

# WOMEN AND PASSES (II)

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“STRYDOM, uthitta abafazi, uthinti imbokhoto,”—“Strydom, you have tampered with women, you have struck a rock!” It is an echo from 1956 when 20,000 women gathered in the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings to tell the Prime Minister of South Africa what the women thought about passes. “Even if the passes are printed in real gold, we do not want them!” That was a great year of protest throughout South Africa, and 1957 saw the beginning of the resistance of the African women as the pass units of the Government crept from place to place.

Can it be necessary to say once again what the pass means to an African man, what it will mean to an African woman, a mother? Yet perhaps it must be said. The pass means prison; it means that life must be lived in constant fear of arrest, of the loss of husbands, fathers, sons—and soon, of mothers and young daughters. It means the “ghost squad”, the hand-cuffed men standing on street corners, the slave gang caught for farm labour, the more than a quarter of a million men every year—to be joined by their women now—arrested for lack of a piece of paper and flung into jail, poured through the magistrate’s courts . . . “Guilty. 15 or ten days! . . . Guilty! . . . Guilty! . . . Guilty! . . .” and down to the underground police cells, there to be channelled into prison vans for the gaols and the farms.

It was to the countryside and the farms that Verwoerd’s pass-issuing units came first, crawling from dorp to dorp with deceit and tricks, to persuade the women to take the passes. But in 1957 sporadic and courageous resistance sprang up. The courage and the sacrifice of the women of Uitenhage, of Lichtenburg, Winburg, Pietersburg and Standerton is written into the history of South Africa. Then came the epic resistance of the women of Linokana, deep in the heart of the country, followed by the full force of Government power, the reign of police terror established in Zeerust, still existing to-day, and by the iron curtain of secrecy and silence drawn over the whole area by Verwoerd and his police. And the passes crept ever nearer to the cities, to the stronghold of resistance.

1958, a crucial year. Verwoerd tried a new target; the professional African women, the nurses. New tricks and stratagems were employed, this time the Nursing Amendment Act, and the S.A. Nursing Council became an agent of Government policy by demanding identity numbers from nurses for training and for registration. And there is only one way in which an African can obtain an identity number, and that is by taking out a reference book, a pass! This was a crafty move, for the nursing profession does not fall into the lap of African women; to become a qualified nurse demands years of sacrifice and struggle on the part of the parents and the children, of brothers and sisters, demands years of persistent study; would the African woman risk all this, her security, her hard-won status, rather than take the pass? "Our mothers were washer-women," they declared, "they educated us. We shall go back to the wash tubs but we shall not carry passes!" Other women rallied behind them, sent deputations to the hospitals; Baragwanath Hospital in the Transvaal was the scene of a most amazing spectacle when the might of the police was massed to protect the hospital—from the women. Road blocks, sten guns, tear gas hidden in the hospital grounds, hundreds of armed police—for a few hundred women, exercising their democratic right to protest for their daughters. Hastily the Nursing Council announced that it no longer required identity numbers for African nurses.

Where then should Verwoerd turn to find his way into the towns? The passes were already at the fringe of the Reef itself and the growing industrial towns with their widespread residential areas where the white South African city dwellers live, not in true apartheid, but with their African domestic servants—thousands of them in every town, living in the servants' quarters in the back-yards, African women from the country, the farms, the small reserves, women far from their homes, forbidden by trespass regulation to have their husbands or even their tiny children with them, to lead a family life, isolated and unaware, dependent upon the "Madam" for the roof over their heads and the few pounds a month of which so great a part must be sent home for parents or children.

And it was in these unprotected, unorganised women that Verwoerd found the answer. As the pass units moved along the East Rand, the pattern became clear—it was mainly the domestic servants who were taking the reference books. In

the African townships opposition was high and women went once more in large crowds to the Native Commissioners, protesting vainly for their very arguments were being undermined by the women who were taking passes, sent or being brought to the pass unit by their employers, women fearful of dismissal, destitution and homelessness if they disobeyed the "Madam."

Meanwhile in Durban, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein, the same thing was happening—pass units were boldly operating, and women in thousands were taking out passes. From every town came the same despairing cry, "The domestic servants have taken the passes!" Government propaganda was everywhere and residential permits, employment permits, Old Age Pensions, railway tickets, the whole administrative machinery which controls the daily life of the urban African was being made dependent on the production of reference books by African women. All but the hard core of resistance, the women in the townships of Johannesburg, were accepting the passes—not willingly, not with enthusiasm as the Government so cruelly and falsely claimed, but in desperation because life itself was being tied to the pass. Women who had taken the passes either hid them and denied the taking, or displayed them with defiance. It seemed as though the momentum of the passes could not be halted; disturbing figures appeared in the press, until the million mark was reached before the end of 1958.

On October 15th, 1958, the pass unit began to operate at the pass office in Johannesburg; the officials had learnt the lesson of the domestic servants, for the approach was made directly to the housewives, not even to the domestic servants themselves. Mayfair, the Nationalist stronghold, was the first suburb to receive the letters from the Native Commissioners, delivered by policemen into the letter-boxes—the shrewdly worded, deliberately deceptive letter, which to all but the suspicious or the well informed was none other than a clear official instruction, calling for compliance and not to be ignored.

"The registration of Native Females in terms of Act No. 67 of 1952 in the District of Johannesburg will commence during 1958.

Will you kindly send your Native female servant(s) to the office of the Native Commissioner at the corner of Market and Bezuidenhout Streets, Johannesburg, in order that she may be registered for the Native Population Register and issued with

a reference book?

Your servant should bring with her the reference book of her husband and if she is not married, that of her parent or guardian in order that Part "D" of the reference book can be completed. If the reference book of her husband is not available or cannot be obtained, this does not mean that your female servant should not be registered. Part "D" of the reference book can then be completed at a later date.

Your co-operation in this matter will be appreciated.

Your servant should report as early as possible on the morning of....."

It is small wonder that the Johannesburg housewives obeyed the "instruction." Protests from the servants were overruled. "You take a pass or else. . . It is the law. . . ." And the strangest part of all this was that it was NOT the law that every African woman had to take out a pass at that time, for no compulsory date had been set beyond which it would be an offence for an African woman not to be in possession of a pass.

But the housewives were not aware of this and they rushed their servants off to get their passes. And then, on Tuesday, October 21st, hundreds of women set out from Sophiatown, four miles from the centre of Johannesburg, to demonstrate at the pass office itself, to show the domestic servants that Johannesburg women were united against passes. But on the way, as they marched through the streets of Brixton, the police confronted them and called upon them to disperse; within a few minutes 249 women were arrested, thrust into police vans and carried off to Newlands police station. As they climbed into the lorries the women sang the "Freedom" songs, their spirits high. At the police station all the women were held in custody, except eighty who had little children on their backs. The news of the arrests spread throughout the city and 300 African women marched in protest to the police station, demanding to be arrested. But the South African police, true to form, beat them off with batons.

Yet another 335 had reached the pass office in the city and were arrested for creating an obstruction and disturbing the peace. Many had their children on their backs and these were crammed into the cells with their mothers. In one day 584 women had been arrested; over 500 were in the cells, waiting to be charged. Conditions were chaotic on that first night;

there were not enough blankets and the women slept on the stone floors; there was not enough food and the women ate only because their supporters brought food and insisted that it be given to them. Police officials tried wearily and ineffectively to compile lists of the accused until late into the night; and this was only the first day.

The following morning at the magistrate's courts strange scenes were enacted. No court could be found large enough to accommodate 335 women, and a special court was held in the cells below; the women sat on the floor, nursing their babies or rocking them gently on their backs. Bail was fixed at £1, and the women remanded until October 30th. At Newlands Court, 249 women were also released on bail. But while these remands were taking place, another 250 women had marched to the pass office, massing outside in militant protest and refusing to leave. Police troop-carriers, the "kwelakwelas," politely provided with step-ladders to help the women up, awaited them, and singing gaily the women climbed in, superb in their defiance.

By this time it had been agreed that there should be no further bail; the first 500 had been taken unawares, had not been prepared for a stay in gaol, but those who followed came ready for arrest. A further hundred women brought the total arrests to 934 by the end of the week, with 350 women held at the Fort. Many of these women who had been released were pressing to surrender their bail and join the women at the Fort. Twice a day a large black car made its way from the offices of Congress to the Fort, high up on the hill overlooking Johannesburg, carrying great baskets of bread and jam, bags of oranges and cans of milk for the babies. Harassed Fort officials met the food parties almost with a welcome, for the gaol resources were inadequate to provide even prison food for the women.

This was only the first week of the protest, but already the police and the Government officials were screaming "Communist agitation," refusing as always to admit that every African, man or woman, loathes the pass and all it stands for, denying the evidence of almost 1,000 women arrested within four days, unprepared but ready to endure the price of their protest.

The second week opened with dramatic developments. On Monday, 27th October, the third anniversary of the day when the women first protested against passes at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, several bus-loads of women arrived from

Alexandra Township, determined to carry on the protest started the week before. At the city bus terminus a force of nearly one hundred armed policemen awaited them, and, as the women set off together for the pass office, they were arrested for being in an illegal procession and failing to disperse. The "kwelakwelas" drove up, while the women waited and danced on the pavement, singing defiantly. As each police lorry drove off with its load, the women cheered, while other women arrived on later buses and were also arrested. One hundred and fifty women defied armed policemen at the central pass office for three hours, until in despair and exasperation the order was given for their arrest. That day saw more than 900 arrests, almost the total of the week before. Women with babies on their backs and with small children refused to be released on their own recognisances and went cheerfully to the cells with the other women.

The conditions in the cells were indescribable. At Marshall Square, the women were herded thirty and forty in each cell with their children, every inch of floor space crowded with



huddled bodies; some sat all night with their backs against the wall, others lay restlessly on the stone floor, using the back of another woman for a pillow to ease the weary head. Prison food was stiff mealie pap served on an upturned dustbin lid pushed into the centre of the cell. The babies cried fretfully throughout the long night from hunger and discomfort. Food was brought in from outside, little packets of bread and jam and cans of milk, but it was pitifully inadequate, for there were now nearly two thousand women to be fed.

On the next day the court sat until after ten o'clock at night dealing with the remands. Bail of £2 was offered but the majority of the women refused, despite anxious husbands and fathers waiting outside, willing to pay. And the walls of the magistrate's court echoed with the cries of the babies as the day dragged on.

On Thursday, October 30th, some 800 women appeared for the first day of their trial and once again the court was held below in the cells, while anxious relatives and friends waited outside, crowding the pavements around the magistrate's court. The police had assured the public that "they would not allow themselves to be frightened off the task of preventing lawlessness and disorder." It was on this day that they displayed their vaunted courage. Shortly after noon, the first batch of 335 women were freed when the charges of disturbing the public peace were withdrawn. The crowd outside surged forward to welcome the women, the police bawled a dispersal order which no one heard, and then some charged the crowd lashing out with batons and canes while others flung tear gas bombs among the scattering people. And the '*Rand Daily Mail*' published the photograph of a young police constable lashing a fleeing African woman with his cane, with a laughing jubilant spectator in the background.

The mass trials had begun and had taken on a sinister aspect, for the women were charged not merely with the breaking of by-laws, but with committing an offence by way of protest and thus falling under the Criminal Laws Amendment Act No. 8 of 1953—the Act which makes a serious crime of any violation of any law by way of protest, and which carries a maximum penalty of £300 or three years imprisonment with or without a lashing. Cases were remanded from week to week and it became essential that the women be released on bail. Thousands of pounds had to be raised, but within a few days all of the women

had been released. More than twelve hundred women and one hundred and seventy babies had been held in the Fort, some for more than a week, in a gaol built to accommodate not even half that number. It was small wonder that the prison authorities seemed eager to let the women go, even letting them out before the full bail amounts were paid in, on the assurance of the attorneys that bail securities would be furnished later.

The results of the trials speak for themselves. Of 1,893 women arrested, 915 were either found not guilty and discharged or the case was withdrawn, but the 926 women who were convicted were sentenced to fines totalling £7,819, with alternative imprisonment ranging from three weeks to three months. Four women were sentenced as leaders of the protests to fines of £50 or three months. (Fifty-two women were still on remand at the time of writing this article. All cases where the Criminal Laws Amendment Act was invoked have been taken to appeal.)

As the women were sentenced they were taken to the Fort—until their fines were paid or until bail had been arranged pending appeal. No one who saw the women being driven off in the police vans to begin serving their sentences can ever forget the sight of their gallant smiles and Congress salutes or the sound of their songs of struggle as the vans disappeared.

Meanwhile public opinion had been stirred by the courageous opposition of the African women and disgusted by the unscrupulous devices employed to trick the women into accepting passes. Letters were published daily in the English press, many indicating sympathy with the women. The Black Sash declared their opposition to the reference books for women and applied for permission to hold a meeting on the City Hall steps. But once again the police dictated to the Johannesburg City Council, and the permission was refused. The Federation of South African Women called for a mass protest of women of all races to the Mayor of Johannesburg and this brought forth a tornado of police intimidation and threats of arrest. On November 27th, however, nearly four thousand women outwitted the police by coming to the City Hall, not in a mass or in a procession, but in groups of two or three, handing in their signed protests to the waiting leaders. Members of the Security Branch crowded the City Hall steps and uniformed police stood at every street corner while the women walked past them,



completely at ease.

Despite the dramatic protest campaign, however, passes were being issued at the rate of over a thousand every week. In European suburbs the domestic servants were still flocking to the pass offices, although the hard core of African women in the townships had remained untouched. The battle of the passes is on, and Johannesburg is—and is likely to remain—the storm centre. Government retaliation has begun: Johannesburg is to be brought to heel. 1959 has opened with the threat of the banning of all gatherings attended by Africans held outside the African townships. This threat is strung around an allegation of “mixed drinking parties”, but the real objective is clearly to eliminate all association of the races except in the master-servant relationship and to prevent mixed political gatherings. The women shall not go again together to the Union Buildings, to the City Hall, to protest against passes. The City Council must agree with this new edict of the Minister . . . or else. New legislation shall be passed; another loophole shall be stopped.

The first passes were issued to African women in Winburg in March, 1955, nearly three years ago, and South Africa has seen protest after protest. But the issue of passes goes on, and at the end of 1958 the Government proclaimed that 1,300,000 reference books had been taken out by women. More than a million, but this is still little more than half of the total number of African women in the country. There is still a long way to go and much may yet happen. It is the last million that counts.