



Adelaide Tambo leads delegates in the singing at the national launch of the ANC's Women's League

Looking for the Women's League? Leave a message...

The problems facing the ANC Women's League are similar to those which have dogged women's organisations in the past — in particular, reports Sheila Meintjes, a lack of interest from the ANC leadership

Attempts to organise the ANC Women's League are being hampered by a lack of coherent leadership, a scarcity of resources and minimal support and interest from ANC head office.

The league, which still has to hold a fully representative conference, needs urgently to address how it is going to harness women in the tasks it has set itself.

At the level of rhetoric, the ANC national executive committee has made a remarkably progressive statement on women, saying: 'The emancipation of women is not a by-product of a struggle for democracy, national liberation, or socialism. It has to be addressed in its own right.'

The statement recognises that women in South Africa have experienced gender

oppression, and that their subjugation has occurred culturally, legally and economically as a result of patriarchal domination.

This has prevented women from participating fully in the political process, and this is true even for the ANC.

The ANC pledges itself to giving priority to programmes of education and advancement for women, and claims gender equality as one of its central objectives.

To achieve this, 'women must take the lead in creating a non-sexist South Africa'.

And so, a historic role has been created for the ANC Women's League.

The aims of the new Women's League are spelled out in the draft constitution: to mobilise and organise South African women to participate in the liberation struggle, through their membership of the ANC.

Within the ANC, the league's role is to 'spearhead the emancipation of women', as well as to 'promote the all-round development of women and help in building their own confidence'.

Since the national launch at Currie's Fountain on August 9th, there has been a regionally varied response to the call to join the league. Areas which have a tradition of strong women's organisation, like the Western and Eastern Cape, have successfully drawn women into their branches.

In Natal and the Transvaal, where women's organisation has always been weaker, women have been slow to join, although a Soweto branch exists. On 18 November, a Central Johannesburg branch is to be launched.

To what extent has the league managed to initiate programmes to achieve its objectives?

It has not been able to establish effective women's lobbies within ANC branches. Although women are being elected to branch executives, albeit in small numbers, and many women are joining the ANC, this does not mean that women's particular problems and needs are being addressed.

Women hold office in their own right, and are not there to implement the league's policies.

Moreover, local league initiatives are severely hampered by the lack of support from the Women's League national task force.

Symbolic rallying points have yet to be mobilised in the organisation.



Delegates at the national launch of the ANC Women's League

This is reflected in the absence of a suitable logo.

The interim leadership of the Women's League is largely comprised of exiles, who are still adjusting to the radically changed modus operandi since 2 February.

There are only eight members of the national task force, whose resources are overstretched. To organise effectively, they should be mobile, yet they lack transport. There is no phone connected to the offices of the interim leadership of the ANC Women's League in downtown Johannesburg — ANC head office, in another building, has to take messages.

These are only some of the many difficulties the national task force faces since the league's relaunch.

As yet, the organisation lacks coherent co-ordination. Campaigns emanating from the task force, such as the nationwide Women's Charter campaign, have not got off the ground.

In part, this relates to the difficulties in communication. But there is also a need to face the problem of the lack of a guiding programme of action.

The league needs urgently to address how it is going to harness women to the very important tasks it has set itself.

More seriously, little support has been

forthcoming from the ANC itself.

The Department of Political Education has not prioritised a programme to promote either an understanding of the centrality of women's oppression and its overall social effects, or to encourage ANC women to join the league.

This has implications both for the league and for the future of women's issues in the ANC.

But it is not surprising in view of the massive task the ANC faces in establishing accountable local and national structures as it moves from an illegal underground organisation into party politics in the new political terrain in South Africa.

The Women's League will have to go it alone. One possible strategy to win support from the women of South Africa, is to try and mobilise around the proposed Women's Charter.

Just as the Freedom Charter campaign in the 1950s presented the ANC with the opportunity to organise nationwide, the Women's Charter creates the conditions for a concerted membership drive and politicisation campaign.

The women of South Africa have to be able to express their needs from the grassroots, and the ANC Women's League must take those forward as demands for a future, free and equal society. •