

WOMEN IN FOCUS

AUGUST 9 is remembered as National Women's Day by all who struggled against the Pass Laws and other unjust laws in South Africa. It was on this day that 20 000 women from all over South Africa joined hands in a courageous march to Pretoria to protest against the law that women also must carry passes. This law forces African women to carry passes wherever they go.

The women marched through Pretoria to the Union Buildings. They had come to see Strijdom, the Prime Minister.

But he refused to see the women. So, they left thousands of signed petitions at his door, and held a silent protest for 30 minutes.

After the silence, the women sang their famous song: "Strijdom you have tampered with the women. You have struck a rock."

26 years have passed since that march. The women are still suffering hardship. They still carry passes. As August 9th draws near, women are reminding themselves of their part in tackling the problems of the present.

UWO calls women to work together

AS WIVES and mothers we have to make small wages stretch a long way.

There are almost no free child care facilities for working mothers. Women who go to work are constantly worrying about their children.

The worst paid, unskilled work is done by women, in factories, on farms and as domestics. When jobs are scarce, women are the first to be laid off.

In factories women are forced to have family planning. When women fall pregnant, they may lose their jobs because maternity leave is not always granted.

Many women do two jobs. When they come home after an 8 hour working day, they have to start another job. They must start the work of cooking and looking after the family.

Some women who cannot get jobs are sometimes forced into running shebeens or becoming prostitutes.

The Pass Laws hit women very hard. Women in the Bantustans are not allowed to come into the cities to look for work or to live with their husbands who work there. Women are often

made to feel inferior to men because women have been taught to believe that a "woman's place is in the home". This prevents women from becoming actively involved in the community to overcome these problems.

In the Western Cape, the United Women's Organisation is bringing women together and helping them overcome these problems. Through the UWO women can come together to tackle the problems that are special to women as members of the community.

The UWO was launched in April 1981 at a Conference of 500 women who saw the need for women to organise in the community.

The women want mothers to stand by their children in the hardships they have to face at school in their frustration with their education, in the community where there is nothing but the streets to grow up in and later, as job seekers hunting for jobs that will not earn a living wage.

Women come together in the UWO to tackle their problems. They believe that united action will help the women overcome the problems facing them.



Meeting of Federation of South African Women, Johannesburg 1954.



THE women of the Cape, the ordinary housewives, have never been recognised for their role in the community. In this story Jean Naidoo, a housewife and mother, tells us about some of the women of the past. Many of them according to Jean have "stood in the shadows of the public eye", and are unknown to many of us.

She said: "I have chosen a few women to write about, but in the past twenty-seven years, I have met so many women and pay tribute to all of the women of the Cape Town community, especially my fellow workers, the housewives."

Knowledge

They have a vast knowledge and experience starting in the home and extending into the community. They are the nurses, cooks, financial experts, psychologists, teachers and the peace-makers. There is no school except life itself which teaches them.

I want to tell you about some of the housewives who contributed to be political movements in Cape Town. Some of them have had little or no schooling and belonged to no political organisations. All they knew was what is right and wrong.

Others are the wives and daughters of men who have been banned, detained and house arrested.

One such woman is Lulu Peake who returned to South Africa recently to bury the ashes of George Peake, in the grave of her only son Karl. Lulu and her daughters live in exile in London.

Tribute to Cape Women

I sat with her and went to the graveside to bury George's ashes. He was the president of the Coloured People's Congress in the 1960's and the "Mayor of Robben Island", as we called him.

Lulu told me about all the women in London that we knew, Rose Desai, Lily Stein, Martha Brutax, Bettie September and Blanche La Guma were a few of the women of the 1960's who were forced to leave. They miss home, but there is no hope of returning

until change comes to South Africa.

I remember Blanche La Guma well. She was a community midwife in Cape Town and a founder member of the Women's Federation. I remember her delivering two babies in 1964 and 1965 as we talked about protests, the arrests and the suffering of many people.

Then there was also Evelyn Ouman who passed away in 1981. She was the wife of Ahmed Osman, Ouy as we called him. He was banned, jailed and forced out of his teaching job. In 1981, just before her death, she was still advising us on many community matters.

Tragedy

But there are many Evelyns in the community who have suffered with dignity and have touched the lives of many. The greatest tragedy is that we may lose all this history if we who lived through the past do not tell the stories to our children.

Before you go, I want to tell you about another ordinary housewife who is one of the unknown pillars of the community. Her name is Fatima Rapoo who came to Cape Town 45 years ago from Heidelberg where she was born.

Her house in Portsmouth Road is the Dry Docks was a place where everybody could come together. Those who were on trial or needed assistance in Cape Town could always head for Fatima's home for a lunch and much needed support.

Fatima always tells the story of

Lowest wages for garment workers

CLOSE to 40 000 women in the Western Cape are employed in the clothing industry. They are the wives and daughters of the families living on the Cape Flats.

Grassroots spoke to garment workers who complained bitterly about their low wages and poor working conditions, in spite of recent wage increases. In fact, they are the lowest paid workers in the manufacturing industry in the country.

The average weekly wage of the workers is R18. According to a study by the University of Port Elizabeth, this is half the wages needed by a family to survive.

Many garment workers still remember the days in the 1970's when close to 10 000 workers in

the country were laid off because of the slump in the industry.

Today, the industry is running at 90% employment. But this is not expected to last long as poor economic conditions will once again force many to lose their jobs around next year.

This is the plight of all workers, but especially women workers. When jobs are scarce, they are the first to be laid off. But as conditions improve, they are employed in the worst paid unskilled jobs in the factories, on the farms and as domestics.

Grassroots interviewed Mary Petersen, a machinist at a clothing factory in Cape Town. This is what she said.

Worker speaks of hardship on factory floor

MARY gets up at 5 every morning. Prepares breakfast, gets her baby ready to take him to her sister, and then rushes off to the taxi rank.

She finally arrives at the station, but as usual, the train is late and the platform is crowded. She arrives at work and clocks in 30 minutes late. And so, loses her attendance bonus.

"This is the way I start my day," Mary told Grassroots.

"But I'm not the only one. All the girls I know go through the same thing every morning."

GrassROOTS asked Mary about her work in the factory, which makes ladies underwear.

"I started here as a cleaner four years ago at R13 per week. Usually, I would have had to work for three years before being allowed

to work a machine. But, because I was a good worker and taught myself, I earned a machinist's wage of R34 after only two years. I now earn R40,50 per week."

We asked Mary how she felt about the recent wage increases for garment workers.

"Yes, I'm now getting R2,80 more per week, but this will not make much difference. We certainly think we deserve more. We work hard for our money, putting out all those thousands of garments every day. When we lived in District Six I could easily walk to work, but now I have to get up so early and travel far. I have to pay out so much money for transport and other things that I only have enough to live on."

Mary said that the girls spoke about this at work, "we really should ask for more than R3. Some of the girls say we must ask the

Union to get us higher wages, but some girls also say that going to the Union is just like going to the boss. They will just say they can't."

Mary is one of 51 000 members of the Garment Workers Union. She also told Grassroots that the union helps them with some benefits such as, a sick fund. She sees this as a good thing; the workers have many health problems caused by the chemicals and the dust in the factories. "The union doctor cannot do anything about my backache and chest problems. A pill will not help. Many girls suffer from these illnesses", she said.



You are invited

THIS year the UWO is arranging a commemoration of National Women's Day on Sunday, August 9th.

The programme will also focus on the problems of women in the present.

The UWO has invited all progressive organisations, trade unions and churches, associations, and welfare organisations and women who have heard to come together on National Women's Day.

The commemoration will take place at the Northwold Civic Hall, Bluegum Street, Bonthuys. All are welcome. This day is especially important for women. It is the day for those women who can say:

"We know what it is to keep family life going in overcrowded one-room flats."

"We know the bitterness of children taken to lawless boarding schools or growing up without education or training or jobs at a living wage."

rest of the land was just hills. The police went from door-to-door looking for pass books, they really behaved badly.

They used to come to our houses and throw out our flour and yeast because they said we were making simon- 'n' off-beer."

The women had enough and called a meeting. We used to take paraffin (oil) and walk up the hills hanging it with planks. Everyone would come out. What's going on? A meeting! And so, the community would come to listen and talk and decide.

We went to Mr Govan, the superintendent of the location to complain. He sent us to the Commissioner in Athlone. We marched to Athlone. It was a very hot day. But the Commissioner would not speak to all of us, only to five women.

This type of bad behaviour of the police all stopped.

Protest of 1950's

GRASSROOTS spoke to a Guguletu mother who did not want to be named.

This is what she said. "The 1950's, yes, there was protest in Cape Town. We protested and then the police came and took our placards away. So we had to go home."

There was another time in the 1950's, when we all lived in the pokkers near NY6 and NY 143. The

'We don't want passes'

"IF YOU CAN'T GO TO PRETORIA, GO TO YOUR NEAREST NATIVE COMMISSIONER."

This was the call to the woman who

couldn't march on August 9, 1955.

Not all women fighting the Pass Laws went to Pretoria.

All over the country that day, the United voice of the women was heard.

The FSAW said to its members: "If you can't go to Pretoria, go to your nearest Native Commissioner".

In the Western Cape, nearly two hundred women gathered at the office of the Native Affairs in Salt River.

At their head was Mrs Nqose of Retreat.

That was before the Group Areas Act removed all Africans to the locations.

The delegation took 800 signed protest petitions to the Native Commissioner.

Even more petitions went to Pretoria with the delegates from the Western Cape.

The women carried placards saying: "We don't want passes. We have seen the hardship these passes have brought to our men."

Here, too, the women stood in silent protest against the laws that they knew would

bring much suffering.

As one woman who talked to us put it:

"If the people who made the laws had to live under them and put their children under them, then they would know what it is to suffer. That is why the women sing a song that goes:

"Let us start with Mariette

"Let her be the first to carry a pass".

"Mariette was Strijdom's daughter. I'm sure he would not want his daughter to carry a pass."

WHO WAS BEHIND THE MARCH?

The force behind the Pretoria Demonstration was the FSAW. The Federation of South African Women was a non-racial organisation made up of many organisations that affiliated to it.

It was launched at a National Conference on 17 April 1954, where the Women's Charter was adopted.

The Women's Charter reached out to all women irrespective of race or colour and called for solidarity in the struggle against apartheid, racism, sexism and capitalist exploitation."