

WOMEN AND PASSES

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LIPASA! AMAPASI!—the most hated of all words. Yet these are not really Sotho or Xhosa words at all; they are but the word “pass” with prefixes and suffixes attached. For there is no word in any African language for the pass; the badge of cold slavery with all its ugly implications is something imposed, foreign even to the language.

African women live in the shadow of the pass system; they see the suffering and the hardship which it brings to African men. Every year more than a quarter of a million African men are convicted under the pass laws; more than a quarter of a million African women wait in lonely anxiety for the husband, the father, the son who does not return, who is only found after long weeks of searching at callous police stations. These women know only too well the fear of the pass endorsement “out of the municipal area”, the brutal exile of the unemployed. Now African women themselves must be exposed to these dangers, must add their own fears to their unbearable anxiety for their men. Dr. Verwoerd and the Nationalist Government have decreed that African women shall carry passes.

What does it mean to a woman to carry a pass? It means that homes will be broken up when women are arrested and sentenced under the pass laws; it means that helpless children will be left uncared for, when the mother is arrested and thrown into the pick-up van as she goes to buy food for her family because she has left her pass at home; it means that women and young girls will be exposed to degradation at the hands of pass searching policemen, at the hands of ‘ghost’ squads with indescribable license in the dark night; it means that African women may be hired out as farm convict labour, sold for ninepence a day; it means that the African woman will lose her freedom of movement, her right to sell her labour where she pleases.

It is not the first time in the shameful history of South Africa that African women have been threatened with passes. In 1913 the municipalities of the Free State tried to issue passes to women—and failed. For the women resisted in Jagersfontein, in Winburg, in Bloemfontein; they refused to buy or to carry

their monthly passes, refused to pay fines and flooded the gaols. And the women won their war; after five years of failure there was no more talk of issuing passes to women. Nor were there any serious attempts for the next forty years.

In 1952, however, the Nationalist Government amended the Urban Areas Act, giving municipalities sinister additional powers under the pass laws and proclaiming: "All . . . Natives, men, women and children, fall under these laws." To stifle the protest in Parliament, Verwoerd declared: "I repeat that, notwithstanding the fact that these provisions are applicable to Native women, it is not our intention to proceed with its practical application at the moment because we do not think the time is ripe for that. *Now I hope the Hon. Member* (referring to Mr. Sam Kahn, M.P., African representative for Cape Western) *will stop his agitation of telling Native women that we are introducing a law by which we are going to force them to carry passes, because that is not true.*"—Hansard, p. 2955—March 17, 1952.

But this was nothing more than the usual piecrust promise of the Nationalist Government, just another in the long line of dishonest undertakings and broken pledges. And in 1955, the Minister of Native Affairs announced that from January, 1956, African women would have to carry passes.

A storm of indignation broke out in the towns and cities where women are so tragically aware of what the pass laws mean. Through the Federation of S.A. Women, women of other races united with the African National Congress Women's League to protest against this outrage to women. From the first dramatic protest of two thousand women of the Transvaal at the Union Buildings in Pretoria on October 27th, 1955, to the historic and unparalleled demonstration of twenty thousand women from all parts of the Union on August 9th, 1956, women demonstrated all over the country against passes, gathered in their thousands at the offices of Native Commissioners crying, "Women don't want passes!" Harassed Commissioners met the women with crippled arguments—"The passes are for your protection." What words were these to use to women who had always lived in the shadow of the pass? In Pretoria, the Prime Minister remained out of sight while twenty thousand women stood in dignified silent protest at his absence. Thousands of protests were presented to Native Commissioners to be forwarded to the Minister of Native Affairs, were handed in at the very office of the Prime Minister. Months later, through

evidence led at the Treason Trial, the women learned that these protests had, one and all, gone no further than the Security Branch of the police. It is an insult which the women will not easily forget.

Meanwhile Verwoerd began the issuing of passes. The little town of Winburg in the Free State was the first—Winburg, where forty years ago the women had defied the pass laws. Quietly, unannounced, the pass unit arrived in March, 1956; soft spoken officials praised the passes, and many women were deceived and accepted the reference books, stringing them around their necks. But swift awakening followed; the granddaughters of those earlier women of Winburg marched to the magistrate and, when he refused to take back the passes, burnt hundreds of them in a sack outside the courthouse. The women were arrested and charged—with theft! For six months after this act of defiance, no more passes were issued, until, in October, Verwoerd's Department began in real earnest with twelve small towns in the Cape Province. It is a sorry story, one of tricks and lies, of threats and intimidation, of scurrying around the countryside to every little dorp and village, of visits to women in the rural areas and reserves where their victims are unorganized, scattered, unaware. The initial error of Winburg with its tradition of resistance was shrewdly not repeated. Pass units have travelled from place to place in the Cape Province and the Free State, avoiding the larger centres, but creeping up as closely as they dared, nibbling at Port Elizabeth through Uitenhage, there to meet a core of defiant resistance and burning of passes, skirmishing around Johannesburg and the Reef, testing these strongholds through the outlying towns of Standerton and Balfour, meeting there some resistance, some success, and falling back to the Western Transvaal.

That the Nationalist Government seeks to force the hated pass system upon women is in itself shameful enough, but the methods of intimidation and persecution to which it is driven are almost beyond description. The women of Balfour were threatened with dire consequences if they refused passes. They were told by the police that their husbands would be dismissed from their work, business licenses would be cancelled; they were told that doctors would refuse to attend the sick; even in death the pass must be carried, for they were told that the dead would not be buried. And when the women went to the Location Superintendent to protest, they were dispersed by

a baton charge. Passes were issued—and accepted. Then nine hundred marched in protest, and once again passes were burnt. In Uitenhage where indignant women burnt their passes, they met with brutal violence at the hands of the police; pregnant women were batoned, the police declaring that “they had to protect themselves against these women.” Two children were born in gaol as the women awaited trial, and their mothers stood long hours in Court only a few days afterwards. Other women, near to their time of confinement, stood beside them.

In Standerton, more than a thousand women were arrested for an allegedly illegal procession of protest against passes. On the first day of the trial, 113 women received suspended sentences and were discharged. On the second day, the residents of Standerton prepared to leave the town; cars were filled with petrol, and all available ammunition was purchased from the shops! Then came nine hundred women in dignity and discipline to stand their trial in Court and be discharged. But in Lichtenburg, when women burnt three sacksful of passes an hour after taking their decision at three o'clock in the morning at the graves of their tribal ancestors, twenty-five were arrested under the Criminal Laws Amendment Act and were held on bail of £50 each. And when they were sentenced—to £100 fine or twelve months imprisonment—the bail pending appeal was raised from £50 to £100. On appeal to the Supreme Court, the bail was reduced—to £5!

The Nationalist Government knows no scruples in its choice of weapons to intimidate women into accepting passes. Nor are its threats idle. The aged, the blind are amongst its victims. To the little village of Putfontein in the Western Transvaal came the Native Commissioner on March 6th to issue passes. Most of the women refused, despite threats of the loss of their old age pensions. And on March 18th a woman, reputed to be at least one hundred years old, received nothing and was given no reason why her pension had ceased. She was amongst those who had refused passes. Three helpless blind men received no pension; their wives and daughters had refused passes. That was six months ago, and there is still no official explanation.

There seems to be no depth of persecution and intimidation to which the Government will not sink in its determination to issue passes to African women, and as the months go by the passes spread over South Africa like some horrible disease. In July, 1957, the Government claimed (*Dagbreek*, July 28th,

1957) that nearly three hundred thousand passes had already been issued to women. This appears an impressive figure at first sight. Almost half of the passes issued have been in the Free State where there has been little opposition save in Winburg, and of the 230,000 women over 16 years of age, 57 per cent. have already taken passes. But Bloemfontein, Bethlehem, Kroonstad, the large towns, have not been touched. Natal has been left almost undisturbed, only 4 per cent. of the women have passes. In the Cape Province and the Transvaal, the pass units have concentrated on the small towns and rural areas; more than seventy areas have been visited in these two provinces, and passes have been issued to 12 per cent. of the women living in them. Yet Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London remain unvisited, nor has any attempt been made to issue passes to the hundreds of thousands of women on the Witwatersrand.

At this rate—fifteen months have been spent issuing passes to 11 per cent. of the African women in the Union—it should take the Nationalist Government some ten years to issue passes to all of them; if it remains in power so long. The resistance of the women will undoubtedly continue and strengthen, for it is not isolated from the struggle of the African people against the whole pass system and against the cheap labour policy which it supports. To-day it is the women who are in the forefront of that struggle and who are carrying it a stage further. Victory cannot be expected at every stage; the history of the past twelve months has shown that clearly. But the introduction of passes for women may yet prove a boomerang, for there is no aspect of the pass system which has aroused more bitter resentment amongst the African people, which has so moved the consciences of others, White, Coloured, Indian, to protest and denounce the pass system. In Cape Town recently, two thousand women of all races met together under the auspices of the newly formed Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women—women of the Black Sash, the National Council of Women, of the Anglican Church Mother's Union, the Federation of S.A. Women, the African National Congress Women's League, the Society of Friends. Women of different races, different colours, widely differing political affiliations, came together to protest and to hear African women tell in their own words what passes meant to them.

It is a titanic struggle, this clash between the determination

of the Government to entrench the pass system by extending passes to African women and the growing opposition of the women. For it is not only in the towns where the African National Congress has organized women that resistance is to be found. It flares up unexpectedly in rural areas where women resist not only the Government officials but their own chiefs, who have sometimes led their wives to be the first to take the passes.

South Africa is a vast country, and the present somewhat sporadic nature of the opposition by women to passes is mainly due to this factor—a factor of which the Government has taken the fullest advantage. In the coming years, it should be the task not only of the Congress movement, but of all who believe in personal freedom, to weld together the opposition to the pass system. For in this vast, unmeasured, and as yet inadequately organized potential of the resistance of women to passes, lies one of the sharpest weapons against the present Government, against apartheid itself. And it is not too late.

