

Women's struggle in South Africa - Still a Long Way to Go

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The most life-shattering decision I ever made was to leave home and go blindly into exile. I say blindly because it was without forethought. From an early age, I knew that the South Africa of the time was not the place to build my life and dreams.

My first child was born on 6 February 1956. I was driven against the wall. It was inevitable. I could not accept the fate that awaited my miracle of creation: to be herded through life in indelible contempt as soon as he began to gurgle. The thought became more and more unbearable.

At about the same time, and perhaps in keeping with the tempo of the times, the women's campaign against the introduction of passes was escalating. The Federation of South African women drew women from all working sectors and trade unions, regardless of colour, race or creed, to fight for the removal of all social, legal and economic disabilities, and to work for the protection of women and children in South Africa. This powerful call raised an alert in all parts of the country, for every woman knew the severity of apartheid oppression whose main instrument was the pass. Throughout South Africa, women organised themselves for the first non-racial National Conference of April 1954 in Johannesburg, followed by the marches of 1955 and 1956.

I could not help but be swept into the wave of protest. At the time, I lived in the Pretoria township of Lady Selbourne, but kept in constant touch with some of the women I had worked with in Durban on matters of the struggle. I was in touch with Dorothy Nyembe, Bertha Mkhize and others who kept the issue burning. But since I had a small baby I only made up my mind to join the march at the last minute. We (a few other women from Pretoria and I) decided to join the amazing march, the stream of women who were arriving by trains and buses and on foot. We walked and climbed towards the Union Building slowly, without transport. We were happy to be part of the show of strength that escalated from all corners of that historical hill.

The failure of Dr Verwoerd to come out and receive the multiracial delegation fostered in me a new fervent belief that some day we, the people of South Africa, would topple over the burden of apartheid. In that act alone, by that single mighty leader, I knew the superstructure was not invincible; I knew then that one day apartheid would come tumbling down.

The long years of exile were fired by the belief that my grandchildren, if not my own children, would one day live in a free South Africa. The journey has been long. Thirty years have not been without disappointment and sometimes outright hopelessness. But my conviction stayed with me until I returned to South Africa in 1994.

I am back home now, and apartheid is gone, but it would be untruthful to say the seeds of patriarchy on which apartheid itself was anchored have all been swept away, that all my dreams are fulfilled. The seeds of patriarchy on which apartheid itself was anchored have all been swept away. But Africa has had her own malignant strain of patriarchy. This leaves the women of South Africa with only half the battle won. To compound the situation, the residue of apartheid, which left the African men scrambling on the lower rungs of the social ladder, has left many men disgruntled and feckless,

turning on their own women to assuage their anger. Besides, apartheid left many totally unprepared to take over the institutions that might turn the tide of poverty into productive capacity.

One other legacy of the past is greed – everyone for himself. This is not what the struggle was about. Those who have the means, or who got there first, are grabbing and looting, and are seen to have benefited more from the freedom than everyone else. But strangely enough, even those who do not grab everything for themselves, those who got there by their own sheer natural ability or opportunity, are often perceived as having done so in a negative way. This has left us all with a bitter taste of an unfinished task. Where to next? How long shall we wait for freedom to be fulfilled? That is the task of the next generation.

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P.S.

* From Amandla! website.

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/special-features/sa-national-womens-day/595-still-a-long-way-to-go>