

South African Women Unite For A Non-Sexist Post-Apartheid South Africa!

For the first time women from different organisations all over South Africa and South African women from the African National Congress (ANC) outside of the country, met together for a conference. The conference was called 'Malibongwe,' and the theme was 'Women united for a unitary, non-racial, democratic South Africa.' It took place in Amsterdam, a city in Holland, from 8 - 18 January 1990. There was much singing and toyi-toying at this joyful reunion between women from inside South Africa and the ANC women. As one delegate said: "Malibongwe brought us together with our comrades in exile. Together we were able to say what we want as women, and we are prepared to work very hard to achieve what we want."

A Call For Unity Amongst Women

The Malibongwe conference was organised by the ANC Women's Section, women in South Africa and the Women's Committee of the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement. Those women who organised the conference felt that South African women must unite to fight sexism in South Africa. They are worried that women's issues are being forgotten in the struggle to end apartheid. They feel that women's issues are not taken seriously, and that women's freedom must be fought for as part of the struggle for national liberation. Through unity women will prepare the way for a non-sexist post-apartheid South Africa.

International Solidarity Against Apartheid

The first week of the Malibongwe conference was open to women from all over the world who came to show solidarity with South African

women. South African women visited Dutch women's organisations and organisations which contributed funds for Malibongwe from all over Holland. On these visits Dutch and South African women shared experiences. South African women were moved to feel the strong support Dutch people have for the struggle against apartheid. South African women called on Dutch people to increase international pressure to end apartheid and injustice in South Africa.

Women's Lives

During the the first week of Malibongwe there were many discussions. One of the discussions was about women and the media. Women spoke about the way the media only talks about rich and successful women. The media never says anything about the lives and problems of most South African women. The other problem with the media is that women's bodies are used to sell products. There was a call to make women aware of this exploitation of women. The paper presented by the ANC showed that even 'people's' newspapers don't write enough about the real lives of South African women. People felt that more women should be trained as journalists.

Women Around The World

There was discussion about women and liberation struggles in other parts of the world. Nancy Igllesias from Cuba explained how Cuban people were liberated through their revolution. Many women learnt to read and write and found work outside the home. In Cuba there are laws that say that housework and childcare are the responsibility of men and women. But women are still left with the burden of work in the home. Celia Pomeroy spoke of the struggle in the Philippines. She talked about how all women, young and old, became involved in the armed struggle against the Japanese who were occupying the Philippines. It was clear that national liberation struggle is a struggle through which women's liberation must be achieved.

There was also a discussion between South African women and the Dutch police. South African women talked about their experiences with the police in South Africa. The Dutch

policewomen talked about the role of police in a democratic country. South African women tried to imagine a time when the police will be on the side of the people in South Africa.

Frontline States

The conference delegates talked about the problems faced by South Africa's neighbours - the frontline states - countries like Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Zambia, Mozambique and Angola. The South African government has waged a war against the frontline states to try to prevent them supporting the struggle for freedom in South Africa. South Africa's war against the frontline states has caused great suffering. The women at the conference said that this suffering will only end when apartheid is destroyed. South African women sent messages of support and solidarity to the frontline states.

Not All Serious Talking

Malibongwe was also a time for music, dancing and poetry. Women gathered at Malibongwe to be together, to talk and sing about their lives, their problems, fears and hopes. South African, Dutch, Moroccan, Surinam and other musicians entertained people with their songs. The Dutch choir from Culture in an Alternative South Africa were very popular. People cheered when they sang South African freedom songs.

South African Women Meet

The second week of the conference was only for South Africans from inside and outside the country. The first issue the women talked about was how and why women are oppressed and exploited in South Africa. They also talked about how women are oppressed in a different way to men. They talked about women at work and women in the family. The conference agreed that black women who work outside their homes are the most oppressed of all women in South Africa. They spoke about how difficult it is for working women to join trade unions and the political struggle because they go home after work and do another shift at home. Women are treated as minors in their families. And families further the oppression of women. Malibongwe delegates called for housework and childcare to be shared by men and women in the home. They committed



Malibongwe was a time for women to discuss the issues that affect them as women.

Photo: SPEAK

themselves to making sure that this is raised in every organisation. Only when men take equal responsibility for their homes will women be able to take part fully in organisations.

Rural Women

There was discussion about the problems facing rural women. More than 60% of all South African women live in rural areas. Women are left behind when men go to the cities to work. They have to deal with the lack of schools, lack of health care and the poverty in rural areas. Women at the conference agreed that there needs to be links between women in urban and rural areas. The Malibongwe Conference launched a bursary fund called the Malibongwe Bursary Fund. This will be used to develop rural women's skills.

Women And Health

There was discussion on women and health. Many women are forced to take contraception. Many women are given the contraceptive injection called depo which is banned in other countries because it is dangerous. There are



Women at Malibongwe had the opportunity to share experiences and ideas.

Photo: SPEAK

not enough hospitals in South Africa. Women do not get proper health education and care. Malibongwe delegates agreed that there needs to be campaigns around women's health issues. There needs to be health and sex education. Delegates recommended that AIDS awareness and education should be part of the work of community organisations.

Laws That Oppress Women

There was discussion on how women are oppressed by law. Women suffer repression and violence under South Africa's apartheid laws. It was clear that the laws and practices of our country do not protect women. They just make women's lives more difficult and burdened. Apartheid laws have increased male domination of women.

Fight Women's Oppression

There was discussion on cultural and traditional practises like lobola, and men being married to more than one woman. Delegates said that traditions like these oppress women. Women felt the need to understand why such customs exist. Women strongly agreed that cultural and traditional practices that oppress women must be fought. They said that this needs to be part of building a progressive people's culture.

Homes, Health And Education For Children

Women discussed the problems facing children in South Africa. All children in South Africa are affected by violence. And they do not have a

chance to be children. There was discussion on the problems facing homeless and street children. They felt that the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) has not looked at ways of dealing with these problems. Women at Malibongwe made a call for a national campaign to deal with the problem of South Africa's homeless children.

The conference resolved to build people's education and to be part of the struggle to push the government to provide decent education. There was a call for women's organisations to start pre-school programmes based on people's education. The conference said that children in South Africa start to suffer before they are even born. Their mothers do not have healthy food to eat. There is no proper health care for pregnant women. Children are then born into poverty. It was recommended that progressive health organisations look into ways of dealing with the the problem of children's physical and mental health.

The conference also looked at the issues of the militarisation of children and the effect of violence and repression on children. Malibongwe women called on all South Africans to look at this problem very seriously. Children are the future of South Africa.

Freedom For Women

The conference discussed how women can free themselves. All agreed that this cannot happen while all people are oppressed because of their

race, or because they are poor, or because they do not have political power. But the freedom of women will not just happen with national liberation. Women said that struggles in other countries have shown that women are still oppressed even after liberation. Even laws against women's oppression do not stop this oppression. South Africa needs laws to protect women's rights. But this is not enough. The way in which society sees and treats women must also change. The struggle for women's freedom must be part of the struggle to liberate South Africa. A call was made for the MDM and the ANC to take the fight against sexism as seriously as the fight against racism.

Unity Amongst Women

The Malibongwe Conference discussed the importance of the unity of South African women. It was felt that the main problem facing the women's struggle is that there is no strong women's organisation. The conference agreed that it is important to form a national structure to unite all women's organisations. The conference resolved that all organisations must begin working towards the formation of a national women's structure. The conference said that women's freedom must be an important part of the ANC's plans and the plans

of all progressive organisations. That the fight for women's freedom must be taken up now. Freedom for South Africa, freedom for women, and freedom for workers, must be fought for at the same time.

Women at the conference made plans about what all women can do about women's oppression. The plans were put into a programme of action on all the issues discussed at Malibongwe. Women who went to Malibongwe will take this programme of action back to their organisations to discuss.

Putting Words Into Action

Ruth Mompoti from the ANC National Executive Committee and the ANC's Women's Section, closed the conference. She said in her speech that the success of the Malibongwe conference will be seen by how discussions are put into practice. The task of all those who attended the conference is to take those discussions back to their organisations and put them into action. They must make sure that the discussions at Malibongwe become the discussions of all organisations that are concerned with the liberation of oppressed people in South Africa. Women from Malibongwe, she said, must take home the strong call for unity among women.



The task that lies ahead for those women who attended the Malibongwe Conference is to take back the discussions to their organisations and put words into action. Women took back home a strong call for unity.

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