



TRAC

Newsletter No. 17 Feb 1991

Transvaal Rural Action Committee



RURAL WOMEN COME TOGETHER WITH HOPE

"There is always a little hope for our land, a long way away there is hope." These are the words of Margaret Gaonose from Huhudi in the Northern Cape. She was speaking at a Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC) sponsored workshop for rural women held in October 1990. The women came together around the common concern about land and life in the South African countryside. Over the years that TRAC has been helping communities to resist forced removals, rural

women have been at the forefront of the struggles. Lydia Kompe, TRAC fieldworker said: "When I first started working for TRAC I found that men excluded the women from community decision-making forums. When the government officials arrive in the community, the first people to be approached are the women who are looking after their children and their homes while their husbands are maybe in the veld tending the cattle or even in town as migrant workers.

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So I felt it was very unfair for the men to exclude them from decision-making." The crises of forced removal or incorporation forced men to rely on women much more, though they still try to keep them out of the *kgotla*, said MamLydia.

First women's workshop

In 1986, TRAC organised a workshop specifically for rural women to meet together who were experiencing similar problems. It was held at Mathopestad, a black spot area that won a long battle against a threat of forced removal. This gathering provided a great boost for rural women's groups to form in the communities. Since then, women have met together to support each other, discuss their problems and to assert their right to be taken seriously by the men. The contact between women's groups has encouraged women to take action on their problems. For example, in Mogopa women have gained the right to representation in the *kgotla*. In Braklaagte, the women have set up a *stokvel* (a revolving loan scheme) to assist each other in times of trouble.



Women share ideas in a small group at one of the workshops. *Plc.: Tania Schoennagel*

Rural Women's Movement formed

In May 1990, 85 women representing 16 rural communities from the Western and South Eastern Transvaal held a weekend workshop in Matjakaneng at which they decided to form the **Rural Women's Movement**. It is not seen as a replacement for

political women's organisations such as the ANC Women's League but rather as a forum that provides **rural** women a place to meet and discuss their problems. The movement hopes to build strong links with all other women's organisations and to ensure that the concerns of rural women are given priority. A follow-up meeting was set for after winter. In October representatives of the groups travelled to Johannesburg to discuss developments in their communities and to elect a formal executive of the Rural Women's Movement. One of their resolutions was that women from the Northern Transvaal should be drawn into the Rural Women's Movement. Three places on the executive were left open for women from the North if they wished to participate.

Women from the North

In December 1990, TRAC invited women from several communities in Sekhukhuneland to a meeting. Members of the executive of the Rural Women's Movement attended to share their experiences. The two-day meeting heard about women's problems and hardships in the villages. Women from the five areas in Sekhukhuneland which were represented, unanimously decided to join with the Rural Women's Movement. They felt that contact through this structure could provide them with support from other women. They wanted assistance to build women's organisations and ideas for small projects.

Women resolve

At the first meeting of the Rural Women's Movement, the women passed a number of resolutions.

- * They condemned the bantustan system "which has caused untold misery with its forced removals, incorporations and evictions of our people from their ancestral land";
- * They rejected bantu education and demanded equal education for all South Africans;

- * They registered their opposition to discrimination on the grounds of race and sex;
- * They called for the ending of the hostel system which has torn apart families.

The women also called on the government to allow black people the right to land - this would mean the scrapping of the Land Acts, the Group Areas Act and the Illegal Squatting Act. The meeting resolved to work for equal representation with men in a future democratically elected South African parliament.

Problems women face

Delegates reported on the recent events in their areas - some of the reports told of victories and some of continued suffering. The people living in Koster in the Western Transvaal won a reprieve from forced removal after years of struggle. And the famous community of Mogopa which was removed from their land in 1984 seems to have won the right to return to their land. But the women of Modderspruit related stories of repression and suffering under Bophuthatswana rule. And in Daggakraal in the S E Transvaal, there have been many deaths in a war between the taxi-drivers and the youth over fare increases. As a speaker from Mogopa said, "Even though many of our areas have been reprieved, there are still many problems which need to be talked about."

At the meeting in October, the women broke into small groups to discuss three common themes: the relationships between tenants and landlords on black owned land, ways of strengthening women's organisation and women in decision-making.

Exclusion from community decision-making

In many places, the traditional community decision-making body or *kgotla* excludes women. Women at the Johannesburg workshop said that strong women repre-



A delegate noting the resolutions of the women.

Pic: Tania Schoennagel

sentatives should be elected to the *kgotla*. It is assumed that men will represent women either as husbands, fathers or brothers, but the women complained that the men never give adequate report-backs. They also pointed out that many women are not "attached" to a man - they may be widows or unmarried women - and therefore are completely excluded from participating in important decisions. Rita Ndzanga from Mogopa said: "We are living in new times - there must be new ways of doing things. In the past, women weren't even allowed to sit on chairs in the presence of men. Women take care of the most important things in life - health, education and the family - and should be represented at all levels in the society, from the *kgotla* to the parliament."

Women at the meeting expressed support for the ANC Women's League. "The only way to win representation and make sure that women's issues are dealt with is to build strong women's structures," said Mmathangeng Matsosi from Braklaagte near Zeerust.



Women act out their relationship with their chiefs in a play.

Pic: Tania Schoennagel

She said it was unfortunate that so many men felt threatened by the Women's League. "The men think that the Women's League will get a place in the new parliament where they will campaign for the end of men's right to have more than one wife!"

One man, many wives

Some of the women did feel strongly that polygamy should be stopped. Beauty Mhkize from Driefontein in the South Eastern Transvaal said: "It just causes problems. Men cannot support many wives financially and they cannot give all their wives the same amount of love which causes terrible bitterness and suffering."

Landlords and tenants

The women were very concerned about the problems arising in black settlements between tenants and landowners. They said the only solution was to demand that the government make more land available. "The problems with tenants only arise because there is not enough land," said Elizabeth Melwa from Matjakaneng (near Brits). The government also must make a law to prevent evictions of people from the white-owned farms. Many of the families who became tenants in the rural areas are homeless farm workers who have been thrown off the land. Many of the families who became tenants in the rural areas are homeless farm workers who have been thrown off the land. Evic-

tions from farm land cause the most terrible suffering. "It is against people's culture to move off and live apart from their ancestors who are buried on that land."

Water

Poor water supply was a common theme at the Northern Transvaal workshop. Some women spent up to 4 hours a day carrying water for their families. The shortage of water also meant that women could not cultivate crops or vegetables to supplement their families' food supply.

Chiefs won't help us

Women complained that the chiefs and *kgotlas* often blocked their efforts to set up self-help projects. For example, in one area, the women were refused permission to use a piece of land for vegetable growing. There are so few opportunities for employment in the rural areas that women are desperate to look for ways of generating a little extra money or producing something for their families to eat.

Future plans

The next action of the Rural Women's Movement will be to plan a celebration for the victories that have been won. Women said that they have lived through so much suffering that it was time to celebrate and give thanks.