the very important role played by the past valiant and fearless generations of women in our quest to rid our society of patriarchal oppression. While most of our contemporaries across the globe had, since the twentieth century, benefited from the international instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which barred all forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination, we in this Southernmost tip of the African continent continued to endure the indignity of gender discrimination across all spheres of national life. Gender oppression was particularly inhuman during apartheid, where women suffered a triple oppression of race, class and gender.

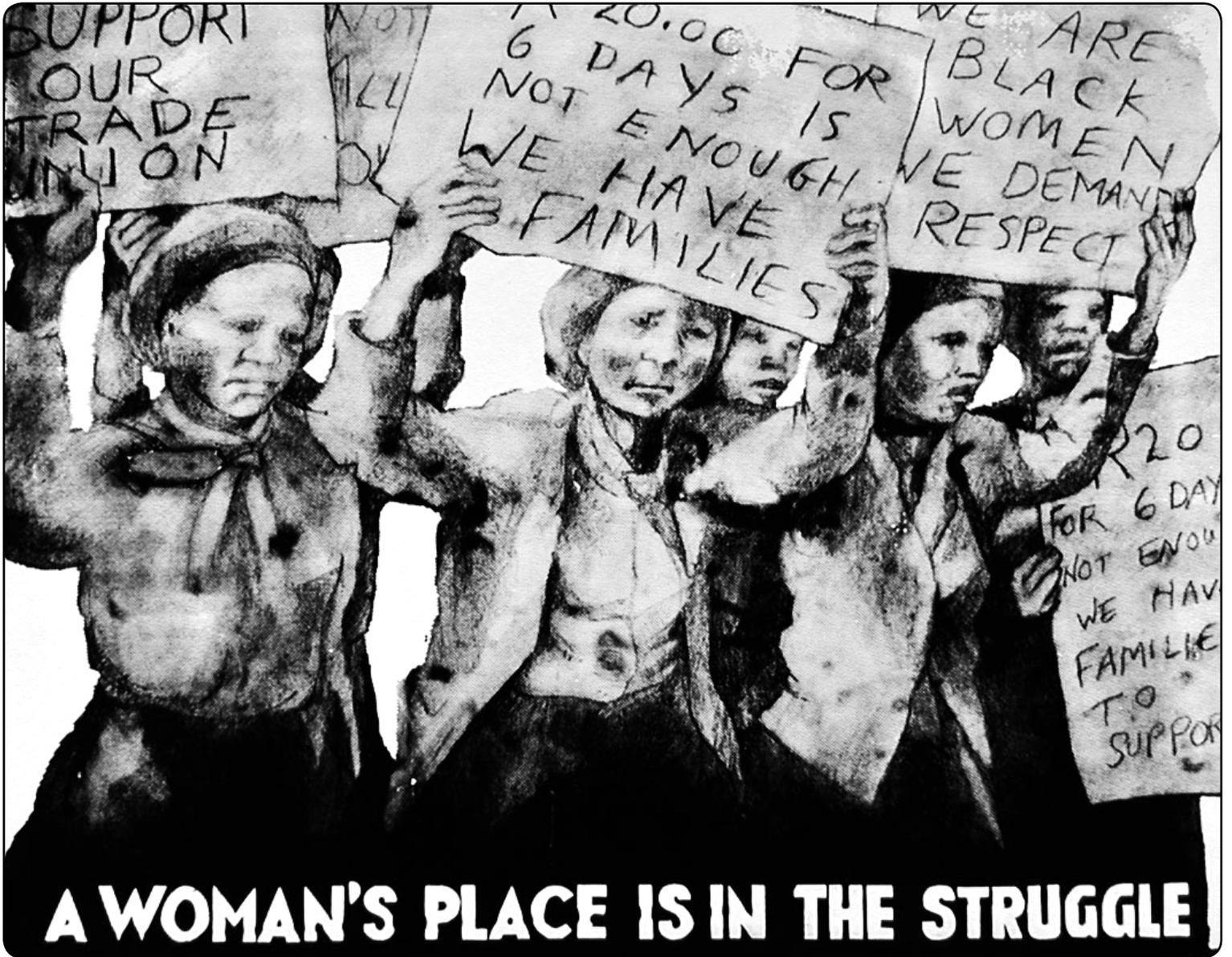
The formal promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic in 1996 was an important milestone, particularly for women, in our new democracy. However, while the Constitution outlawed unfair discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, and other considerations, it will be disingenuous to suggest that the battle against patriarchy had been won in democratic South Africa. If anything, like racism, the evil of patriarchy still lives amongst us and often within us. It is against this background that we have to be even more vigilant that the gains made in the post-apartheid era are not unwittingly rolled back. Therefore, as part of our history and heritage, it is important to recognise the role played by our predecessors in shaping a better life for all women in this country. Although today their ideal of a non-sexist and gender equitable society is still an elusive goal, these gallant women have laid the foundation from which we can realise their ideals.

There are many other moments in our journey to liberation in South Africa that we can savour, and in doing so, we dare not forget the valiant, fearless, and selfless struggles of the past generations. Hence, we deemed it fitting to launch our first quarterly publication on history and heritage with a dedicated focus on women. In that regard, we pay tribute and celebrate those women who have become an embodiment of our struggle for liberation and gender equality in the current times. The objectives of this publication are two-pronged. First, it profiles biographies of important women figures in our struggle for freedom in general and gender equality in particular. Second, while recognising the important historical figures, it also attempts to foreground contemporary biographies of women who continue to play an important role in advancing the course of women in the post-apartheid period. The biographical representations in this publication are from across the vast spectrum of South African society.

I believe this publication will provide insight into the contribution of various generations of women who took the lead to challenge patriarchy and advance gender equality. It is my hope that this publication would spur you into action, like the many women profiled, in realising a better life for all women in this great country of ours.

**Mrs AM Motshekga, MP**

**Minister of Basic Education**



'A woman's place', 1982, Gaborone, Botswana. Silkscreen by Judy Seidman.

## CONTENTS:

1. INTRODUCTION... 3

2. BACKGROUND: AN ERA OF APARTHEID REPRESSION... 5

3. SPECIAL PROFILE: ALBERTINA SISULU... 8

4. 1970S: SOWETO AND INCREASED PRESSURE ON THE APARTHEID STATE... 10

5. 1980S: WOMEN ORGANISE... 16

6. 1990S: WOMEN BEFORE AND AFTER

THE FIRST DEMOCRATIC ELECTION... 24

7. 2000S: WOMEN TODAY... 30

8. WALL OF REMEMBRANCE... 36

9. GLOSSARY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY... 40

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he struggle for democracy and gender equality is built on the foundation of struggles by generations of women and men. This booklet examines the women's struggle from the 1950s onwards, with a particular focus on the 1970s to present day. Great leaders and activists emerged in the 20th century. Many women worked hard over long periods at great cost to themselves to help our country to gain freedom from Apartheid.

The profiles of the people in this booklet should encourage us to engage with the heroes of our past to inspire a new generation of women and gender activists to continue the struggle for equality and social justice. Struggle is not easy. As you will see when you read about women from the past, struggle requires service, commitment, self-sacrifice and even suffering.

## DECADE OF THE WOMEN: 1950S

In the 1950s the Women's Struggle in South Africa gained momentum. On 26 June 1955 thousands of women delegates joined men from all across South Africa at the Congress of the People to draw up the Freedom Charter. For the first time in the history of the country a multiracial gathering of men and women agreed on racial equality, human rights and gender equality.

One year later, on 9 August 1956 the militant cry of thousands of black and white women rang out across the grounds of the Union Buildings in Pretoria. They had marched to the seat of the Apartheid government to protest against the hated pass laws and to demand equal rights for all South Africans. They marched singing a song that has become a 'battle cry' of the Women's Movement ever since.

"Strijdom wathint' abafazi, wathint' Imbokotho"

(Strijdom you've tampered with the women, you've knocked against a rock).

The Women's Anti-Pass Campaign and the Women's Charter became the inspiration and benchmark around which decades of women struggled openly, underground and in exile until the realization of our democracy in 1994.

The demands of women for equality have been written into the South African Constitution. However, many challenges still face South African women today; the main challenges include HIV/AIDS, poverty, and lack of education, unemployment and violence against women. Women's voices must be heard at all levels of our political and social lives. The establishment of grass roots organisations and effective research projects will help to ensure that the challenge is met.



### THE 100 YEAR STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND THE ANC WOMEN'S LEAGUE

This booklet was produced by South African History Online (SAHO). It forms part of an online archive on the role of women over a century of struggle, this is important at this time because the African National Congress (ANC) is about to celebrate its 100th anniversary (2012). It is, without question, a momentous occasion in South African and African history. But, the history of the

ANC cannot be separated from the history of a multi-layered liberation struggle. So it is important that we teach about the role that women played as an integral part of our 'struggle history'

In commemoration of the ANC's 100th anniversary this booklet includes a 'Wall of Remembrance' that highlights some of the key women who have played an important role in the 100 year struggle for freedom.



#### DID YOU KNOW

When the African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912, it did not accept women as members. At the ANC's 1943 conference women were accepted as members. In 1948 the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) was formed. The first official president of the ANCWL was Ida Mntwana who was appointed after the brief presidency of Madie Hall-Xuma.



9 August 1956, womens' anti pass march to the Union Buildings. This march was organised by FEDSAW and led by Sophie Williams, Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi, seen in this picture. *Photograph by Eli Weinberg, UWC Robben Island, Mayibuye Archives.*

## BACKGROUND AN ERA OF APARTHEID REPRESSION

**T**he year 1960 was a turning point in South African history. It was the year of the Sharpeville Massacre, when 69 men, women and children were killed by Apartheid police outside a police station for resisting the Apartheid pass laws. The aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre and the declaration of a State of Emergency in March 1960 signaled the beginning of a brutal and intensive phase of state repression against resistance. About 10 000 people were detained. Harsh measures were introduced to deal with those (both black and white) who resisted. After Sharpeville, the Apartheid regime banned the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

At this time many people began to feel it was useless for the ANC and PAC to continue using non-violence against a government that responded with violent attacks on unarmed people. By mid-1961, liberation leaders had abandoned non-violent methods of resistance and launched an armed struggle.

The ANC created an underground military wing, called Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) or the 'Spear of the Nation', launched in December 1961, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. Men and Women began leaving the country to join MK and train in exile.

Ruth Mompati, for example, left the country and became secretary of the ANCWL in Tanzania in 1962.



*...Here, from underground, is Walter Sisulu to speak to you...*

*Sons and Daughters of Africa! I speak to you from somewhere in South Africa. I have not left the country. I do not plan to leave. Many of our leaders of the African National Congress have gone underground. This is to keep the organisation in action; to preserve the leadership; to keep the freedom fight going. The struggle must never waver. We of the ANC will lead with new methods of struggle. The African people know that their unity is vital. In the face of violence, many strugglers for freedom have had to meet violence with violence. How can it be otherwise in South Africa?*

Extract of the inaugural broadcast made by Radio Liberation, the ANC's radio station, on 26 June 1963. Sisulu and other leaders were arrested during a raid at Liliesleaf farm less than a month later.



A woman stands alone on the steps of the Palace of Justice with her fist raised in support of her leaders. Rivonia Trial, 1963-1964.  
Source: Pretoria News.



Mayihlome ke Nako ("let us arm, its time"), date unknown. ANC Tanzania, women's armed struggle poster.

The PAC formed an armed wing called Poqo. They are less well-known today but also played an important role in South African history. Robert Sobukwe was the founding president of the Pan Africanist Congress. Some of his ideas later inspired Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. Sobukwe was put on trial for his role in the anti-pass campaigns of 1960 and sentenced to three years in prison in Pretoria. After completing his three-year sentence, Sobukwe was detained by a special Act of Parliament called the 'Sobukwe Clause', and transferred to Robben Island. He was jailed separately from the other political prisoners.

In August 1962, Nelson Mandela was captured by the police. In June 1963, other MK leaders including Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Dennis Goldberg, and Ahmed Kathrada were arrested in Rivonia, Johannesburg. They were charged and tried in the infamous Rivonia Trial. They were sentenced to life imprisonment in June 1964. The Rivonia Trial had significant short-term and long-term consequences. The Apartheid government was largely able to break the strength of the struggle inside South Africa by imprisoning the leaders of MK and Poqo. For a time, open political activity was nearly impossible.

After the Rivonia Trial and Sobukwe's arrest, organised resistance to apartheid within South Africa slowed down. Many anti-Apartheid leaders and supporters were in jail or had gone into exile. And in the late 1960s Apartheid policies were further tightened by B. J. Vorster, the Minister of Justice (later the Prime Minister).

Out of this vacuum, the late 1960s gave rise to new sources of resistance, mainly in the form of the Black Consciousness Movement and student activism.



## DETENTION LAWS

In 1963, a law which allowed for 90 days detention without trial was introduced. Albertina Sisulu was the first woman to be arrested under this new law. She was placed in solitary confinement incommunicado for almost two months.

In 1965, the 90 day detention period was increased to 180 days. In 1967, the Terrorism Act gave the State even more power to suppress any opposition. New methods of torture in detention were also introduced. These included extended periods of isolation, standing for long hours, sleep deprivation, physical assault and psychological torture. Many women were victims of torture. But the experiences of white and black women were different, as brute force was not generally used against white women.



## CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

### Questions

1. The following list of events is in the incorrect order of time. Refer to the introduction and background sections and arrange the events in the correct time order. Write the list in your notebook.

- ANC and PAC banned
- Women's March to Pretoria
- Sharpeville Massacre
- Black Consciousness Movement gained momentum
- MK and Poqo formed
- Rivonia Trial

2. With your class, make a list of words that could be used to describe:

- a) the Apartheid government
- b) those who stood up against the Apartheid government