Women under Apartheid

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«We, women of South Africa claim our rights. We claim full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non racist, democratic society ... 

We claim recognition and respect for the work we do in the home, in the workplace and the community. We claim shared responsibilities and decision-making in all areas of public life ... 

We require society to be reorganised, and its institutions to be restructured to take cognisance of all women ... »
# Women's Charter

Throughout history South African women have struggled for better lives. During the early 1990s the Women’s National Coalition (WNC) went out to women across the country and asked them to speak about their different experience of the past and hopes for the future. At the end of this process the Women’s Charter for effective equality was drawn up and adopted by over 90 women’s organisations which belong to the WNC. The Charter summarises women’s demands under 12 headings.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Equality</th>
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<td>Equality shall apply to every aspect of women’s lives including the family, the workplace and the state. Principles of equality shall be embodied at all levels in legislation and government policy. New legislation, new government structures and new educational programmes shall be established to promote gender equality.</td>
<td>Women shall have access to all the basic development resources and services necessary to sustain a healthy and productive life. Women must have access to safe water supplies, land, affordable secure housing and appropriate energy sources.</td>
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<td>Men and women shall have equal status in both civil and customary law, and women should not be disadvantaged in legal or quasi-legal proceedings. Women shall be fully represented on all judicial structures including traditional courts and other structures.</td>
<td>Social services like social pensions and disability grants, health care, preventive care and counselling should be a right and not a privilege for women.</td>
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<td>Women claim involvement in decision-making at all levels of both formal and informal economy. Economic policy must secure women’s equal place in the economy and discrimination on the basis of gender or marital status shall be abolished. Women demand equal access to jobs and skills training, as well as adequate parental rights for working women.</td>
<td>Women shall have the right to participate fully in all levels of political, civic and community life.</td>
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<td>Women and men should share the work, responsibilities and decision-making in family life. Women should also have equal access to the financial resources of the household. When partnerships break down, men and women should have rights to property and maintenance in accordance with their needs, means and responsibilities.</td>
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| 12 Media |  |
In the early decades of the last century large numbers of African men left the rural areas to work as migrants in the mines and towns. The women and children were left behind to scrape a living from deteriorating soils in overcrowded homelands. For example a 1949 survey of one area in the Eastern Cape found that more than two thirds of the farmers were women who were caring for large numbers of children and old people. In the same area nearly half of the children died before their tenth birthdays.

Influx control legislation, which was only abolished in 1986, made it almost impossible for rural women to join their men in the towns, and to find well paying jobs. Instead, rural women had to depend on money sent to them by city relatives. Their only other alternative was to find work as labourers on the farms. Farm work has always been the worst paid and least protected kind of work.

Apart from the physical hardship of women's lives in rural areas, the absence of men - fathers, lovers, friends and husbands - caused deep damage to family life in the rural areas.

«Migrant labour keeps my husband away from me ... Children miss the discipline of their father. Many families break. Women get involved in misconduct. Husbands stay away and forget their family responsibilities - children suffer.»
The brewing of beer and other alcohol became an important part of life in urban slums. Many women kept their families together by running shebeens. But the authorities declared war on home brewing and the brewers were frequently raided and fined or imprisoned. They wanted men to spend their money in municipal beer halls.

In 1959 the women of Cato Manor retaliated by attacking the drinkers in the municipal beer hall. Three thousand women gathered outside the beer hall and fought with police.

During the 1920s and 1930s large numbers of women moved from the countryside to the towns. As the depression of the 1930s deepened, young Afrikaans and coloured women arrived in the towns looking for jobs in the growing manufacturing sector. In the late 1930s the numbers of African women in the towns began to grow. They lived with their families in segregated locations or in rented rooms in the crowded yards of the cities. Some of these newly urbanised women worked as domestic workers or washerwomen. But most made ends meet by informal sector activities like the brewing and selling of beer, sewing and sex work.

After the National Party government came to power, there were many restrictions on family life in urban areas. Many women were forced to leave their children in the rural areas, and live alone in backyard rooms or hostels.
“We can never eat meat. Just mealie meal (maize meal) and milk from our cow. Before, we sometimes used to have chicken, but all my chickens died. Sometimes we eat vegetables, but now there is none.”

During the 1930s South African women began joining the formal workforce in growing numbers. White and coloured women found jobs in the clothing and food factories. In these “home-like” industries, the wages were low, the hours long and the conditions poor. At this time the majority of African women workers were in the worst paid and least protected jobs of all domestic work and agriculture. For both domestic workers and farm workers the wages and working conditions were decided by the employer. In 1981 the average wage for domestic workers was R32 a month. Until the Labour Relations Act was passed in 1996, neither domestic workers nor farm workers were covered by the protective legislation granted to other categories of workers.
The breadwinners

“We don’t get promotion. We need the jobs and the bosses know this. We know our jobs well and we work harder than many of the men, but we stay in the same boring job day in and day out. It makes us very frustrated.”

Although factory work was better paid than other women’s jobs like domestic work and agriculture, women factory workers still earned less than men. A study of workers in the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) during the 1980s found that most of their women members were in the lowest paying grades of the worst paying factories. Women members complained that they did not receive as much training as men, and that their jobs were unskilled and repetitive.
Toiling native women, white working women, realise your interests, wake up to fight for better conditions side by side with your husbands, fathers and brothers: only by a united front can you get rid of all the exploitation which you suffer under capitalism and where you as women are the greatest sufferers.

In the early years of the 20th century women had few political rights. Under customary law, African women were regarded as legal minors, and even in the enfranchised community, women were refused the vote until 1930.

Despite discrimination and legal disabilities women were active in the struggle for democracy in South Africa. Individual women broke the yoke of their times to fight for justice and humanity. As in later years, women were the backbone of many political organisations and campaigns, but women were often relegated by men to a support role. For example women were only allowed to be auxiliary members of the African National Congress, and had no voting rights until 1943.
Women organise

«Many men who are politically active and progressive in outlook still follow the tradition that women should take no part in politics and a great resentment exists towards women who seek independent activities or even express independent opinions.»

During the 1940s and 50s women’s organisations grew in strength and number. The ANC Women’s League was established in 1943, largely as a means to bring more women into the border political movement. Its goal was also to «take up special problems and issues affecting women.»

Women participated in large numbers in the anti-apartheid campaigns of the 1950s, but at work and at home they were still oppressed by the bosses and even by their own husbands. Even in the political organisations of the day most women were relegated to the service jobs of «tea and typing». 
«I will never carry a pass.»

«They had peacefully stormed the Bastille of the privileged whites. For the Union Buildings were regarded as sacrosanct; not even «whites only» notices were placed there because in all these years the «non whites» had never gathered there, had never thought of doing so.»

Government attempts to control the movement of women from rural to urban areas have dominated African family life during the first 80 years of this century. From the 1930s, legislation was passed to prevent African women from living with their men and children in the towns. But they could not survive on migrants wages, so they came anyway. The National Party government was determined to enforce the migrant labour system by keeping women and children - whom they called «superfluous appendages» - in the rural areas. In 1952 they announced the extension of the pass laws to women. Despite massive and widespread resistance, the laws were enforced by 1963. The influx control legislation was tightened again in the 1960s and 1970s until there was virtually no legal possibility for a rural woman to find work in town. Ordinary women, battling starvation and loneliness, continued to defy the pass laws. Risking arrest and deportation, they came to work in the towns as «illegals». 
«Everybody has died. My man has gone and died, as have my daughters. They took my land away. The Lord has gone - yes - I suppose he has also gone.»

Women played an important role in the liberation struggle. They sacrificed their freedom and their lives, many losing their homes and families. As young women, as activists, as wives and mothers, they bore the brunt of apartheid's dark years.

Between 1960 and 1980 more than two million people were removed because of apartheid policy. In many of these threatened communities the men were absent, working in the towns and it fell to the women to resist the removals. Women struggled to hold their families and communities together, and women suffered when resistance failed.
«Before the parental rights negotiations I didn’t realise the problems that women face. But during those negotiations I began to realise that as long as women were tied to the kitchen sink they cannot be free. And until women are free, we will only have half freedom.»

Since the early 1980’s trade union women have fought against discrimination in the workplace. They have also fought for more rights for women workers. Maternity rights and benefits have always been a big issue. In 1983 the SA Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union signed the first maternity agreement. It protected women workers from losing their jobs when they became pregnant. They were also guaranteed their jobs back after 12 months (unpaid) maternity leave. Other big issues for women workers have been equal pay for work of equal value, access to skills and training, and the provision of child care for working mothers. Unions have also fought and won demands around special health needs for working women, such as special protection for pregnant women and free screening for cervical cancer. Since the new government came to power trade unions have begun a new struggle to consolidate these gains into labour legislation.
During the 1980s a whole new range of women’s organisations developed within South Africa as part of mass democratic movement. Activists from the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) of the 1950s, and young women from the United Democratic Front established organisations in all provinces. They mobilised women into the broader struggle, and fought for gender equality. The new women’s organisations also began to look at women’s issues like rape and violence against women.

Many community-based women’s organisations sprang up all over the country and were active in grassroots actions like consumer boycotts and protests over housing and water provision. During this period there was much debate about feminism, and its relevance to the South African liberation struggle. Many women activists argued that feminism divided comrades in the struggle at a time when national liberation was a priority. Others argued that as long as women were oppressed, the resistance movement was fighting apartheid with only half its strength.

The unbanning of the African National Congress and the return of the ANC Women’s League in 1990 led to big changes in the women’s movement culminating in the formation of the Women’s National Coalition in 1992 which campaigned to ensure that women’s rights were included in the new constitution.

“We have been banging on doors for generations and nobody has opened them. Now we must force open those doors to a non-sexist South Africa. We, here, must do it.”
«The only energy that I am left with is to educate as many people with HIV to help themselves ... I pray every night. I say, please God help these people to understand that they can make such a difference to their own lives.»

Despite the gains which a few privileged women have made in public life, the lives of the majority of South African women are still filled with economic hardship and difficulty. Many women also experience discrimination and abuse within their relationships, within their families and within their homes. Violent crimes against women and girl children are also on the increase. Recent police statistics suggest that one in three women are battered by their husbands, and one in three women will be raped in their life time. At the same time the institutions which are intended to protect ordinary people and punish offenders are failing women at an alarming rate. Fewer than a quarter of all rape cases reported have resulted in a conviction of an offender. In this new postapartheid period a new challenge for women has emerged in the form of the HIV epidemic. Because of biology and socio-economic status women are more susceptible to HIV infection than men. In recent years the rate of HIV infection among pregnant South African women has soared - from under 1% in 1990 to over 16% in 1997.
Women make up 51% of the South African population, but only

25% of law makers
18% of councillors
10% of decision-makers in public service

Over the last three decades South African women have made gains – in government, in the workforce, in organisations, in the political movement, in the church, in business and in civil society. The new Constitution specifically outlaws discrimination based on gender and promotes affirmative action for women and other disadvantaged groups. The new government has facilitated the formation of structures such as the Commission on Gender Equality and the Office on the Status of Women in the Deputy President’s office which are designed to advance gender issues. The position of women in government illustrates the gains which have already been made.

By late 1997 women occupied more than one quarter of all National Assembly seats, and women composed 31% of all cabinet and deputy cabinet ministers. These new women parliamentarians have played an important role in putting women’s issues on the national agenda – and keeping them there.
They have struck a rock

Ray Alexander
Frances Baard
Brigalia Bam
Amina Cachalia
Cheryl Carolus
Ivy Matseepe Casabburi
June Chabahce
Sophie de Bruyn
Thoko Didiza
Winkie Direko
Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma
Ruth First
Frene Ginwala
Janub Gool
Pregs Govender
Barbara Hogan
Priscilla Jana
Christine Jesson
Helen Joseph
Baleka Kgotsiile
Deborah Mabale
Lindiwe Mabuza
Winnie Madikizela-Mandela
Nosizwe Madlala Roughtledge
Mavivi Manzini
Nosiviwe Maphisa
Florence Matomela
Charlotte Maxeke
Fatima Meer
Hetty Meleod
Berte Meshoba
Florence Metomela
Nomainda Mfeketo
Florence Mkhize
Berta Mkize
Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka
Ida Mntwana
Thandi Modise
Lindiwe Mokate

Yvonne Mokgoro
Ruth Mompati
Mary Moodley
Rehima Moose
Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyela
Thenjiwe Mtintso
Victoria Mxenge
Shanthie Naidoo
Rita Ndzanga
Lilian Masediba Ngoyi
Dorothy Nyembe
Naledi Pandor
Mamphele Ramphale
Joyce Seroke
Gertrude Shope
Annie Silinga
Albertina Sisulu
Lindiwe Sisulu
Sheila Sisulu
Gladys Smith
Dora Tamana
Pansy Tlakula
Sophie Willig
Medie-Holl Xuma

There are many more women who hold very responsible positions in post apartheid South Africa and are actively contributing to the reconstruction and development of our society. In 1994 the ruling party agreed to setting a minimum target of 30% female representation in all management structures of government. We are close to reaching this target.