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'To work hard and walk fearless'

The Specificity of Women's Resistance in South African history

HSRC Women's Day Seminar, 8 August 2003

Janet Cherry, Senior Research Specialist, Democracy and Governance

Why should we celebrate National Women's Day each year? What was so special about the events of August 9 1956, and can we draw from those events any arguments about the nature of women's resistance to apartheid? In this paper, I will draw on the oral testimony of women in the Eastern Cape in order to put forward an argument that there is a specificity to women's resistance which differentiates it from other forms of organization -a specificity which has everything to do with the fact that it is women who were doing the organizing. In other words, a 'gendered analysis' of women's resistance in the past will be put forward, which may also offer some tentative insight into challenges facing women's organization in South Africa today.

I won't repeat here an account of the events of August 9 1956 – I will assume that these are well known to most of you present, and that the video screening has refreshed your memories of these events. Rather, I will examine the context in which women were able to organize such a remarkable protest, and then try and develop some sort of argument about what made this organization 'gender-specific'. In other words, to see it not just as a celebration of one of many instances of mass mobilization in resistance to apartheid, but as of particular significance because of what it represents to us today about the potential of women to organize effectively.

The context of women's resistance to apartheid in Port Elizabeth[i]

I am drawing in this section from the recorded oral testimony of some of the women involved in the ANC Womens League in the 1950s: Frances Baard (as recorded by Barbie Schreiner); Pauline Mbunye (as remembered by Hilda Tshaka); Hilda Tshaka and Lillie Diedericks, as recorded by myself. All except Lillie Diedericks (to my knowledge) have passed away since these recordings. I have also drawn on other secondary sources where other people – usually men – comment on women's organization in PE.

What is of interest, or what I have chosen to see as of interest and to emphasize here, is what these women express about their strength as women and their independence from men. In addition, their effective organization around local issues, their sensitivity to the needs of particular groups of people, and their humanity in their style of political work, all hold important lessons for us today. Thus the focus here is not on a 'triumphalist' history of a particular action, but on

seeing such action as the culmination of a particularly successful organizational practice and culture.

Let us go back to the situation in Port Elizabeth earlier in the last century, back even to the 1930s. Already, there was a stable African working class population living in New Brighton and Korsten, and women were making their voice heard; Jenny Robinson notes in her thesis that from the 1930s, the voice of women in New Brighton

> Persisted and assumed an increasingly organized form until by the late 1940s and 1950s the location superintendant was receiving frequent and every larger deputations from women demanding council action on a number of social and physical problems experienced in the township.

One administrator of New Brighton even considered the ANC in Port Elizabeth to have 'been managed entirely by women'! (Robinson 1990:239)

In Korsten, which was a mixed, informal residential area until its forced removal in the late 1950s, and the only area in Port Elizabeth where African people had freehold title to land, the Manager of Native Affairs stated openly that

> The problem of the Native female resident of Korsten is her freedom from control

Of course, during the *apartheid* era, this independence and 'freedom from control' was unacceptable to the authorities. In a situation where passes had never been rigorously implemented, and women in particular had not been threatened in this way, the extension of the pass laws posed a very real problem. Women's livelihoods, status and freedom in urban areas came under serious threat with the establishment of labour bureaux, the extension of passes and the deportation of women to the reserves. This is one of the explanations for the high level of organization and resistance in Port Elizabeth in the 1950s, and the significant role that women played in such resistance.

In Port Elizabeth, influx control had not been strictly enforced before the 1950s. After the Defiance Campaign and the New Brighton riots of 1952, the PE municipality – which had a reputation of being relatively liberal – changed its policies and began to enforce pass laws. These were applied first to men, with the first labour bureau being established in 1953 in New Brighton, and all men having to carry passes by 1955. Strangely, there was no clear, organized resistance to this. However, when the government announced its intention to extend pass laws to all African women in 1956, it was a different story. The ANC Women's League, together with its allies in the Federation of South African Women, took up the campaign against passes with a militancy and determination that had not been seen before, and was not to be seen again – not even in the anti-pass campaigns of 1960 which led to the Sharpeville massacre. The pass laws were probably the most hated aspect of the apartheid system; a symbol to Africans of their oppression and of the deprivation of their citizenship under the 'grand apartheid' of the homeland system. Millions of South Africans were

arrested for not having passes, in the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s, yet the 1956 protest by women remained the single most powerful anti-pass protest in South Africa's history.

Local struggles

The 9 August protest in Pretoria was not merely a 'once-off' event, remarkable for its organizational coherence and dignity. It took place after extensive organizing 'on the ground' in localities around the country.

In Port Elizabeth, the ANC Womens League took up many local issues, in addition to the national campaigns such as the Defiance Campaign (1952), the Campaign against Bantu Education (1955), the potato boycott, and the Campaign against the extension of passes to women. The Women's League identified issues that affected women directly in their day-to-day lives, noting that certain social concerns were 'gender specific' and that therefore women responded to these initiatives in a way which men did not do:

> We women had a lot of problems at that time which the men didn't have to worry about (Baard 1986:34):

The women organized, among other things, around housing (only married women had access to municipal housing), food prices, low wages, racist employment practices, and conditions in the hospital. I give here just a few examples to illustrate these struggles. In one instance, women organized a selective consumer boycott to force shopkeepers to drop discriminatory employment practices:

> In Korsten, women didn't organize a boycott of all shops. Some of the shop owners didn't want to employ blacks, so we used to boycott the shops one at a time. When business was down in a particular shop, they would decide to employ black people, so we would stop boycotting that shop and go on to the next one. (Hilda Tshaka, interview)

In another instance, the Womens League protested persistently, until successful, against the discriminatory treatment of black nursing staff at the local hospital:

> The time they started Livingstone (the hospital) they said black nurses wear black and white, like domestic workers' uniforms. So a delegation of women went to see them – myself, and Mrs Matomela and others went to see Dr Weir (the hospital superintendant) to protest against this. The other women gave me letters to give to Dr Weir. When I arrived, Dr Weir would not respond. Florence Matomela would give me another letter and say 'Go again, until he responds.' I used to give the letter to a matron, and the matron would give it to the superintendant. Then one day I asked to see Dr Weir himself. He asked whether I was one of the delegation so I said no, I was just Mrs Matomela's 'girl'. When at last the delegation was given permission to see him, I was also one of the delegation, one of seven, and then the Doctor wanted to know, "And this one – what is she doing here? She is supposed to be at home!" And that delegation was very successful, because the position was changed. We then tackled the

> kitchens at the hospital where there was very poor food – Mrs Matomela 'tested' the food and said it was no good. The superintendant also promised that the food would be improved. (Hilda Tshaka interview)

With regard to the use of more militant organizational tactics, I love to quote another story of ANC Women's League activist Hilda Tshaka. This story relates to a stay-away organized in PE in 1957, when people were being urged not to catch buses to go to work in town. The Women's League organized a group of women into a particularly militant and effective form of protest to pursuade men to comply with the stayaway:

> The minority refused to obey and forced the way saying they were here to come and work for their families. Most of them were the homeland people. Mrs Mbunye focused this and plans to stop it were made but an effective one was her suggestion that all women must come together for a sleep together. Women were to wear men's overalls and must also carry sticks to attack those stubborn men. Women slept where General Tyre is today. At dawn men were seen coming, women lay flat and waited. When men were about ten metres away from them, women stood up and charged at them. Men were so shocked and fascinated and others ran away. Those who were standing amazed were beaten up. For them not to be noticed that they were all women, they changed their voices to baritone tones. The leader said 'Tshisa, tshisa!' meaning 'Beat, beat!'. Mrs Mbunye was there and because men were so afraid of her, not even one ever stood facing her, as she was so powerful.
>
> I could not even hit one man I was laughing so much at these women attacking the men and the men running back to the township! That was very successful, none of them went to ride the buses and the buses were taken away from General Tyres.

In this tactic of women adopting male roles, we see a delightful combination of humour with militancy; the aggression of the women acting as men was more effective in terms of the surprise it caused, than in terms of physical violence!

But the women were not always acting against the new arrivals from the homelands. There was another occasion where they organized to assist the wives of migrant workers from being 'endorsed out' to the homelands. Again, Mrs Tshaka tells the story:

> There was a train from East London which used to bring the wives of migrant workers to PE. They would bring lots of vans and wait for the women, and take all these women and claim they were going to help them, take them to the hostels or something, and then they would be taken to Labour and then to Rooi Hel (North End Prison) and the money they were meant to take home would have to be used to bail them out; then they would be sent home again with no money. So we went to Mr Boast (the township superintendant) and complained about this, and it was stopped for a bit, but we discovered that it was still continuing, so we went to sleep at the station to protect these contract workers' wives, and we fought with the headmen.

Frances Baard also recounts how the appalling conditions under which migrant workers lived in the Single Men's Quarters moved her to join the ANC, where she became involved in organizing the Womens League. In addition to organizing women around their day-to-day concerns, they also took it upon themselves to send a delegation to the township superintendant to complain about the conditions in the migrant worker hostels. (Baard 1986:32-34).

The Women's Anti-Pass Campaign

One of the interesting things about the anti-pass campaign of 1956 is how it was taken up specifically as a women's struggle. While in fact African men were having passes enforced on them for the first time in Port Elizabeth in this period, it was only when the ANC Women' League responded to the proposed extension of passes to women that it became the target of militant organization. Frances Baard noted

> Also the men knew what the passes meant; they knew what it was like to carry a pass, and they thought that maybe the women could do something so that there were no more passes for anyone, not even the men. (Ibid 1986:46)

She explains how the government began by issuing passes to women who were isolated in rural villages and small towns, and outlying suburbs like Walmer and Despatch, and to domestic workers who were not organized. This is how she argued against taking passes:

> We knew that you would be carrying a child, or have a child on your back, and the police will be coming behind you wanting your pass and you won't be able to run away and jump over that fence there, and that will be the time the police will get you, or else your child will fall and get hurt because you are trying to run away from the police. And then who is going to look after the children when they take you to jail because you haven't got your pass, or your pass is not right? (Ibid 1986:48)

In Port Elizabeth, the campaign against the extension of passes to women was not just addressed through public meetings and deputations, but through a militant 'street politics' which involved setting up pickets next to reference book units, to dissuade women from accepting passes. A delegation marched to the mayor's garden with placards and leaflets. Pamphlets were issued in Xhosa and English. They warned women that 'our bodies will be exposed, handled anywhere and anytime by thugs' and 'we will be stripped naked'. Girls at hostels in Humewood and Summerstrand ('white' residential areas where black women were only allowed to reside as domestic workers) had been women up in the night and forced to strip. They aimed the campaign at young women over the age of fifteen, entering the labour market, and told them not to be deceived by promises that passes would help them to find work, or by threats that they would not be accepted at high schools or colleges without passes. The pamphlets warned:

> It means that no husband can ever be sure any day that his wife is his wife; nor can he be sure that his child may not be taken away from him and sold to farmers under the pretext of failing to comply with the pass regulation...how can any decent home be built for the proper upbringing of the children...a man has only to come into any home or stop a woman on the street and say he is a policeman or detective and the law of the country empowers him to take away that woman and touch any part of her body as they can do with men under the pretext that they are searching for a pass. Even in the day of slavery there was nothing like this. This is the basest method of humiliating a people and destroying the honour of its womanhood. (Quoted in Lodge 1983:144)

They called on women: "We do no take passes. We fight for the respect and dignity of womanhood. Asilathathi ipasi! Akuyiwa eLabour!" Two thousand women gave up a day's wages to tell the Native Commissioner, 'We will not rest!'

While appealing to 'traditional values' such as the integrity of the family, the honour of womenhood, and the importance of family life in the raising of children, the campaign also called on women to resist violations of their physical integrity and dignity as women. And they maintained their fierce independence in organizing against the passes; Hilda Tshaka expressed this in quite openly feminist terms when trying to explain the success of their organization:

> The women today are not organized like we were organized. They mix with men, that is why; we did not work with men, we did not want men, we wanted to work ourselves.

Organizational culture of the Womens League in Port Elizabeth

This organizational 'separatism' is corroborated by Frances Baard. She explains how women organized as part of the ANC and the FedSAW, holding separate meetings and yet never seeing themselves as politically distinct from the ANC. There was no obvious conflict of interests between the local and national issues taken up by women, and those of the ANC as a whole – yet women seemed to maintain a 'space' to respond to local needs with particular sensitivity, and to offer personal support to women as well:

> But us women, even when we did things like this (referring to the campaign to improve conditions in the migrant worker hostels) we never used to work by ourselves, because we were part of the ANC as a whole. We used to have our own meetings, just the women, and talk about what we wanted to do and how to do it. Then we would go to the general meeting and tell them, 'Such and such a thing is so-and-so, and we want to do this and this.' And we would tell them exactly what we wanted to do to put this thing right. We would discuss it all together at the general meeting and decide on it, and we would get a mandate from them. We couldn't do things by ourselves; we had to work together so that everyone knew what we were going to do, and everyone agreed. (Baard op cit 1986:34).

Ma Baard explains how the 'house meeting' system used by the ANC in New Brighton was used to organize women specifically:

> When we wanted to organize the women too we would call them to our houses in the evening when they had come back from work. Then we would talk to them about things that were wrong and take decisions on these things, the same as at ANC small meetings. We would take the decisions from these meetings to the branch meetings and we would discuss them there....

Of course the usual problems occurred with women being prevented by their husbands from attending meetings, having husbands unwilling to share in childcare in the evenings, or expressing concern about women's safety in going to meetings in the evenings.[ii] Ma Baard explains how the women responded to this last 'concern' by putting into place a system of leaving the meetings in groups, and escorting all women to the gates of their homes after meetings, to ensure that all got home safely.

The leadership of the Womens League also made sure that the ordinary members were 'looked after', with an extraordinary humanity and lack of ambition in their approach to political work. Mrs Tshaka described Pauline Mbunye, another of the Women's League leaders, as follows:

> For she was so keen and brave and bright, she even knew very well what she was doing; as a result, whenever she came back (from Defiance Campaign actions in 1952) it was her responsibility with all the women's league to check door to door those who are arrested. Should there be a house with arrested parents, she was looking after that family by providing food and other things.

Mrs Tshaka also described how she coped personally with repression with the same combination of compassion and defiance:

> When I was released (from prison) I stayed in PE and waited for my husband. After his release he was taken to Keiskammahoek. When I asked where he was they said they didn't know. I waited and waited but couldn't move because I was restricted. Then I found out, and hired a car and went to fetch him. The next day I went to the police and said "You didn't know where my husband was – well he is here at home". When they discovered my husband was staying in PE they did not want him here because he was a strong person at that time, so they deported us to Keiskammahoek.

This personal, caring approach did not conflict with extraordinary courage on the part of the Womens League leaders. They were not afraid to put themselves 'in the frontline' of resistance; during the Defiance Campaign of 1952, Florence Matomela was the very first Volunteer to defy apartheid laws in Port Elizabeth:

> The first woman who defied was Mrs Matomela – the first Defiance Campaigner. We walked from Korsten to New Brighton at about 3 o'clock. At that time we were afraid, we didn't know what was going to happen to us, but we wanted to come and see what the police were going to do. There were many of us – almost the whole membership of the Women's League. It was a protest march. But we were not all going to defy at one time. Mrs Matomela would be the first. If she was just

> arrested, then we would all defy. But if she was shot down, we would not continue. (Mrs Tshaka, interview)

The women stressed unity, solidarity and hard work, as well as the feeling of personal fulfillment and empowerment they experienced through being independent activists:

> At that time there was no time to sit down, there was no time to eat or drink – all the time we were working, working, and the people were together. I would like to die when I think about it. There is still lots of work to do, but I can't do it now. (Hilda Tshaka interview)

> It was a very exciting time. A lot of our campaigns were successful and we were fighting, fighting all the time. There was a lot of support for these campaigns; the people were very strong about what they wanted. The women too, they were very strong, very militant at this time, saying this is what we want and this and this and this. I think the women even surprised the men with how strong they were. (Baard 1986:38)

And Mrs Mbunye expressed her continued defiance of authority after the repression of the early 1960s in a very personal manner, by refusing to wear shoes:

> To take no shoes any more was not accidental but spiritually committed to the people's struggle. The day Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and his comrades were sentenced, that was her last day to wear a shoe on her feet, saying then it was her chance to work hard and walk fearless on the surface of the earth as shoes will make a noise. (Hilda Tshaka document)

Organizing for the Pretoria march

The same spirit of independence characterized the way in which women prepared for the protest in Pretoria. Helen Joseph wrote (Joseph 1986:18) that when she went to PE before the march to Pretoria, she found women organizing so hard that

> ANC officials complained laughingly that the women had taken over the Congress offices and turned the men into clerks and typists.

In this delightful reversal of traditional roles, we see that for a change it is women who are providing the political and organizational leadership, while men perform the routine administrative tasks.

When organizing for the march to the Union Buildings, the women of Port Elizabeth determined to hire a whole railway coach to transport them to Pretoria. Frances Baard described how they painstakingly raised the money:

> We divided ourselves into clubs, we divided into about 10 women in a club, 10, 10, 10 and a certain club had to bring a certain amount of money. The women made tea parties, concerts, bazaars, and they sold oranges or anything, until we

> managed to get a lot of money for the trip. The women even said that if we had to, we would sell our furniture to get to Pretoria. But we managed to get the money without that..... (Ibid 1986:59)

In this manner, the women managed to raise the sum of seven hundred pounds for a coach that held seventy women. This was a huge sum of money in those days, and given the poverty of the African community, the fund-raising drive was a massive achievement that demonstrated the level of grassroots support that the ANC Women's League commanded. I cannot imagine a local ANC branch engaging in such efforts to raise an equivalent amount of money today – the spirit of self-reliance has been replaced by one of dependency on funding 'from above', while the spirit of volunteerism has been replaced by one of expecting payment for services. This is not to say that women do not still engage in such activities – I have a lovely example of desperately poor women in Kwazakele forming a co-operative to bake and sell 'rostle koek' in just such a manner – but such activities these days are aimed at economic survival, community support for those who are ill, or paying for funerals. Seldom would such commitment be shown for the attendance of a political gathering or protest activity.

Having raised the money, the women had to decide who would go to Pretoria, for they could not all fit into the railway coach:

> There were many women who wanted to go and so we had to vote, this one must go, and this one, and this one, until we had chosen the women who were to go from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria to represent us. But before we went to Pretoria we got all the women who couldn't go to sign petitions to say that they also didn't want those passes. Every woman who was on that train took those petitions with her to give to Strijdom. (ibid 1986:59)

Some thoughts on women's organization

Before we end with a symbolic revisiting of the Union Building protest, I would like to try and answer the questions, 'what does this history of women's organization mean for us now, in a democratic South Africa'? and 'What lessons can we draw from these examples of women's organization in the 1950s?'

I am somewhat dismayed by the current dismissal of feminist analysis and theory in South Africa today – both in some academic institutions and among political activists. The term 'feminism' has, it seems, become 'politically incorrect' and is assumed to have connotations of being exclusive, anti-male, anti-tradition, anti-African – a whole range of 'negatives' which fail to recognize the broader, more inclusive feminism that asserts women's independence. Without going too far into the debate around non-racialism and African identity which has recently resurfaced, it may be helpful to refer very briefly to the positive contribution of the philosophy of Black Consciousness – a philosophy which asserted the need for the oppressed black majority to organize themselves, to be independent of white patronage, and to establish their worth and dignity both organizationally and intellectually in this way. At a time when women in our society are living under

the threats of extreme personal violence, poverty and disease, a time of enormous social crisis where women, despite the many positive changes in law and policy, are struggling to survive as never before, it is perhaps appropriate to revisit some of these debates around feminism and women's organization.

Through revisiting this history, I hope to have illustrated, through the voices of women activists, two points:

Firstly, the specificity of women's organization: the style of organizing, which embraced a responsiveness to women's concerns at 'grassroots' level, together with the selflessness and caring usually understood to be 'women's characteristics' – these were combined with a fierce independence, in terms of organizational structure, economic support and political leadership; and also with a sometimes aggressive, and yet humorous, self-mocking (or mocking of men!) adoption of militant tactics. Secondly, this independence and militancy was not understood by these women as a form of radical separatist feminism: it was understood to be essentially compatible with the overall aims of he national democratic movement. Nor was it 'anti-male' – with strong women's organization at times even taking up the cause of particular groups of vulnerable men. Yet, I would venture to argue that there is an independence and pride asserted by these women which expresses a form of inclusive feminism.

For women in South Africa now, this poses an interesting challenge. Women need not aspire to simply 'fill the shoes' of men – in quotas for political representatives or in the labour force, important though it is that women are adequately represented in all spheres of society. These examples illustrate the way in which women's organization around localized, social problems can pose a radical challenge to the status quo, can put pressure on government to ensure 'delivery', can 'take control of our lives' while maintaining the independence of civil society. Such local organization is today increasingly 'survival based', and is becoming 'depoliticised' as 'politics' becomes the realm of elected representatives and government officials. In response, and in conclusion, I would even go so far as to argue that the growing divide between civil and political society can potentially be bridged by women's organization, infusing a radical egalitarian politics once more into our democracy.

The 9 August Union Building Protest

It is only appropriate to end this paper by giving Frances Baard's moving account of the famous march on the Union Buildings which we are commemorating today and tomorrow – a protest that was more than another moment of successful mass organization; a protest that made a magnificent statement about the dignity and power of women:

> It is two days by train from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria. Two days on the train sitting in the railway carriage, singing all the way. First we went to Johannesburg

and we slept the night in Soweto, and then the next day, it was August 9th, we went to Pretoria. Some took buses, some trains, some taxis, anything to get to Pretoria. Some people were volunteers who were to look after everyone and make sure everything went smoothly. They had to see that the women got to the Union Buildings, either by bus or on foot. They told the women walking not to walk like it is a procession because otherwise the police would have stopped them before they got there. We had to walk like we were going somewhere by ourselves, not like we were a group.

Then we all walked into the yard of the Union Buildings and we waited there for all the women coming from other places. We all had those protest forms with us and there were some extra ones for those who hadn't brought them. We waited until all the women were gathered there. It was about 20 000 of us altogether!

Then we went up into the place there in front of the buildings, what they call the amphitheatre. It took a long time, maybe nearly two hours or more for all the women to walk up the steps to that place. Some of us had been chosen, Lilian, Helen, Rahima Moosa, myself and some others, eight of us, we took all those petitions that had been signed, piled and piles of them, and we marched up to Strijdom's office to give them to him. The secretary told us that Strijdom was not there and that we were not allowed in anyway because we were black and white together. They said he wasn't there, just like that. But we knew he was just too scared to see us! We walked past the secretary and into his office and we put those pamphlets no his desk, and on the floor, and the room was full of them...

Then we walked outside again and joined the other women who were waiting in the amphitheatre. All the women were quiet. 20 000 women standing there, some with babies on their backs, and so quiet, no noise at all, just waiting. What a sight, so quiet, and so much colour, many women in green, gold and black, and the Indian women in their bright saris! Then Lilian started to speak. She told everyone that the Prime Minister was not there and that he was too scared to see us, but that we left the petitions there for him to see. Then we stood in silence for half an hour. Everyone stood with their hands raised in the salute, silent, and even the babies hardly cried. For half an hour we stood there in the sun. And not a sound. Just the clock striking. Then Lilian started to sing and we all sang with her. I'll never forget the song we sang then. It was a song written especially for the occasion. It was written by a woman from the Free State. It went: 'Wena Strijdom, wa'thint'abafazi, wa'thint'embokotho, uzokufa!' Of course he did die, not long after that. (Ibid 59-60)

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[i] Some of this paper is drawn from a presentation I gave on National Women's Day in Port Elizabeth on 9 August 1996 – the 40th Anniversary of the women's march to Pretoria. It is also based partially on research done for my Honours dissertation, presented as a seminar in PE and written up as a paper for *Agenda* which was never published, entitled 'Womens Resistance in Korsten in the 1950s'; as well as on research for my MA dissertation on working class organization in Port Elizabeth in the 1930s to 1960s, and for my PhD thesis on political participation in Kwazakele township in the 1980s and 1990s.

[ii] This is discussed by Frances Baard in her autobiography, as well as by Govan Mbeki in his unpublished autobiography.