

# The history of women's struggle in southern Africa

Via [LSR](#)

The history of women's struggle in southern Africa is a topic that we need to discuss more in order to rescue the lessons and experiences of these struggles. It was the theme of one of the commissions of the Virtual Marxist University, an event held by the International Socialist Alternative (ASI) that took place in July of this year. Here we bring an account of this debate that included Marxists from all over the world, including South Africa, Nigeria and Brazil.

The introduction was by Carmia, a militant of the Workers and Socialists Party (WASP, ASI's section in South Africa) and ASI, an effort to document the historical struggle of women in this area of the world from a Marxist analysis. In the debate, she also exposed that the African National Congress (ANC) claims a kind of monopoly on the history of struggle in South Africa.

Freedom from apartheid did not solve the issue of racist or sexist discrimination. After all, we know as Marxists, that the struggle to end oppression is necessarily linked to the struggle to end capitalism. Likewise, one cannot ignore, when looking at historical processes, the role of oppressed sectors in democratic and anti-capitalist struggles. The crucial period of the 1980s in South Africa, for example, cannot be properly assessed or understood without addressing the role of women in the struggle against the government as they fought for their own liberation as women and also as workers.

Women like Ray Alexander, Emma Mashinini, and Linda Komape did not play a mere secondary role in the liberation struggle, but were essential in establishing the growth and survival of

workers' organizations during the extreme setbacks. Women had a great impact on the struggles in South Africa in the last century and their organization played a great role in forging solidarity between the races due to women's shared experiences under an extremely patriarchal society.

Historically, the effects of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism have resulted in a strongly patriarchal and misogynistic society. This is exemplified by experiences of women in all ethnicities, as well as the common and customary laws governing South Africa. In both systems, women were considered legal minors. Although the end of Cape slavery in 1838 gave men their freedom, women immediately acquired legal minor status – occupying the same space as children and with no right to work or bodily autonomy. The idea that women were essentially the property of their husbands or male relatives, with no rights to land or custody of their children, legitimized violence against women. They went from being owned by slave owners to being owned by men. Even their labor contracts were dictated by the male authority figure in their lives! This inferior legal status was enshrined in different ways in different laws, until 1984 for white women and 1988 for black women.

Women were also excluded from formal political organization, notably in the NAC, but of course we know that they were not apolitical. They created their own protests and organizations. The first really notable action was the Anti-Pass Campaign of 1913, when black women organized against official regulations that forced them to carry formal employment documentation and restricted their movement.

In this campaign, urban black women refused to carry their passes, burned them in the streets, and marched in protest. Despite multiple arrests, this sparked similar actions across the country and other women began to march, burn their passes, and organize to resist and protest. These struggles succeeded in forcing the government to repeal some of these

restrictions. Later, they also created the Bantu Women's League led by Doctor Charlotte Makgomo.

The quest to have financial independence from husbands and relatives, as well as to get out of abusive low-wage jobs in the domestic sphere, led many women to seek alternatives where they could, such as in the informal sector. The most famous case was the process of distilling and selling alcohol clandestinely. This means of social independence that brought political empowerment to women throughout their lives was a threat to the system that relied heavily on women's subservience to men. Soon the government realized that they could stop women's aspirations for financial independence and social empowerment by establishing their own "legal" municipal drinking places (canteens). They placed strict regulations on home brewing of beer. This was followed by police raids where homes were broken into and destroyed and women were sexually harassed. The women lost their incomes and their husbands spent their wages drinking while funding the profits of the repressive state – which charged 4-5 times more than they did. Taking matters into their own hands, they joined the local branch of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union and resisted. Militant women marched into the cities, raided the canteens, and assaulted male customers. This resulted in some cities issuing brewing licenses to women, but for the most part the regulations and canteens remained.

Women also resisted in the 1930s. They were mainly concerned with pressing social issues that affected the entire community: rents, cost of living, discrimination in the workplace, passes and controls. It was during this period, that Ray Alexander – still a teenager at the time – organized black workers into unions and politicized many women, recruiting them into unions and the South African Communist Party.

In 1948, the National Party came to power and instituted the racialized apartheid system, which triggered another wave of

resistance. In 1954 the South African Women's Federation was founded, which took up issues of concession, equal pay, increased property rights, and racial equality. They also pointed to the fact that this was a struggle of both women and men.

Many other resistance movements occurred. Outrage at these events led to riots and the apartheid regime declared a state of emergency, banning prominent opposition parties such as the CNA and PAC. The banning of political opposition in the 1960s had a severe effect on established women's organizations, which lost prominent members to political imprisonment and exile. However, the issues underpinning the spirit of resistance and anger among women did not disappear.

In this period workers' struggles influenced mass student uprisings, the most famous being the Soweto Uprising in 1976. Many young women joined the armed struggle. But women were also treated as second-class citizens in these spaces. They were forced to use IUDs, in the camps they were sexually harassed, and if they got pregnant they were banned. These movements emphasized an etapist way of dealing with oppression – first the end of apartheid, then the oppression of women.

Between 1979 and 1982, there was the legalization of black unions and, as a result, unionization of black workers doubled. In 1987, the United Democratic Front (UDF) Women's Congress was formed by all women affiliates. It was organized around the principles of the Freedom Charter and the Women's Charter of the 1950s. It also aimed to educate the men in the FDU around the oppression of women.

Defending the patriarchal system was a big element of Apartheid. African, colored, and indigenous women faced racial oppression under the system, as did men. But they also faced issues such as sexual assault and domestic violence, wage inequality, discrimination in the workplace, lack of adequate access to health care and education.

Women played a crucial role in this arena, it was these “domestic issues” that politicized them and brought them into the working class movement.

The struggles after apartheid also had participation from organized women, less around gender and more around class. There was a recognition of the common struggle with men against colonialism and apartheid. In more recent women’s struggles, there is a greater tendency of the influence of identity politics that has limits and has paralyzed the movement to some extent. Still, it was an important turning point for generation of new feminist activists.

We can draw from the last few years more examples of women at the front of the struggles. The full stoppage movement in 2015 with miners’ and students’ struggles had strong participation of women. It was the experience of these struggles that led the more advanced layers to understand that the tactic of paralyzing the economy was essential in the struggle for gender equality. In 2018, the brutal murder of a student in a context of more than 50 feminicides in one month brought thousands of women to the streets.

In South Africa, as around the world, women were the frontline in the fight against Covid. Also immigrant women are another important element in the country. These struggles need to be unified against the attacks of capitalism. Women today have been protagonists in leading the struggles against neoliberalism around the country. In the struggles, women have been leading the fight against the oppressions imposed by pandemic.

We need to draw lessons from these movements and from the inspiring and heroic examples of women in southern Africa. Our struggle has to be international to be able to defeat a capitalism that takes us ever closer to barbarism. Only with class solidarity and internationalism can we build a real socialist alternative and end exploitation and oppression for

all.