

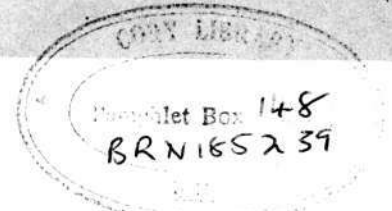


UNITED NATIONS

UNIT ON APARTHEID

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SECURITY COUNCIL AFFAIRS

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS*



No. 38/75

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WOMEN AGAINST APARTHEID IN SOUTH AFRICA

	<u>Page</u>
- The Pretoria demonstration against the pass laws	1
- Profiles in courage: the leaders, the "widows", the prisoners, the banned	3
- The agony of black women under <u>apartheid</u>	8

[Note: This issue of Notes and Documents contains extracts from articles published in the bulletin of the South African Human Rights Committee on 9 August 1975 in tribute to "the women of South Africa who have struggled, and still struggle, for freedom and human rights." This bulletin was banned by the South African régime.

The memorable demonstration in Pretoria, on 9 August 1956 by 20,000 women of all races against the pass laws, the plight of black women under apartheid, the lives of some of the women who have gone to prison, been banned and banished because of their opposition to apartheid, are described in the following pages.

The South African Human Rights Committee was formed in September 1974 "to protest against the violation of human rights in South African society and to bring about full rights for all the people of South Africa." Its address is:

Miss Sheila Weinberg
 Secretary, Human Rights Committee
 P.O. Box 79051
 Senderwood 2145
 South Africa]

* All material in these notes and documents may be freely reprinted.

Acknowledgement, together with a copy of the publication containing the reprint, would be appreciated.

THE PRETORIA DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE PASS LAWS

August 9th, 1956 stands out as one of the proudest dates for the women of South Africa in their struggle for freedom and human rights. It was on this day that more than 20,000 women of all races and from all over the Republic gathered at the seat of Government at the Union Buildings in Pretoria to demand the withdrawal of passes for women and the repeal of the pass laws. It was the day when the men stayed home to tend the children and the women went onto the offensive en masse.

Organized by the Federation of South African Women, the demonstrators were mobilised in the face of tremendous difficulties and harrassment. One of their slogans - "Strijdom you have struck a rock, you have touched the women!" - describes the spirit and the outrage that inspired the demonstration. The protest was called by the Transvaal branch of the Federation, and branches throughout the country were asked to send members. The demands were directed to the Prime Minister, Strijdom.

The women answered the call, and arrived by train, coach and car. There were contingents from as far away as Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein. Country districts were also represented. A ban on the proposed public meeting and march failed to deter the women, and they converged on the capital city on schedule. They were forbidden to march - but that did not stop them from wending their way to the Union Buildings in groups of two and three, separated by five or six paces. The 20,000 women massed around the statue of Louis Botha in the gardens of the Union Buildings and awaited their leaders. When they arrived, the crowd - many carrying young children on their backs - fell in behind them and walked to the amphitheatre. In the amphitheatre all the signed protests were collected and given to the leaders.

The leaders, who included Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Sophie Williams, Rahima Moosa and Francine Beard delivered the demands to the Prime Minister's office - Strijdom was out - while the women waited outside. When the leaders returned with their news, the women stood in silence for 30 minutes, their arms raised in the Congress salute. Dressed in their Federation uniforms, they carpeted the amphitheatre in green and black. The silence was broken only by the cries and murmurs of the children.

Following the salute, Lilian Ngoyi, the Federation president, began to softly sing the anthem of free Africa, Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Union buildings, symbol of white dominance over the oppressed black majority, was soon ringing with the haunting sound of the beautiful anthem sung in four-part harmony by 20,000 women. Slowly the weary but triumphant women wended their way back to the bus stops and taxis - to perhaps their greatest tribute: the working men who crowded the depots stood aside to allow the protesting women to leave first. In honour of the courage and determination of the women that day, August 9 has become Women's Day in South Africa.

The Federation of South African Women

The Federation of South African Women which organized the Pretoria demonstration was formed to unite women in the fight to end discrimination against them as women, and as black women - in work and in society. The movement began in 1954 when 78 leading women, black and white, signed a letter of invitation calling on women all over the country to attend a conference to promote women's rights. Hundreds of women attended the conference, held at Johannesburg's Trades Hall in April 1954, at which the Federation was formed.

It was the first women's organization in South Africa to bring together women of the various racial groups on the basis of full equality and full co-operation in one undivided organization. The moving spirits behind the inaugural conference and the birth of the Federation were Ray Alexander and Ida Mntwana, who became the first National President. "Forward to freedom, security, equal rights and peace for all." This was the slogan of that first conference, although the women who attended were very conscious of the need for a women's organization that would also unite and organize women in the struggle for national liberation and the fight against racial discrimination and oppression.

In South Africa the fundamental struggle of the people is the struggle for national liberation, and the women of the Federation realized that any women's organization that stood outside this struggle would stand apart from the mass of the women. After the conference the women set out to organize the provinces into regions of the Federation. It grew steadily in numbers and influence. The women of the national liberation organizations and a few of the trades unions affiliated. There was no individual membership. Inevitably the Federation developed politically in the context of the liberation struggle, with its main strength coming from the ANC Women's League. However, the Federation always preserved its multi-racial character. Regional conferences of the Federation were called regularly to discuss and protest against day-to-day issues concerning women, especially as mothers, such as: Bantu Education, Group Areas, rent increases, the pass system.

These protests culminated in the epic struggle of the women of the Federation and the Women's League against the issuing of passes to African women, and the famous August 9 demonstration in Pretoria. In 1955 the Transvaal region of the Federation drew up the women's demands for the Freedom Charter, which were incorporated in the final document adopted at the Congress of the People. By 1955, Lilian Ngoyi had succeeded Joise Mpama as Transvaal President and Helen Joseph had become Transvaal Secretary. In 1956, at the Federation's National Conference, they were elected National President and National Secretary - a partnership that lasted until banning orders broke it up in the early 1960's.

The Federation has, in fact, never been banned. However, it has become virtually defunct since its leadership was whittled away by banning orders.

* This is the Women's League of the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC)

PROFILES IN COURAGE: THE LEADERS, THE "WIDOWS",
THE PRISONERS, THE BANNED

THE LEADERS

Lilian Ngoyi

The Nationalist regime has again found it necessary to silence - again by banning - one of its most outspoken and bitter opponents, Mrs. Lilian Ngoyi. The reason is simple: Mrs. Ngoyi has refused to knuckle under and desist from political activity.

A former president of the banned ANC Women's League and also of the Federation of South African Women, Mrs. Ngoyi was "freed" from restriction at the beginning of 1973 - after being banned for 11 years. For the first five years she was confined to Orlando. Now she has been rebanned, this time for a further five years.

During her 30 months of comparative freedom, Mrs. Ngoyi embarked on an extensive round of political activity reminiscent of her old style. She has spoken at a number of Human Rights Committee (HRC) protest meetings and was one of the organizers of the HRC Christmas party for the families of political prisoners and banned people. Friends believe that her indomitable spirit will carry her through this latest banning with the same courage which she faced the 4018 days duration of her last restrictions. In 1952, when the Defiance Campaign started to rock South Africa, Mrs. Ngoyi was so moved by the courage and sacrifice of those involved that she joined the ANC Women's League and also defied. She appeared in court four times, but was discharged. A year after she joined the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) she became president of the Women's League. In December 1955 she was elected to the ANC National Executive. In 1956 she was elected national president of the Federation of South African Women.

Mrs. Ngoyi was detained for five months during the state of emergency in 1960 and later underwent 71 days solitary confinement under the 90-day Act.

She has visited China and the USSR.

In December 1956 she was arrested and charged with High Treason.* After standing trial for five years she was acquitted. When Mrs. Ngoyi was banned she was forced to give up her trade union job and had to rely on her talents as a dressmaker working from home. The security police made sure she didn't earn much money by raiding, checking passes and asking questions. Her customers were often frightened away. Now Mrs. Ngoyi faces these same problems all over again.

* Eighteen women were amongst those arrested during the dawn raids of 5 December 1956, and charged with high treason. Five years later, they were all acquitted. The eighteen were: Lilian Ngoyi, National President of the South African Federation of Women; Helen Joseph, Martha Motlakoana, Francina Beard, Bertha Mashaba, Yettah Barenblatt, Ruth Slovo, Sonia Bunting, Florence Matomela, Bertha Mkige, Dorothy Shanley, Stella Damons, Mary Ranta, A. Dawood, A. Silinga, C. Jasson, Jacqui Arenstein, Dorothy Nyembe.

Helen Joseph

Mrs. Helen Joseph, trade unionist, political organizer and enemy of oppression, has become a legend in her own lifetime.

Born in England 70 years ago, Mrs. Joseph has adopted South Africa as her country - and with it the struggle for freedom and civil rights. She has been detained, jailed, tried for high treason, banned, house-arrested and listed in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. Yet as soon as the Nationalists lifted some of her restrictions when it was found that she was suffering from cancer, she immediately launched right back on the offensive on the political front. In spite of poor health, she has addressed meetings all over the country (including HRC protests) and has provided an inspiration to all those involved in the struggle against oppression. Helen spent the war in military welfare work. Later, inspired by a wish to attack the causes of misery and injustice, she moved into trade union work.

In 1953 she was made a member of the provisional committee at the formation of the South African Congress of Democrats, and the next year she was elected to the national executive of the multi-racial South African Federation of Women. She later became its national secretary. She was one of the organizers of the Congress of the People and was one of the leaders of the women's demonstrations at the Union Buildings.

On 4 December, 1956 she was arrested on a charge of high treason - only to be acquitted five long years later. In April 1957 she was banned for five years. During the 1960 emergency she was detained. Hours after her first ban expired Mrs. Joseph embarked on an 8000 mile trip round South Africa to visit the banished people and to try and trace others who had simply disappeared off the face of the earth. She returned to Johannesburg in July 1962 and was elected national vice-president of the Congress of Democrats, which was banned later that year.

In October 1962 Mrs. Joseph became the first person in South Africa to be placed under house-arrest. In the following years she was arrested on three occasions and was convicted once, for failing to report to the police. Those years were also marked by the publication of two books, If This Be Treason and Tomorrow's Sun, a journal which had to be smuggled from South Africa.

Further bans in 1966 prohibited Helen from entering premises of the Industrial Council of the Clothing Industry, and so she lost her job. She was 61 and desperate for work. She eventually got a job at Vanguard Bookshop. The following year she was banned and house-arrested for a further five years. She was also listed as a member of the Congress of Democrats. When a bomb was discovered at her home in 1971, Mrs. Joseph was not as worried as she might have been - for she was 90 percent certain she had cancer. This proved to be correct, and she underwent drastic, but successful, surgery.

Out of the blue, the government suspended all her bans except the listing. She was free at last - at least comparatively. Over the last three years Mrs. Joseph has used this freedom to oppose the government exactly as she did in the past.

Francina Baard

Francina Baard, a former leader of the outlawed ANC, has been jailed, banned and banished in the struggle for the freedom of her people. Now aged 62, Mrs. Baard still lives in Mabopane, near Pretoria, the township she was banished to from her home in Port Elizabeth in 1969. Although her banishment and banning orders expired more than three years ago, she continues to stay in Mabopane - simply because she no longer has a home in Port Elizabeth and her four children are scattered. "Africa is my home - I cannot be banished!" she has said.

Her political life began more than a quarter of a century ago when, after seeing the plight of hostel dwellers in Port Elizabeth, she joined the ANC. She was soon an organizer of the Women's League and was one of those rounded up in the countrywide swoop that preceded the Treason Trial. In 1963 she was arrested and kept in solitary confinement for a year before being sentenced to five years under the Suppression of Communism Act. When she was released in September 1969, she was banished to Mabopane, a place where she knew nobody. She was also banned. After finding a job, Mrs. Baard served 14 days in jail for refusing to carry a pass. Mrs. Baard, who is a widow, has been forced to give up work because of leg trouble, and is helped out by her children.

Florence Matomela

Florence Matomela was one of the leading members of the Women's League and an executive member of the Federation of South African Women.

A great organiser, she was arrested during the mass arrests of the 1960's and was one of those charged, but later acquitted, of treason. She was one of the great organisers of the Defiance Campaign in the Eastern Cape and took a leading part in the organising of the women for the United Buildings demonstrations and the Anti-Pass Campaign.

Florence was sentenced to five years imprisonment and while she was serving, was transferred to East London Prison to face further charges. Her health was very bad, and at this time she was going into diabetic comas. While she was serving her sentence her husband died, but Florence was not told. The shock was too great, and she died immediately after her release from prison.

THE 'WIDOWS'

There are scores of 'political widows' throughout South Africa - courageous women who cheerfully struggle to maintain their homes and feed their children, knowing that their husbands have lost their liberty in the cause of freedom and justice. We pay tribute to these brave women and salute their courage and determination. It is impossible to mention them all here, and so we choose to write about the wives of two leaders, Mrs. Nonsikelelo Albertina Sisulu and Mrs. Winnie Mandela, who typify them all.

Albertina Sisulu

Mrs. Sisulu, now aged 57, "lost" her husband Walter Sisulu 13 years ago when he was sentenced to life imprisonment for his part in the anti-government political activities. At that time the five Sisulu children were between four and sixteen years old. In the face of great hardship - she has been banned and house-arrested for 10 years - Mrs. Sisulu managed to give all her children a good education.

Her restrictions have made it difficult for her to find employment and in the early years she did knitting and sewing at home to make ends meet. She is a trained nursing sister and now works at the child health clinic in Orlando East.

Winnie Mandela

Mrs. Winnie Mandela, wife of Nelson Mandela, the ANC leader serving a life sentence on Robben Island, is remarkable in at least two respects: the way in which the trials and tribulations of her life

have failed to mar her beauty or her spirit and her continuing dedication to the struggle for freedom in South Africa. In spite of her banning and house-arrest orders, which restrict her freedom of movement and expression, she remains an inspiration to those involved in the struggle

Mrs. Mandela has suffered more than a fair share of tribulations: left to look after two baby daughters when Nelson was jailed, she was unable because of restriction orders to work as a social worker, the work she is qualified to do. Forced into ordinary office work, she has been hired and fired from numerous jobs -- thanks to the harrassment of the security police and the restrictions and time limits imposed in her banning orders. Thanks to friends in England, Sir Robert Birley and his wife, the two Mandela girls, Zinzi and Zeni, are receiving education in Swaziland. This year Zeni was able to visit her father on the Island for the first time when she reached the age of sixteen.

Besides all the restrictions and harrassment, Mrs. Mandela has also had to face numerous terms of imprisonment. In 1969 she was detained for 17 months, and later acquitted together with 21 others. She has just completed a six-month sentence for breaking her banning orders. On several occasions the Mandela house has been under attack by "thugs" who creep into the rooms at night and terrorise the family. Mrs. Mandela's car has also been tampered with.

Mrs. Mandela's banning orders have been lifted on 29 September 1975. She has participated ever since in various public meetings where she reasserted her opposition to apartheid.

Rookeya Saloojee

Rookeya Saloojee, the widow of Babla Saloojee, who died while being detained by the security police, is carrying on her dead husband's ideals by being a member of the Human Rights Committee. Babla and Rookeya had been married for only two years and six days when he was arrested on July 6, 1964. He died on September 9, following a fall from the 7th floor of the Grays security branch headquarters. Babla, who was an articled clerk with a firm of attorneys, was a member of the Transvaal Indian Congress.

THE PRISONERS

Dorothy Nyembe

Dorothy Nyembe, one of the two women political prisoners in South Africa, is serving a 15 year sentence for sabotage. One of the outstanding leaders in the struggle for freedom, Dorothy is now 45 and has served seven years of her sentence, first in Barberton and now in Kroonstad Prison. She was sentenced on March 23, 1969.

A disciple of Chief Luthuli, Dorothy grew up in the struggle for the liberation of her people. She was only 16 when she had her first brush with the law in 1946 during the first Defiance Campaign. From an early age Dorothy was given serious tasks and during her political career she has been arrested time and again. During the Anti-Pass Campaign she led the Natal women in one of the biggest campaigns ever staged in the province. She again led the women in the great Union Buildings demonstration. It was during the 1961 Cato Manor riots and the campaign against the beer gardens that she showed her outstanding qualities as a fighter. She was then Natal President of the Federation of South African Women.

She was arrested during the mass arrests in the 1960's when the ANC members were rounded up. She served in Nylstroom and Barberton. Dorothy was released in 1968, but 14 days later she was rearrested on the charge of sabotage.

In the seven years she has already served, Dorothy has had no visitors and rarely gets letters. She is at present studying for her Junior Certificate.

Mrs. Amina Desai

Mrs. Amina Desai, a 55-year-old-mother of four, is the second woman political prisoner at present in South Africa. She is serving a five-year sentence under the Terrorism Act. She was detained on October 24, 1971 during the nation-wide swoops in connection with the arrest of Ahmed Timol, a distant relative of her late husband. She was held under Section Six until charged in March 1972 together with Salim Essop, Idris Moodley and Yusuf Essack. She stood trial at the Old Synagogue in Pretoria and was convicted, with the others, at the beginning of 1973. She is now serving her sentence, with Dorothy Nyembe, in Kroonstad prison.

Her late Husband, Mr. Suluman Desai, was a former secretary of the Transvaal Indian Congress. Mrs. Desai, who ran an import business until the time of her arrest, receives few visits because all her children are abroad. Because they are political prisoners, neither Dorothy or Mrs. Desai can expect remission of their sentences.

THE AGONY OF BLACK WOMEN UNDER APARTHEID

In racist South Africa no one feels the pains of the migratory labour laws more than the black woman who is left alone to till the land, build the home, educate and bring up the children single-handed, whilst the father goes to the mines, to the urban areas in search of food and the means to run his home, which he visits at intervals when his contract expires. The children, who need him as a father figure, during their formative years are compelled to do without him. He is in fact more of a visitor in his home than the head of the family he should be. The woman is compelled to do what her husband should have been doing: hoeing the fields, reaping the millet, feeding the cattle if there are any. The woman, if she is to have a family, has to periodically come to the urban area to her husband azothatha isisu to fall pregnant and go back as soon as this happens. This is commonly planned after the hoeing season, which demands most

of her attention so that the pregnancy can coincide with the winter months when there is not much to be done in the fields.

Since the food she eats is normally starch with one common protein, beans, she invariably needs constant medical care, which she gets often from the old-fashioned local white quack who visits the outskirts of the rural areas once or twice a week in a pseudo-clinic. In most cases he prescribes litre-sized medicines, a simple mixture of coloured water for the illiterate mother-to-be who psychologically believes in quantity. For that coloured water she will pay something like R1,50, without the examination fee.

A man who suffers from high blood pressure will get the same prescription as the pregnant mother. So the child is born, already, a prospective victim of gastro-enteritis, kwashiokor, malnutrition, etc. At one time in the Transkei alone the infant mortality rate was reported to be as high as 40 percent, and the incidence of tuberculosis was also highest in this area.

The land, tilled generation after generation by women without modern methods of soil preservation is threadbare, and can yield no more even if such methods were introduced now. The land is so overpopulated that the puppets of separate development are compelled to clamour for more and from their white masters in Pretoria.

The web of racial laws

So numerous are the racial laws that make the life of a black woman a sheer hell that it is not possible to mention the lot. Firstly, to live a reasonably honourable life she has to be married and must qualify in regard to influx regulations to be in the urban area if she lives there. One of the greatest catastrophies that can befall her is to be widowed. That moment means loss of her home for her children. Unlike her white counterpart she cannot buy a home, even if she has the means. The white official will not even wait for her to complete her mourning period peacefully. The husband's death means countless trips to the commissioner's office, endless raids by the municipal "blackjacks" at dawn.

If she is lucky, bribable clerks will fix her up for a tidy amount, or depending on who she is, there may be such an uproar about her plight that various organizations make representations on her behalf to the powers that be.

Unmarried mothers and single women are not even recognized by the law as human beings who have the right to own homes. If the unmarried mother is "lucky" enough to have a son, he invariably starts work as soon as he turns 16 so that the mother can qualify for a house. With him all she needs is proof that she boy will pay the rent. Education for a black child is not compulsory; all the system is bothered about is the payment of the rent. Even elementary education is not subsidised. A mother

may have ten children, whom she maintains with the money she gets from doing "the white madam's" washing, who if she is "generous" will pay her something like R2 for washing and R2 for ironing. If she is in full domestic employment she is required to look after the white children from about 6 to anything like 10 or 11 pm while her own children are left to fend for themselves at a dangerous and tender age. She is lucky if she is able to spend weekends with them. She mostly gets a day off during the week when her children are in fact at school or at work, so that she hardly sees them.

She will never know whether they play truant or not, smoke benzine or sniff glue. She will never know whether they are part members of the "twilight family", the black children who litter the streets of Johannesburg, hanging around cinemas as little beggars, pleading for handouts from the white "masters" or the fur-coated "madams" who impress their rich boy-friends by throwing cents to the "picannin'" with tattered clothes.

Even if children have both parents, they may play truant for hundreds of other reasons. They may be required to attend school 10 kilometres from home where the school of their ethnic group is. The black mother's choice of school for her children is determined by the law, no matter how much she would like another school. Lately she even has to produce a permit providing that the children have a right to attend school in the urban area. Black schools have double sessions in the lower standards, which means that each child has endless unsupervised hours to himself without recreational facilities to keep him off the streets. He whiles away time by joining a non-schooling gang in a little gambling game that builds up to bigger things. Even if the mother finds out that this is happening, the law which is invariably against her, can do nothing to help until the child commits an offence and is whisked away to a place of safety or committed to an institution which has no corrective or rehabilitative facilities - but is a junior prison.

Then there is the educated black woman. The only difference between her and the domestic worker is that she has a string of certificates. She probably sits behind a desk at work, earns half of her white counterpart who may be academically junior to her. This elite black woman is intolerable to the white female. She is regarded as a perpetual threat, since the employer can simply replace the white worker with three black ones for the same salary, resulting in more production and cheap labour.

Once more the law protects the interests of the white worker with the Job Reservation Act, even though the country's labour problems are such that this law is crumbling and quietly being shelved by the very proponents of Nationalist theories.

The pettiness the black woman has to put up with is unimaginable. The original planning of the biggest city in the country, Johannesburg did not accommodate her: there are no toilet facilities for her except in the new structures. She is required to share the toilet with the cleaners who are men. Very often this toilet is on the top floor.

She may be a professional woman who joins a firm where the white in charge is merely a standard eight girl who got the job because of the colour of her skin. This results in a serious situation, as one of the most difficult things is to fight a "white complex" in a country where the system actually legislates to preserve white supremacy. In the past the educated black women who battled to get a decent job surrendered to the set-up and became subservient to these uncultivated white women who put every obstacle in their way to force them to leave the jobs of their own accord.

The political grass widows

Here lies the tragedy of South Africa where women have to bear the worst blows. The plight of South African women is best depicted in the individual case histories dealt with in profiles in courage. A black woman has seen her husband whisked away at dead of night, children clinging to her and crying hysterically. Endless midnight raids, further arrests, perhaps of herself, or persecution of herself, her children, her family and friends. In some instances she has been thrown out of the house because she cannot account for her husband's whereabouts, who is alleged to have left the country. She has at times been widowed without knowing it, or if she knows, she relies on press reports she hardly believes and keeps hoping that it is just a mistake, that someday he will come home. Each time there are death reports at the border she wonders if her husband is one of them. She dare not go and enquire least she invite detention under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act.

These widows live in their own world, of hope, the black woman's world of hope, hope for a change, hope that daddy will come home, hope that she will one day lead a normal life, too, in a people's South Africa, when the leaders of the oppressed people will be back from Robben Island and exile.

This, then, is the dream of every black woman, the hope of those who have dedicated their lives to the black cause, women who have born their burden courageously without a flinch against unimaginable odds, mothers of the present youth who have shaken the enemy to the core, mothers of those sons of Africa who are facing charges under the Terrorism Act in Pretoria, mothers of those sons who have shaken the enemy behind bars, unarmed as they are.



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