

FIVE FREEDOMS FORUM-AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS CONFERENCE, JULY 1989

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE ROLE ON THE WOMEN'S ROLE IN SHAPING THE FUTURE

This commission was chaired by Barbara Masekela.

Presentation 1

The first presentation was from Fidela Fouche, who raised a number of vital points in response to the question: should women's issues be subordinate to the issue of the struggle for liberation?

It was recognized that women's issues must be addressed simultaneously with other issues, that they cannot be put "on ice", because then these crucial issues will inevitably be ignored. A call for unqualified equality both in law and practice was made.

She suggested that we should aim to work against all discrimination both racial and sexual and must not wait until other societal ills are resolved before tackling sexism. Liberation is incomplete if women are not liberated and men are unaware of their insensitivity and own oppression.

Other points raised in this presentation will be discussed in the body of the paper.

Presentation 2

Baleka Kgositsile followed with a presentation on the ANC's perspective on the role of women. She began with a rigorous examination of the existing social order and asserted that the relationship between male and female reproduces the same oppression and exploitation that we are attempting to be rid of. Women constitute the majority of the population yet are effectively powerless.

White women were identified as a particularly important group needing education in order to challenge the status quo of which they form part. Her paper moved on to discuss specific issues facing women in the National Liberation struggle; These issues were also covered in general discussion.

Discussion and Content

The discussion then followed three basic areas:

1) - debate ensued as to whether women's struggle for equality was subservient to the national liberation struggle

- agreed : liberation of women is essential in effective mobilization of people and in a just dispensation following on a national level

2) The relationship between black and white women:

- both share common experience of gender oppression yet on a political level whites are seen as the oppressors

- the need for an identification of common issues of concern for women was stressed as a priority

- a difference in black and white women's experiences was recognised, but it was stressed that no experience of oppression should be trivialized, each experience is valid

- recognized further that the women's status and experiences of oppression cannot be divided into different categories for black and white women as this was typical of South Africa's divide and rule strategy. Our common desire for liberation and experiences of oppression must unite women and encourage joint strategies
- particular concern was raised over domestic worker/"madam" situation. Concern was raised over the insensitivity of certain white women employees. More than 42.1% black women are employed in the domestic capacity and it is thus essential that white politically active women familiarize themselves with SADWU and engage themselves in their campaigns; recognising the indications of domestic service like the breakdown of the family unit
- issue of rural women was also raised, it was recognised as particularly difficult to mobilize these women as many were unaware of their sexual oppression
- 3) Bridge-building between black and white women's groups
 - the following practical suggestions were made:
 - mobilization around 9th August, the international day of solidarity with the women of South Africa
 - issue of segregated creches
 - teaching white children a black language
 - township encounters
 - holiday activities for children
 - confidence (assertiveness) training
 - work with SADWU (a bridging notion on the lines of "maids and madams")

Two main motivations for such bridge building programme were identified:

- a) to promote clearer understanding (extend white women's awareness of the injustices specific to white women)
- b) to establish a sense of solidarity and to begin to look toward concerted action around women's issues.

GENERAL

Many points, not specifically related to the above issue were raised and are seen as pertinent to the debate:

- a) - much emphasis was placed on the idea of women discussing common issues and problems and through this gaining strength.
- b) - potential to mobilize women of all races around specific issues was also discussed such issues were:
 - militarization
 - child-care
 - health
 - environmental issues
 - education
 - literacy programmes
 - basic social welfare
 - legal issues
- c)- identification of such issues by different women was seen to offer an opportunity for women to gain confidence and draw strength from one another
- d) - an awareness of the situation in Zimbabwe was raised, where women's issues were relegated to a later stage and women are still battling to assert their rights

- e) - notion that ANC must practise "non-sexism" and send the word to the townships that women are not commodities but have a vital role to play in the struggle for liberation
- f) - ensure that women's issues do not just focus on "women's" issues because women have a vital contribution to offer to every sphere of life
- g) - there must be a constant "empowerment" of women who move from women's organisations into positions of leadership within other organisations
- h) - while women are mobilising other women, they must still play a role in policy formation
- i) - women need to be trained and offered specific programmes - insufficient to say "OK, you're equal"; must be demonstrated practically
- j) - the women's role is not restricted to a post-apartheid SA, but must begin now
- k) - women must participate actively now, to ensure that when a new constitution is devised, their position is incorporated
- l) the use of culture must be explored, and where possible it should facilitate a change in attitude both toward women and from women
- m) - essential that people are aware of sexist language and avoid discriminatory words
- n) - men must fully participate in the emancipation struggle

Conclusion

The main notions summarise the debate:

Women must

1. raise the consciousness of women about their own condition
2. engage women in campaigns with which they can identify
3. involve white women in campaigns which bear directly on the situation of their black compatriots