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WOMEN IN TWENTIETH CENTURY SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS:
THE FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN, ITS ROOTS,
GROWTH AND DECLINE

A thesis submitted for the
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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

AAC	All African Convention
AME	American Methodist Episcopal (Church)
ANC	African National Congress
ANCWL	African National Congress Women's League
APO	African People's Organisation
COD	Congress of Democrats
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
CYL	Congress Youth League
ICU	Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union
NCAW	National Council of African Women
NCW	National Council of Women
NEC	National Executive Committee
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement
NCC	National Consultative Committee
NIC	Natal Indian Congress
NLL	National Liberation League
PAC	Pan-African Congress
SACPO	South African Coloured People's Organisation
SAIC	South African Indian Congress
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SAP	South African Party
TCC	Transvaal Consultative Committee
TIC	Transvaal Indian Congress
WEAU	Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation

INTRODUCTION

"Strijdom, you have tampered with the
women: you have struck a rock"

- Women's protest song (1956)

In the history of opposition to white supremacist rule in South Africa, the 1950's stand out as a period of intensive legal resistance by black political bodies on an unprecedented mass scale. Undoubtedly, for all its weaknesses and difficulties, the Congress Alliance, with the African National Congress its senior partner, was the major source of opposition faced by the apartheid state in this period. More than is generally realised, however, the 1950's were also a decade of mass political action by black women in South Africa, that section of the population which a 1956 pamphlet aptly described as "the most oppressed, suffering and down-trodden of our people"¹. At the centre of this outburst lay the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), an organisation that was linked to the Congress Alliance.

It is the history of this organisation that forms the subject matter of this thesis. Little historical work has been done on women in South Africa, politically or otherwise: for this reason, the scope of this study is broad and, in addition to material on the history and make-up of the FSAW itself, several chapters have been devoted to background developments to the establishment of the FSAW in 1954. Here what has been concentrated upon has been, firstly, the economic changes restructuring the foundations on which women's subordinate position in 20th Century South Africa rested,

1. FSAW: 'Strijdom ... You have struck a rock', pamphlet, p.1.

and, secondly, the origins and growth of a political consciousness amongst women within the national liberation movement before 1954¹. Because of the vast amount of material covered, the treatment of these topics is necessarily that of an overview, rather than an in-depth study. Hopefully it will suggest areas for further and more detailed research by other historians.

This thesis has been written from the perspective that the varied and changing historical experience of women has been unjustifiably neglected by historians, both here and, up until very recently, elsewhere². The study of history needs to be broadened to incorporate the female world as a legitimate area of research. Such a step will deepen our understanding not only of the position of women - 50 percent of the population - but of the workings of the total society at any one time as well. This does not mean that one can delineate a 'women's history' that forms a separate study from the history of society in general. Women do not form an isolated and homogeneous category that can be studied apart from society as a whole, any more than men do. Just as women need to be drawn into a more equal participation in the economic, social and political institutions of our society, so, too, 'women's history' needs to be integrated into our general histories. Yet at the same time, since women have, by and large, been by-passed by historians and since, moreover, their position in society has been stamped with its own, distinctive features, there is a place for detailed and specialised studies on women, their organisations and the sweep of their experience in these social spheres in which they have been active.

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1. The use and meaning of this term, "national liberation movement" is explained below, p.4.
 2. For a collection of writings on the subject of women and the writing of history, see B.A. Carroll (ed.): Liberating Women's History.

The reasons why women have been overlooked by South African historians reflect on the subordinate position that they have occupied in society, both historically and currently. Partly, this neglect has been a product of most historians' preoccupation with political and constitutional, rather than social, history. Given their subordinate status within society, as well as their primarily domestic preoccupations, women have generally been excluded from the institutions of political power and, as a result, excluded from much orthodox historiography as well. Partly, however, the neglect of women has been a product of historians' own, often unconscious, bias against women, in itself a product of the very social attitudes that reinforce and perpetuate women's subordinate position within the larger society. This bias has meant that for many historians - female as well as male - women have been, historically, invisible. Either their experiences and activities have not been considered sufficiently important an area of research, or else the presence of women at particular historical junctures has simply not been noticed¹.

Even when women have been politically active, as in the case of the FSAW, for instance, their efforts have generally been ignored or overlooked by researchers when it comes to the writing of history. The anti-pass protests of African women in South Africa in the 1950's (in which the FSAW played a prominent part) were probably the most successful and militant of any resistance campaign mounted at that time. They were also an indication of the degree to which black women of the 1950's were throwing off both traditional and more modern, governmental restraints on their independence and assertiveness. Yet in one of the major general histories of black opposition in South Africa for this time, E. Roux's

1. For a discussion on this notion of the "invisibility" of women, as well as an example of this in operation in Colonial Africa, see J. van Allen: 'Aba riots or the Igbo Women's War?' - Ideology, stratification and the invisibility of women' in Ufahamu, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1975.

study, Time Longer than Rope, the women's anti-pass campaign warrants barely a mention. Roux does not record the foundation of the FSAW in 1954. Even more remarkable, his year-by-year synopsis of major political events with which he concludes his history, does not include the monster anti-pass demonstration by women which took place in August 1956, outside the Union Buildings, Pretoria. This demonstration, which brought together a crowd of women estimated variably at between ten and twenty thousand, from all over the country, was a political highpoint of 1956, not only for the women who took part but for the entire Congress Alliance. Nevertheless, it is not featured in Roux's chronology - an omission which, though glaring, is not altogether surprising.

Because women have been such a neglected area of study, there is thus a dearth of secondary sources dealing with them, of relevance to this thesis. Much of the primary material, too, particularly the official records (government reports and commissions, etc.), treats women very cursorily. Often the information on women is of a negative kind - in many reports women are simply not mentioned at all, from which one can deduce that they were probably not of much interest to the compilers of the reports. The documentation of the FSAW itself is uneven. The existing and very useful collection of FSAW papers, housed in the archives of the South African Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg, consists mostly of papers belonging to the Transvaal region and the National Executive Committee once that was based in Johannesburg, after 1956. The Cape Town papers have not been traced and no record of FSAW activities in the Durban and Port Elizabeth regions appear to exist.

From one point of view, the lack of other historical studies on women makes this a very exciting and rich field in which to work. From another, however, it also adds to the difficulties and demands of one's own research. These are compounded by the general dearth of secondary material on the Congress Alliance in the 1950's as well. There are

several general histories of the period (not all of them freely available in South Africa), but very little in the way of specialised studies. P. Walshe's study on the African National Congress, The Rise of African Nationalism, for instance, stops in 1952.

More serious in its implications for the researcher, access to much of the primary and secondary material that does exist, and is essential for any thorough study of this period, is restricted, or even denied completely, by various regulations and laws operating in this country. Undoubtedly, this has affected the quality of my research. To give but one example, during the course of my work the regulations allowing post-graduate research students access to banned material in public libraries were tightened up. As a result, I was unable to complete reading through all the issues of the newspaper New Age (banned in 1962), which the South African Library in Cape Town holds. Since New Age was the only newspaper to give regular and comprehensive coverage to the affairs of organisations within or linked to the Congress Alliance in the 1950's and early 1960's, this was a major setback for my research.

Furthermore, since this thesis does deal with an area and a period that is still politically sensitive today, certain difficulties have been encountered with the citing and acknowledging of sources. Where possible I have identified my source; occasionally, however, I have been obliged to respect my informant's desire for anonymity. In addition, it is necessary to state that responsibility for all opinions expressed and material used, rests with me alone. Perhaps it also becomes necessary to reaffirm that, despite the undisputed difficulties that do exist to hamper research, this topic and this period generally remain an important area of study, one that is of vital relevance for all of us.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN, 1921 - 1954

"We women have stood and will stand shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk in a common struggle against poverty, race and class discrimination and the evils of the colour bar. As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women, which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination."¹

With these words, the FSAW in 1954 established the two major dimensions of its political outlook and programme. First and foremost, it identified itself completely with the national liberation movement as represented by the Congress Alliance group², aiming at the overthrow of the white supremacist government in South Africa. Since roughly 80% of all South African women were black³, it regarded the removal of the political, economic and social inequalities suffered by blacks as of overriding concern for any broad women's political movement. Second, the FSAW recognised that, apart

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1. From the 'Women's Charter' printed in FSAW: Report of the First National Conference of Women, p.14.
 2. The Congress Alliance was formed in the early 1950's as a political alliance involving the African National Congress, South African Indian Congress, Congress of Democrats, South African Coloured People's Organisation and the South African Congress of Trade Unions. The term "national liberation movement" is how they described themselves and has been accordingly adopted to describe this movement in its broadest terms throughout this thesis. It is recognised that there were groups that stood outside the Alliance who yet would have considered themselves national liberatory organisations, e.g. the Non-European Unity Movement. For want of a convenient term, however, "black opposition" or "black resistance" being inadequate to describe the multi-racial alliance, this term will refer to the Alliance or its predecessors unless otherwise stated.
 3. In 1951 the total population of 12 671 452 was divided as follows: Whites 20,9%; Africans 67,6%; Coloureds 8,7%; Asiatics 2,9% (From: Union Statistics for 50 years, Table A-5).

from inequalities based on colour, women as women suffered severe disabilities on account of their sex. These, too, it wished to overcome.

In terms of its primary commitment to the Congress Alliance, the FSAW must be seen as an offshoot of the national liberation movement. The history of that movement, its origins and development, was the dominant context in which the FSAW took shape. Its emergence in the 1950's was related to the increased tempo of black resistance which had begun to mount during and after the Second World War. The ideas that went into the FSAW had been nurtured from an early period within those organisations which fed into or helped shape the Congress Alliance - the African National Congress (ANC), the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) and certain of the trade unions. At the same time, the emergence of a separate women's organisation within the Congress Alliance cannot be explained simply in the general terms used to account for the radicalisation of black resistance in the post-war period. It also owed much to the specific position that women occupied in society and the changes that this had been undergoing in the decades preceding 1954. Before one can fully understand how and why the FSAW came to take the form it did, when it did, one needs to look more closely at this, the material basis for women's politicisation in the 20th Century.

Accordingly, this first chapter will sketch the major features of the changing position of women in South Africa before 1954 as a preliminary to looking at the political developments that prompted the establishment of the FSAW. No comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing women and their political organisation within South Africa will be offered. Before such a framework can begin to take shape in South African historiography much more work will need to be done on women, both theoretical and empirical and beyond the scope of this thesis. The range of this chapter will be more limited. It will consist firstly of some general perspectives on the position of women in society. Thereafter the

main features and developments that characterised the position of women in South Africa between approximately 1921 and the early 1950's will be outlined¹.

This will provide a basis for analysing the growth of a political consciousness amongst women in those organisations which eventually formed the Congress Alliance, the subject matter for Chapters Two and Three. The emphasis in this present account will be on economic changes and the accelerating rate of urbanisation among women, since these ultimately were the major forces to promote women's politicisation in 20th Century South Africa. Furthermore, since African women equalled some 70% of the total female population and, moreover, formed the bulk of the FSAW's membership, it will be the effects of these processes on their position that will be examined in greatest detail.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN - SOME GENERAL PERSPECTIVES

In 1883 Olive Schreiner, perhaps South Africa's most famous feminist, cried out in frustration:

"But this one thought stands, never goes - if I might but be one of those born in the future, then perhaps to be born a woman will not be to be born branded."²

Some seventy years into the future, when the FSAW was being set up, women were still "branded". In most spheres of

1. The choice of 1921 as a starting point is determined to some extent by the availability of census material. In 1921 the 2nd nation-wide population census took place. The data before then is sketchy and inadequate. The 1921 data itself cannot be considered 100% reliable. However, prior to the 1920's - with the exception of the noteworthy anti-pass campaign in the Orange Free State in 1913/14 - there were few signs of political activity by women which could be linked up to the FSAW: thus, 1921 is an adequate starting point.

2. O. Schreiner: The Story of an African Farm, p.197.

society - social, legal, economic - they occupied a distinct and subordinate position to men. It was this that had prompted the formation of a separate women's movement within the national liberation movement: and this that both handicapped and helped shape the work of that women's movement. Changes and improvements there had been since Schreiner's day, as the following sections will show - the FSAW itself was to some extent a manifestation of this. Nevertheless, the subordinate position of women remained a basic fact about their place within society throughout the period covered by this thesis (roughly 1910 - 1963).

Yet the position of women was more complicated than that. Even though their subordination was general, it was - and is - not possible to talk of women as if they made up a single category of individuals with a common unified experience. A non-linear approach to women's position needs to be adopted.

"... women must not be seen as a homogenous group. Women must be analysed both separately and as part of the social groups, castes or classes to which they belong. In doing so, the nature of these groups, castes and classes will be illuminated."¹

This essential qualification needs to be kept in mind throughout the subsequent discussion. While it is true to say that women, as a sex, occupy a subordinate position to men and that this sex-based division of society means women have areas of experience in common, sex is not the only or even the dominant determinant on a woman's place in society - a statement which the whole history of the FSAW bears out. In societies where the capitalist mode of production is predominant - as it was in South Africa by the beginning of the 20th Century - the basic division of society into conflicting classes has a crucial bearing on the position of women. As a glance at any anthropology textbook will show, the sex-based division of labour in society preceded a class-based one. However, under capitalism this sex-based contradiction is

1. M. Mackintosh: The Study of Women in Society, p.1.

both overshadowed and transformed by the dominant contradiction between the various classes, at its most simplified, that between the owners of the means of production and the workers. Women are distributed throughout the class spectrum and, as the FSAW was to discover, it is this, their different class positions, rather than their shared sex, that has determined their basic and varied political allegiances.

However, because a sex-based division of labour is maintained under capitalism, women do still have some important areas of experience in common. This amounts to more than just a shared inferiority to men within the different and separate strata of society. Thus at all levels, women have shared a similar role as the reproducers and socialisers of children, those responsible for caring for the family. This has stamped some common features on their experience of the world and allowed the development of a kind of broad "women's consciousness". For instance, in 1955 the FSAW issued an appeal to all women to support it. It based its call for solidarity on the theme of motherhood which it saw as constituting a central, unifying experience for women throughout society.

"We are the women who know the joy of having children and the sorrow of losing them. We know the happiness of rearing our children and the sadness caused through illness and ignorance."¹

The manner in which this sex-based division of labour has been incorporated within capitalism has been two-fold. Firstly, as mentioned above, women are responsible for the reproduction of the work force, both on a daily and on a 'generational' level - i.e. looking after their families (including their husbands, fathers - the "workers") on a day-to-day basis, as well as rearing the children, the next generation of workers. "A woman's place is in the home" is thus more than an outdated

1. 'Meeting of Congress of Mothers: Sunday 7th August, 1955'. Treason Trial exhibit G838, p.1, from a speech by Rahima Moosa, Chairlady of the meeting.

cliche. It has been a basic factor in the continued reproduction of capitalist relations of production. Secondly, with the growth of a mature, industrial economy, women have been drawn into the sphere of production in increasing numbers, for the most part as a distinct category of workers. Here they have been used as a source of cheap labour, a situation that the sex-stereotyping of jobs frequently disguises and the view of women as still primarily home-oriented, condones (their wages are just for "extras", wage employment for women is not a lifetime undertaking as it is for men). In addition, because their domestic role continues to be seen as primary, women have also made up a large part of the so-called "reserve army" of labour. In times of economic expansion they are drawn out of their homes into wage employment; in times of recession they can be phased out of employment and channelled back into the home, without seriously disrupting industrial relations in the way that the rise in unemployment among men would.

In both capacities, reproductive and productive, women have served a special, sex-typed role. This the ideological structures of society - the law, schools, the media, etc. - have sought to maintain by treating men and women differently, highlighting women's domestic, supportive role and reinforcing their subordinate status. This does not mean, however, that women's assigned role in society has been without change or contradiction. In particular, women's greater participation in production has promoted their economic independence and shattered their isolation as house-bound mothers¹.

1. This does not mean, as the CPSA assumed, that the key to women's emancipation lay merely in their greater involvement in production. Psychological and ideological barriers were more deeply entrenched than that and could in fact be bolstered up by new transformations of sexual inequalities and the division of labour within production - for instance, by sex-typing particular industries (textiles, food processing) as "women's work" which was less paid, less skilled, lower in status. Nevertheless, direct participation in the wider, non-domestic economy remains an important precondition for any movement aiming to destroy the inferior position of women in society.

Related to this, the growth of towns, the centre of the economic changes transforming society, has also undermined many of the structures previously supporting women's subordinate position. Economic life in town is based on the individual worker rather than the family unit so that the extended patriarchal family of the countryside, and its authority, have been whittled down as a result. Education opportunities are far greater; the range of organisations - political, social, cultural - open to women considerably enlarged. Urban women have thus generally gained in independence and mobility though this has not been a simple inevitable development¹. At the same time, urban life has produced new stresses, new problems which demand new forms of organisation from those existing in the countryside. These developments have, in turn, brought urban women into conflict with an ideology that continues to define them as passive, domestic, apolitical. The various movements in all the advanced capitalist countries in the late 19th and 20th centuries to emancipate women from their position as the "second sex"², have been expressions of such conflict³.

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1. For a detailed sociological study of the complex impact of urbanisation on African women and their traditional status, see K. Little: African women in towns.
 2. The phrase comes from the title of S. de Beauvoir's study on women, The Second Sex, first published in 1949.
 3. Another qualification is required in connection with rural women. The impact of industrialisation and urbanisation has affected the total society, urban and rural. In South Africa the relationship that developed between town and country has been particularly disruptive on the social order of the latter as the subsequent discussion will make clear. Thus rural women have not necessarily been totally isolated from political developments and the pressures on them have, on occasion, led to protests and behaviour which assumes political form. The scope and opportunities for sustained political organisation are far smaller and more tightly contained within traditional limits, however. See for instance J. Yawitch: Natal 1959 - The Women's Protests.

Thus two key factors in the changing position of women in the 20th Century have been the related processes of industrialisation and urbanisation. In South Africa, too, as the following pages will show, these have been crucial determinants in shaping the growth of a political consciousness amongst women.

In South Africa, the above general features of the position of women in society have assumed specific forms which have provided a particular slant to the way in which women have become politicised. This will become clearer in the subsequent discussion; here it is probably useful to summarise briefly the major distinctive features as they affected women.

The first and most glaring of these is that the broad divisions of society along class lines have been further compounded by cleavages based on colour and ethnic considerations - 'race' in the popular terminology. The broad polarity between white and black in society has corresponded roughly, but not entirely to those of class. The bulk of the working class and all the peasantry have been black, the bourgeoisie almost exclusively white. Yet here, too, the actual distribution of the different groups among the different classes has been complex. There was at no stage a simple homogeneity of class position amongst whites or blacks or even within each dominated racial group. The experience of a daughter of a "poor-white" bywoner struggling to find employment in a factory in the 1920's was far removed from that of the wife of a mining magnate or one of the handful of women doctors practising at the same time. A rural tribeswoman had little in common with a shebeen-queen or nurse in the urban locations.

Recent work on the relationship between class and 'race' in South Africa has begun to show how racism has been manipulated in the interests of the capitalist state, particularly in underpinning a cheap black labour force and winning to the

state the allegiance of almost the entire white population group¹. Colour consciousness and ethnic divisions have formed a basic part of the ideologies of successive governments since Union in 1910, a fact which has tended to blur the economic realities which underly them. One effect of this has been to obscure the existence of class divisions within each of the four so-called 'races'. The division into 'Coloured'² and Asian (mostly Indian) groups has corresponded to, and perpetuated, real differences in political, economic and legal status as well as culture, which historically have obstructed the development of political unity based simply on their common blackness, amongst them.

The implications of the above for the growth of a women's movement in South Africa have been profound. White women have been separated from black by a very wide gulf, one located in the basic structures of white supremacy. For most women this racial divide has cut through any experience of common womanhood they might share. Furthermore, for the majority of women who are black, the disabilities they suffer as blacks rather than as women have been felt to press most heavily upon them. At the same time, the experience of their 'blackness' could vary considerably among different sections of black women.

Very clearly, the colour stratification of society has informed the manner in which women have participated in the economy. Here the link between class and 'race' as outlined above can be seen to have had a diversifying effect on women's economic position with far-reaching repercussions on their political outlook. For instance, within manufacturing during the course of the 20th Century, upward job mobility by women took place

1. See for instance M. Legassick: Ideology and legislation of the post-1948 South African Government.

2. Since 'Coloured' is not a neutral 'scientific' term but has strong political connotations, I have chosen to place it in inverted commas throughout this thesis.

on colour lines. Initially white women formed the bulk of the female industrial labour force. Then, as more and more women were proletarianised and drawn into the labour force, the white women tended to move up the scale into clerical and administrative work. A sexual hierarchy between male and female labour was still maintained - and so was the racial hierarchy of white over black.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, women's reproductive function has remained fundamental throughout the 20th Century. Here too, this has been structured on distinct lines. A major divide has existed between non-African women whose reproductive role has been located within the dominant capitalist sector of society, and African women. Until the late 1940's, the majority of African women (who formed close on 70% of the female population in South Africa) were living in the tribal, pre-capitalist societies of the so-called 'Native Reserves'. Their reproductive role within capitalism was thus located primarily in the pre-capitalist reserve economies, with crucial implications for their position in the wider society.

The maintenance of and dominance over the pre-capitalist reserve economies was a major feature of the growth of capitalism in South Africa. The industrial revolution of the late 19th Century was based largely on the use of cheap black migrant labour flowing from the subsistence economies of the African reserve areas to the dominant capitalist sector in so-called 'white' South Africa, and back. This base that the worker retained in the reserve economy meant an enormous saving for the capitalist sector, on wages and in the social services of the state in general. Because his family could eke out an existence in the reserves, the worker could be paid a single man's wages while the young, the old, the sick and disabled were cared for by the community 'back home'. Until the 1940's (by which stage their economic resources were more or less exhausted), the reserves were the main

location for the reproduction of South Africa's cheap (black) labour force¹.

The effects of this on the position of African women (and ultimately on the forms of political organisation that developed amongst women generally) were profound. The maintenance of the reserve economy and hence of the tribal institutions which reproduced it, became priorities for the state in the early years of the century. Within the tribal economy women had always taken an active part but with the expansion of the migrant labour system this grew enormously, so that they came to bear the main brunt of keeping the subsistence economy operating.

The state was therefore not anxious to see a widespread migration of women from the reserves to the towns. At the same time it also had a vested interest in preserving women's traditional junior role within the African family, since this was one of the basic institutions of tribal society. This was accordingly entrenched in the system of customary law applied to Africans. Under it women were deemed perpetual minors, always under the guardianship of their nearest male relative, regardless of their age, marital status or any other consideration. These factors combined to isolate a major sector of African women from the main radicalising forces affecting women - urbanisation, industrialisation - until well into the 20th Century.

By the 1940's, however, the ability of the pre-capitalist sector to function as a reproductive base for migrant labour had largely broken down, under the impact of sustained contact

1. This thesis was first developed by H. Wolpe in an article 'Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa', which appeared in 1972. Although his argument has been criticised and revised subsequently (see for instance M. Morris: Apartheid, Agriculture and the State: The Farm Labour Question) it seems to me that his approach offers a very useful starting point for analysing the reproductive role of African women in the reserves. See below, p. 48.

with the dominant capitalist sector. One index of this breakdown lay in the increasing number of African women migrating from the reserves to the towns. This had important consequences on the attitude of the state towards African women. As the institutions of tribal society fell into greater disarray, it came to play a more direct and coercive role in maintaining the migrant labour system. The apartheid state's increased formal control over African women's mobility after 1948, in the form of refined urban influx control measures and passes was, at least in part, an expression of this.¹

Thus, the position of women in South Africa has been far from uniform: the nature of the cleavages among them is complex. The specific interaction of sex, class and 'race' has taken different forms for different women at various times. It is this interaction that has defined their shifting, diverse positions and thus, ultimately, determined their political organisation.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY 1920's

In 1921, the year of the second Union-wide census of the whole population, the lives of most women were bounded by their domestic responsibilities and defined mainly in terms of their role within the family. Few women were working outside the home; their direct contact with the public sphere of the economy and politics was very limited.

At that stage most women were living a rural existence, under conditions which did not immediately challenge this position. The urban population for the Union as a whole was only 28% of the total². Because of the migrant labour system, the percentage of women living in the towns was even less. The bulk of the rural population were African and the disparity

1. See below pp.47-50 for a fuller discussion on the significance of pass legislation for women.

2. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-10.

between the proportions of African and non-African women living in the towns was very marked. Thus, while between 50 and 60% of the white, 'Coloured' and Asiatic groups (who together made up a little over 30% of the total population) were classified as urban, only 14% of Africans - and less than 7% of African women (approximately 147 000) - were living in the urban areas in 1921.¹ African women, by far the largest racial group among women, were thus the least urbanised of any sex-race category.

A further crucial difference between Africans and non-Africans in the urban areas related to the sex ratio within each group. Amongst urban non-Africans this ratio was more or less equally balanced between males and females. Amongst Africans, however, it was heavily distorted as a result of the migrant labour system so that African men outnumbered women by approximately three to one in the towns. The greatest disparity between men and women was found on the Rand where the masculinity rate (males per 100 females) was a staggering 863 in 1921 - almost 9 males to every female. This figure was followed by that of Durban (624) and then Cape Town (389)². The three largest urban centres, therefore, had the smallest proportion of women in their populations. Since it was in the larger towns that political activity was most developed and the incipient struggle by blacks for political rights most firmly based, this was a significant brake on the momentum of African women's politicisation at the time.

In the 1920's, then, African women by and large occupied a distinct place in society compared to other women. The majority of them - just over 58% of their total in 1921 - were living

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1. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-10, S. van der Horst: Women as an economic force in Southern Africa, p.57.
 2. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.14, Table 16.

in the so-called Native Reserves under tribal conditions¹. These women constituted almost 40% of the total female population in South Africa at the time. The relationship of the pre-capitalist reserve economy to the dominant capitalist economy, as well as the reproductive role of women within the reserves, has already been outlined. As more and more men from the reserves were sucked up into the migrant labour machine, the women left behind were coming to play an increasingly important part in keeping the reserve economy functioning and thereby reproducing the supply of migrant workers. Already the obverse of the situation in the towns prevailed - in the reserves women outnumbered men. The 1921 census returns showed 1 345 421 female as opposed to 1 036 856 male 'peasants' (a blanket term that was used to describe all Africans living in the reserves at the time)². This preponderance was most marked at the most productive age levels, i.e. between 15 and 60 years of age.

Life in the reserves was tough and rooted in traditional customs and values. Dora Tamana, a leading ANC and FSAW activist in Cape Town in the late 1940's and 1950's, grew up in the Transkei in the early years of the century. From her description of her childhood³, a picture emerges of an austere, isolated existence that could be duplicated in its broad outlines many times over to describe the general

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1. Although a detailed breakdown of the distribution of the rural African population between white farms and 'Native Areas' is not available before 1936, in 1921 all African females living in the reserves were classified as peasants. This figure (1 345 421) in the occupations census amounts to just over 58% of the total African female population. Union Statistics for 50 years, Tables A-5, A-33. (There is a slight discrepancy between the total African female population as given in Table A-5 - 2 315 286 - and Table A-33 - 2 315 416).
 2. Ibid., A-33. These figures actually conceal the extent of the excess of adult women over men since children were included in the peasant classification in 1921 and the sex ratio amongst them would have been balanced.
 3. The following account is based on interviews with her over several months.

conditions prevailing in those areas. The nearest town, Idutywa, was three to four hours walk away - there were no buses and such roads as there were, were extremely rough. In Hlobo, her village, medical facilities of any sort were non-existent. There was a two-room mission school which catered up to Std. 6. Her father worked a small allotment on which she and her four sisters helped before and after school. Although she describes her family as having been poor, there were other families she remembers who had no fields at all. The nearest water for the family was a spring about half a mile away. To this, Dora and her sisters would make several trips a day; during summer when vegetables needed watering, the trips would become more frequent. Into this isolated community, developments in the outside world barely penetrated - the establishment of Union in 1910, the Land Act of 1913, the coming of the First World War were distant, hazy events, if known about at all. As she recalls it, there were "no politics" at that time.

Thus the position of African women in 1921 was still broadly contained within traditional tribal limits. However, already there were signs of contradiction. The system of migrant labour, which depended on the preservation of the reserves as a subsistence base, was in fact undermining the very basis of tribal society. In the reserves women were being obliged to assume an increasing degree of de facto, if not de jure responsibility and authority as heads of households. The sexual imbalance in both town and country (one of the most distinguishing features of African family life in the 20th Century) was undermining the stability and organisation of the traditional family structure. Already, too, women were showing signs of breaking away from the oppressive conditions in the reserves and moving to the urban areas. In the early 1920's there were not yet any restrictions on the mobility of African women (unlike men), largely because their townward migration was on so small a scale. Thus in the ten years between 1911 and 1921 the percentage of women in

the African urban population had risen from 19% to 25%¹. As yet the destructive effect of these developments on the traditional position of African women was barely noticeable, but pressure on such institutions as marriage and the family was beginning to mount.

Outside the reserves, women's lifestyles and economic opportunities presented a more diversified picture in the early 1920's. But here too, women's domestic role was still clearly paramount. At this stage the number of women "economically active" was very small. Most non-African women were classified as dependants occupied with "household duties" in the 1921 census - only approximately 23% of all 'Coloured', Asiatic and white women over the age of 15 years were in the economically active category, compared to 92,4% of the same sample of men². The available figures for African women are not strictly comparable since no distinction was made as to age in enumerating those employed. Furthermore, as we have seen, all African females in the reserves were classified as peasants and included within the economically active category. Once this figure is excluded, then a mere 10 or 11% of African women were to be found in wage employment.

Within the sphere of "gainful occupation", women were clustered in the least paid, least skilled jobs. In most cases these jobs were merely an extension of their domestic work into the public wage sphere. The largest single area of employment was domestic service - fully 56% of all female workers

1. S. van der Horst, op.cit., p.57.

2. In terms of numbers, economically active white women outnumbered 'Coloured', but the proportion of 'Coloured' women working was the highest among the four race groups, at 37,4%. White women followed with 19,2% economically active. Asian women, numbering a mere 4 368 or 12,6% of their total 15 years and older, were an insignificant fraction of the female labour force. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-2.

fell within the service category, almost all of them as domestic workers¹. For black women, the predominance of domestic work was especially marked. Almost 65% of all African women workers and 85% of 'Coloured' were in service².

After domestic work, the next largest area of employment for women was in agriculture which accounted for close on 19% of the female labour force³. This figure excludes peasants. Agriculture was virtually the only area of employment for women, white and black, in the so-called 'white' countryside outside of the reserves. Even so, relatively few women were employed in it. In 1921, 66 868 African women were returned as farm workers which, compared to other categories of employment, was a large figure⁴. Nevertheless, this amounted to only 8% of the total African female population then living outside the reserves and urban areas⁵. At that stage, labour tenancy was the chief form of labour on most of the country's white farms. According to the Native Farm Labour Committee Report

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1. Thus 12 006 whites out of a total of 12 255 white service workers were in "personal and otherservice". Similarly 162 905 African women out of a total of 163 009 service workers were domestic service workers. Unfortunately the figures for 'Coloured' and Asiatic service workers were not defined in detail. From Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables A-30, A-31, A-32.
 2. Calculated from figures for service workers and "economically" active women, Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables A-31, A-33.
 3. Calculated from figures for 'Agricultural Workers' excluding the 'peasant' category amongst African women, Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables A-30, A-31, A-32, A-33.
 4. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-33.
 5. Calculated from figures for the total of African women in the country, less the 'peasant' category and the total number of African female farm workers, Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-33.

of 1937-1939, the female members of a labour tenant's family did not generally participate regularly in farm labour, but rather on a casual or part-time basis¹. Here, too, the major function of women on farms would seem to have been reproductive - rearing and caring for the present and future generations of farm workers.

The third most important area of employment for women was in industry (accounting for approximately 7% of the total female labour force in 1921). In the sphere of manufacturing, women as yet made up only a small percentage of the total labour force - 12% in 1924/25². However, with the take-off of secondary industry at this time, boosted by the First World War and later the protectionist policies adopted by the Pact Government after 1924, this was to become an area of growing importance. At this stage, the largest single source of female employment in industry was young Afrikaner girls who were streaming to town from the countryside to escape the rural poverty and depression into which a large section of the white population had sunk. Writing in 1932, the Carnegie Commission on the 'poor white problem' referred specifically to the employment possibilities for girls in the towns as an incentive for their townward migration.

"The earning possibilities of the children, more particularly the girls, play an important part, especially in the drift to the larger cities, for in the country the daughter of a bywoner is seldom able to contribute anything to the family income."³

In 1924/25 roughly half the female manufacturing labour force were white, predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, with 'Coloured' women accounting for almost all the black women⁴. African

1. Report of the Native Farm Labour Committee, 1937-39, p.37.

2. S. van der Horst, *op.cit.*, p.56.

3. Quoted by D. Welsh: 'The Growth of Towns', in the Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. II, p.200.

4. S. van der Horst, *op.cit.*, p.56.

and Asian women were barely represented in manufacturing at all. Thus in the earliest trade unions among women, white Afrikaner women dominated. The Garment Workers Union, which is dealt with in subsequent chapters, was a notable example of this¹.

Sex-typing of manufacturing jobs was already clearly visible. In 1923/24, 86,4% of all white women employed in industry were to be found in four areas - the textile and clothing industries; food, drink and tobacco industries; books and printing; the leather industry². The clothing industry was already the most important area of female industrial employment and rapidly growing more so.

Conditions of female employment were generally extremely poor - low wages, long hours and inadequate facilities were the norm. The contrast between the reality of how women were treated in industry and popular stereotypes of women as the fair and weaker sex, chivalry and suchlike, was a harsh (and instructive) one³. The trade union movement was only just beginning to get under way. The new female recruits to industry were mostly ignorant, unsophisticated newcomers to city life, at the mercy of their employers. A garment worker's description of working conditions in the immediate post-Union period was still applicable in the 1920's.

1. See p.97.

2. Calculated from figures supplied by the Report of the Carnegie Commission, Vol. 1, p.214.

3. Olive Schreiner sharply exposed the blindness or hypocrisy that characterised so much of the ideology of chivalry in Chapter VI of her study Women and Labour (1911). For instance "... at the present day, when probably more than half the world's most laborious and illpaid labour is still performed by women, from tea-pickers and cocoa tenders in India and the islands, to the washerwomen, cooks and drudging labouring men's wives ... it is somewhat difficult to reply with gravity to the assertion, "Let woman be content to be the 'Divine Child'Bearer' and ask no more"." (p.200).

"At the beginning of 1911 I arrived in Johannes-
burg and obtained employment through a school
friend ... she found me a job in a small work-
shop where she was a tailoress. I started at
10 shillings a week. The hours were from 7am
to 6pm daily, with an hour for lunch, and 7am
to 12noon on Saturdays. The workshop was
terribly over-crowded and hot ... Very often,
we had to take work home and sit up late at
night finishing it. For this we received no
pay."¹

The fourth category of employment for women, that of 'pro-
fessional and technical' in the words of the census report,
accounted for a mere 5,8% of the total female labour force
in 1921².

Here the general features of women's employment - sex-typing
of jobs, lower status, less specialised, etc. - were all
apparent as well. Teaching and nursing, in many ways ex-
tensions of women's maternal role, were by far the largest
areas of employment in this field. No detailed breakdown
of the 'professional and technical' category was made for
black women, but amongst whites, out of a total of 20 341
women returned in this group, fully 14 035 were 'professors
and teachers' and 4 558 'medical'³. Women were almost
completely absent from any of the more specialised, high
status professions. In 1921 there were only thirty-five
white women 'physicians, surgeons, medical practitioners',
no female architects, no engineers, chartered accountants,
barristers or solicitors⁴. Until 1923 legislation actually
prohibited women from practising law⁵. The gulf separating

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1. Quoted in D. Welsh, op.cit., p.200.
 2. Calculated from figures for 'Professional and technical
workers', Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables A-30,
A-31, A-32, A-33.
 3. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-30.
 4. Third Census of the Population of the Union of South
Africa, 1921, Part 6, U.G. 37-1925.
 5. This situation was rectified by the passage of the
Women's Legal Practitioners Act, No. 7 of 1923.

white women from black was extremely marked in the professional category with white women, less than a quarter of the female population, greatly outnumbering black. (The comparable figures were 20 341 white women to 3 160 black.) In this connection, the ranking of occupational categories for white and black women revealed clearly how race and class mediated with sex to assign women different places in society. While almost all women were found in sex-typed employment, white women were concentrated in the more skilled and better paid jobs within this division. For them the ranking of occupational categories was first, professional - technical, followed by clerical work, service and then industry. For black women, service, then agriculture and then, trailing a long way behind, industry were the three most important areas of employment.

Overall, then, the economic opportunities open to women in 1921 were still very restricted. However, this position was far from being static. Manufacturing industry, as already mentioned, was just beginning to get established. The demand for female labour, particularly in the textile industry, was on the increase. Already in the ten years that had elapsed since the first population census for the Union, in 1911, the pattern of female employment had begun to show signs of change. Between 1911 and 1921 clerical and typing work had outstripped teaching as the largest area of white female employment, saleswomen had become a considerably more important group than previously and several new jobs employing appreciable numbers of women had appeared - waitress, tailor, machinist, telephonist¹. Prejudice against women in the professions showed a few signs of being on the wane, the 1923 Act which enabled women to practice law being one such indication.

1. See my Honours essay, The Woman's Suffrage Movement in S.A. pp.69-80, for a fuller account of the changing economic position of white women before 1930.

These developments would have far-reaching implications for the position of women. As yet, however, there was, outside of the tiny and racist suffrage movement, little public debate on established assumptions of male superiority. Thus both the legal and educational systems were geared towards perpetuating the domestic and subordinate status of women. Two systems of civil law operated in South Africa, Roman-Dutch, the general law of the land, and tribal or customary law. This was applied by special Native Courts to the African population in matters falling outside the scope of Roman-Dutch law (for instance, lobola suits). Both systems were imbued with a strongly patriarchal system of values. Customary law, however, an important mechanism for maintaining tribalism and tribal institutions, was far harsher in the restrictions it imposed on African women than Roman-Dutch.

Under Roman-Dutch law, women became legal minors upon marriage. Unless an ante-nuptial contract was signed, marital power was vested in the husband¹. The father was the legal guardian of all legitimate children; in the eyes of the law it was the husband who had the right to decide on the place of domicile of a married couple. Thus a woman who refused to comply with her husband's wishes about where they should stay was technically guilty of desertion. However, single women over the age of 21 or widowed and divorced women enjoyed the same legal status as men.

Within tribal society women had traditionally occupied a junior position in the basic unit of that society, the patriarchal and extended family. This position white jurists and courts had entrenched in their codification and interpretation of tribal laws during the course of the 19th Century, both

1. By virtue of 'marital power' the husband became legal guardian of his wife, allowing him, inter alia, to exercise sole control over their joint estate. For an account of the legal disabilities suffered by women and the campaign organised against them, see B. Solomon: Time Remembered, ch.19.

exaggerating and ossifying the inferior status of women in the process. The Natal Code of Law of 1891 was the most glaring example of this - "The code stereotypes a concept of feminine inferiority, unknown to the traditional society and burdens women in Natal with disabilities that they do not suffer in other provinces", commented H.J. Simons in his study on the legal status of African women¹.

The system of customary law in the early 1920's was confused and confusing, varying from province to province, a legacy of the days before Union. It was not till the passage of the Native Administration Act in 1927 that a more uniform system was imposed on the tribal law courts throughout the country. Far from modernising the legal status of African women to conform with the decay of tribal society, the 1927 legislation endorsed the above conservative 19th Century views on their inferior status. Under customary law, women were deemed perpetual minors - in other words, at no stage could a woman escape the guardianship of her nearest male relative, whether father, husband or son. In the 1920's very few women qualified for exemption from these provisions. At that stage, with the vast majority of African women still living in the rural areas, the contradictions between their subordinate legal status and the demands of a modern, industrial society were not yet so acute. However, during the course of the 20th Century, their inferior legal status was to become a tremendous handicap in dealing with a rapidly changing society. The fact that the state continued to uphold women's inferior status reflected the importance that it attached to maintaining their subordinate position and the traditional tribal structures.

In the field of education, fewer girls than boys attended school, the gap between their enrolment figures becoming wider the higher up the school system one went. Figures for the 1920's are not available, but in 1933 (the first year

1. H.J. Simons: African Women, their Legal Status in South Africa, p.26.

for separate school enrolment figures for white boys and girls) white boys in school outnumbered white girls by approximately 16 000. In the final year of school, Std. 10, roughly 60% of the total enrolment were boys¹. By the time one reached university level, girls had fallen even further behind. In 1917 almost 75% of the total student population in South Africa was male². In education, the race-class division intervened as well. White women were far more privileged than blacks generally, in the scope and quality of the education they received. Thus in 1935 the total number of all black matriculants amounted to a mere 144, little over 5% of the total for white girls alone³. (Unfortunately no separate figures for black male and female students are available for this period.) In education black women were pushed to the very bottom of the system. As late as 1958 there were only 317 'Coloured' and Asiatic girls in Std. 10 (compared to 1 293 boys for this group) and 215 African girls (compared to 723 boys) - meagre figures indeed⁴.

In general, school curricula were geared towards training girls for domestic or menial occupations. This was reflected in the almost complete absence of women from any of the more specialised professions, other than teaching and nursing. The conventional view on what education for women should aim at was implicit in the following discussion in the Carnegie Commission's Report (1932) on adult education as a means of combatting the 'poor white' problem.

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1. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables E-12, E-13. The figures were 187 317 boys and 170 847 girls (public schools only).
 2. Out of a total student population of 1 616, 412 were women, Official Yearbook of the Union, No. 2, 1918, p.252.
 3. The figures (public schools only) are as follows: 'Coloured' and Asiatic matriculants - 89, African - 55, white girls - 2 544, Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables E-17, E-21 and E-13.
 4. Compiled from Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables E-17, E-18 and E-21.

"The welfare and progress of poor families is influenced by the activities of women to a degree that is not always fully realised. Our measures of social welfare ought therefore to be designed far more with reference to the women and their power of raising the social level of the family. A system of adult education ought to devote earnest attention to the mothers and daughters of indigent families. They should be trained not only in matters of health and nursing and the care of infants, but also in the economics of housekeeping and the upbringing of children."¹

The Commission recommended further steps to promote such skills amongst women "in addition to the ordinary activities of schools and churches"². Such limited notions on what the proper scope of education for women should be, were so deeply entrenched that in the Native Reserves, despite the fact that to an ever-increasing extent most of the farming was carried out by women, the few agricultural colleges that did exist were for men only³.

In the early 1920's the subordinate position of women extended to the political field as well, as the following chapter will make clear. This was both a reflection of their inferior status in society, and a factor in perpetuating it. No women yet had the vote - in this respect they were classified on the same plane as children, lunatics and criminals, a fate they shared with most black men as well. The question of women's suffrage had long been on the parliamentary agenda,

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1. Report of the Carnegie Commission, Vol. 5, p.XV.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Thus in the Report of the Department of Native Affairs, 1935-36, the objects of the Fort Cox Agricultural School were described as "to give a thorough, practical and theoretical training in general agriculture and stock farming to young native men, so as to enable them to make better use of their own land or to take up posts as skilled agricultural labourers in the European industry" (p.50). In a similar vein, the Report of the Native Affairs Department, 1919-21, stressed the importance of agricultural training in African high schools "in the case of boys" but only "practical domestic training for girls" (p.22).

however, and by the 1920's, it had divested itself of much of its earlier radical connotations for the white male establishment¹. In 1921 the white Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU) (which, since 1911, had been engaged in a tedious uphill battle to win the vote for white women) presented the Prime Minister, Smuts, with a petition of nearly 54 500 signatures in favour of women's suffrage. His reply showed that while he accepted the idea of the eventual enfranchisement of women, it was by no means a matter of urgency - "If it does not win this session, it may win the next session, or the session after"². In the next decade, with the principle generally conceded, the women's suffrage debate came to centre more and more upon whether black women should be enfranchised or not. The history of the women's suffrage movement in South Africa represents in microcosm the pressures working against the establishment of a universal women's movement in a society so rigidly stratified on colour lines. When the Women's Enfranchisement Act was finally passed in 1930, black women were excluded from its definition of "women"; a further wedge between black and white women was thereby established. Black women in the 1920's did not even have a WEAU to represent their political claims. Amongst the main black political organisations at the time, the idea of votes for women was not even discussed. These organisations were preoccupied with trying to defend the limited and precarious political rights still enjoyed by a tiny minority of blacks in the Cape: women's rights were not an issue. The 1919 constitution of the ANC was completely unselfconscious in its assumption of politics as a masculine field. In terms of this constitution women could be auxiliary members of the ANC only, without voting rights. Their main function was seen to lie in catering for conferences. It was not until 1943, over 20 years later, that this prohibition on women's active participation in the ANC would be removed³.

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1. C. Walker: The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa.
 2. *Ibid.*, p.48.
 3. The history of this process is developed in subsequent chapters.

Thus, overall, the position of women in the 1920's was one still rooted in the home, largely isolated from full and direct participation in the public world beyond the family. However, already industrialisation and, linked to this, the growth of towns had begun to erode the foundations of women's isolation. Changes, both in the place they occupied in society and their attitude towards that, were on the way.

DEVELOPMENTS BY THE TIME OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the fifteen years that intervened between 1921 and the third general population census in 1936 both these trends of urbanisation and industrialisation became more marked. Women made advances on a number of fronts. They were still defined primarily in terms of their family and their domestic responsibilities, but the boundaries of the female world were being pushed back to incorporate other areas of activity as well. The passage of the Women's Enfranchisement Act in 1930 was one sign that their position in society was being reassessed to some extent. White women were finally awarded their political majority, though not without a strong rear-guard action from those who saw the Act as a violation of the fundamental laws of nature. (For one member of Parliament, the question "Why are women without votes?" was on a par with the question "Why are women without beards?"¹.) The deliberate exclusion of black women from the terms of the Act highlighted the widening gap in opportunities and interests between white and black women. This gap, economic developments were continuing to maintain.

One of the most important catalysts for change in the position of women during the 20th Century was, it has been argued, the increasing rate of urbanisation amongst them. By 1936 the urban population had risen to almost one third of the total population². All race groups shared in this increase.

1. House of Assembly Debates, 1930, col. 1692.

2. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-10.

Amongst whites the flow to the towns of the rural poor continued at a rapid rate throughout the 20's and 30's. In 1932 the Carnegie Commission noted the effects of urban life on these new immigrants:

"In the larger towns and especially in the cities a process of adaptation is taking place among the younger generation of rural immigrants, since life in the cities gives them the opportunity of becoming skilled workers."¹

These new economic opportunities gave women a degree of independence and a status within their families that was previously unheard of - "cases are by no means rare of whole families subsisting on the earnings of working girls"².

These women continued to form the bulk of the female industrial labour force throughout this period. Conditions of work were slow to improve, despite the growth of trade unionism amongst the women workers. A description made by Katie Viljoen (later a leading trade unionist) of work conditions she encountered in a Johannesburg clothing factory in 1932, does not differ very much from the account already quoted of conditions in 1911.

"I left the house at five thirty as I had to walk a distance of about four miles (she could not afford the tram fare on £1 per week) ... For a month I walked to and from work every day but these long journeys became unbearable. The work was really slave driving. We started at 7 am and finished at 6 pm. I could not send anything home to my parents, as my total earnings just covered my board and lodging."³

Later, she found other work at £1.10s a week which she budgeted as follows:

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1. Report of the Carnegie Commission, Vol. 1, p.xiii.
 2. Ibid., p.220.
 3. Quoted in E.S. Sachs: Rebels' Daughters, p.46.

"Rent 17s6d per week, saving up for new clothes 7s6d per week, 10s a month sent my parents. The balance of 2s6d a week had to be sufficient for food. Once a week I used to buy a loaf of bread for 6d and a pound of butter at 1s8d."¹

The balance was thus 2d per week - not even enough to join the union whose weekly subscription was 6d.

For white immigrants to the city the shock of adjusting to the alien conditions of urban life was cushioned to a large extent by vigorous state action aimed at combatting the so-called 'poor white problem'. Jobs, often protected against competition from black workers, were created for them and attempts made to raise and protect their living standards. For blacks no such mediation was forthcoming. For them the transition to urban life was often a violent one.

The movement of African women away from the rural areas to the towns had become noticeable by the late 1930's. In 1936 the majority of African women (52,6%) were still living in the 'Native Areas' but both the reserves and the 'white' countryside showed a decrease in the proportion of women living in them compared to 1921². The percentage of African women living in towns had risen by 4% to just under 11% of their total³; the urban masculinity rate among Africans had dropped from 299 to 220⁴. Thus although African women were still a tiny fraction of the urban population, the trend towards their increased urbanisation was unmistakable.

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1. Quoted in E. Sachs: op.cit.
 2. Based on figures supplied by the Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, Table 9, p.8.
 3. Based on figures supplied by S. van der Horst, op.cit., p.57 and Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-5.
 4. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, Table 16, p.14.

Already the potentially disruptive effect of their large-scale townward migration on the reproductive role of the reserves had been officially noted and attempts made to curb it. Speaking in Parliament in 1937, the Minister of Native Affairs, Grobler, referred to the influx of Africans to the towns as:

"one of the things that is undermining the morality and family life of the natives ... It not only weakens tribal and parental control, but there is a tendency for these young men and women to become permanent town dwellers. The parents are left behind uncared for, and for the most part they never hear again of these natives ..."¹

Before 1930 there were no controls on African women moving to the urban areas. They were not included in the terms of the 1923 Urban Areas Act, an act which has been described as containing the "skeleton" of all subsequent urban areas legislation². This can be seen as a sign of the insignificance of their presence in the urban areas at that stage. Then, in 1930 and again in 1937, the first legislative attempts to stem the tide of African women entering the urban areas were made. In 1930 municipalities were empowered to prohibit African women from entering their area without their prior permission - though not if the woman's husband or father had been working there for a minimum of two years and, a damning proviso, accommodation was available. A woman's right to live in town was thus seen as dependent on her relationship to a resident male - she could have no independent claim to living there. From 1937 women wishing to travel to town were required to obtain the permission of the magistrate in their home districts in addition to that of the local urban authority. However, since women, unlike men, were exempt from the compulsory carrying of passes, the enforcement of both acts was difficult and generally ineffective.

1. House of Assembly Debates, 1937, col. 4219.

2. R. Davenport: 'African Townsmen: South African Natives (Urban Areas) Legislation through the years', p.99.

Female migration to the towns continued to grow. The Keiskammahcek Rural Survey estimated that in that one district of the Ciskei at least, the rate of women migrating to towns was increasing faster than that of men from about 1936 (though their numbers were still far less)¹.

The impact of township life on the traditional African family was generally extremely destructive. Most of the available data refers to the post-war period but it is clear that the developments which later sociologists and anthropologists would comment on, were noted in the pre-war years. The effects of the migrant labour system and the unequal sex-ratios in both town and country, the acute poverty, insecurity and lack of political rights of township residents combined to undermine the structure of the family without creating the basis on which new and viable alternatives could be built. Illegitimacy was on the rise. Marriage was becoming increasingly less stable, less binding. While many of the traditional restraints on female independence were crumbling, their status was riddled with contradiction and ambiguity. Even though the decline of the traditional family structure meant women were often de facto heads of households, the law continued to define them as minors. Patriarchal values were still deeply entrenched within the African community. (Some 20 years later, in reply to an opinion poll conducted by Drum on the question of equal rights for women, a majority of its respondents were against such equality².) Women had very little security of tenure on housing compared to men and employment opportunities for them outside of domestic service were scant. Frequently only through illicit trading, in prostitution or drink, or by precarious and marginal occupations such as hawking food or some other commodity could a woman make a living in the townships. Again, the experience of Dora Tamana, living in Queenstown for a while during the 1930's, was in no way unusual or particularly extreme. She used to scrape together a meagre income by fetching thatching grass

1. Keiskammahcek Rural Survey, Vol. II, p.29.

2. Drum, May 1954, see below p. 45.

from the surrounding hills to sell in the locations. One bundle, which took most of the day to gather and sell, would fetch about 1/6. During this time three of her four children died¹.

The impact of urbanisation on African women was clearly not a straightforward liberatory one. While old restraints on their position were being eroded, new and daunting restrictions on their mobility and security were replacing them. The pressures on African women in the towns were enormous. The need for finding a voice to give expression to their frustrations and demands was growing more urgent but the obstacles preventing this from taking a political direction were still considerable. Apart from the handicaps women suffered because they were women, the general level of political activism and organisation amongst Africans generally, at the time, was low. For many women the churches or mutual aid institutions such as 'stokfels' came to fill the gap².

In the economic sphere the pattern of 1921 still prevailed. The largest occupational category for women was still that of housewife or, in the case of women in the reserves, peasant farmer. In both cases their primary importance lay in the reproductive, not productive sphere. Domestic service and agriculture were the largest areas of employment for black women, industry trailing far behind. Notable increases in female employment were taking place in the field of manufacture, however, with white women still far ahead of their black counterparts. As secondary industry continued to expand and diversify, so the demand for female labour expanded as well. In the eight years between 1924/25 and 1932/3, the

1. Interview, 2/10/1977.

2. For a discussion on African women and the church see M. Brandel: Black Women in Search of God. B.G.M. Sundkler: Bantu Prophets in South Africa also contains some references to the scope offered women in the independent African churches. A 'stokfel' is a fund-raising party.

female labour force in manufacturing rose from 12% to 17% of the total force¹. The proportion of white women in this total rose from 6% to 12% while the percentage of black women employed in industry remained roughly on a par with what it had been in the 1920's².

By the second half of the 1930's, however, the dominance of white women in the female industrial labour force had reached its peak and from about 1936 their importance began to decline. Already by 1939/40 their percentage of the total industrial labour force had slipped to 10% (from 12% in 1932/3)³.

This decline continued during and after the war. As the economy expanded, white women were being drawn increasingly into clerical and administrative posts. By 1936 this had become the largest single area of employment amongst them. In the fifteen years between 1923 and 1938/39 their presence in the clerical field doubled from 12% to roughly one quarter of all clerical workers⁴. As white women moved out of factory work, black women began taking their place on the factory floor, a development of major importance in view of the politicising potential of productive work on women. At that stage, mostly 'Coloured' women were involved, less hemmed in by restrictions on their mobility and independence than African women. By the time of the outbreak of the war in 1939, this process had only just begun to get under way. The war and the tremendous expansion that that generated in manufacturing industry gave it an added boost.

1. S. van der Horst, op.cit., p.56.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-8.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN BY THE EARLY 1950's

In any political and economic history of South Africa, the Second World War marks a divide between two different periods. Economically, it encouraged a shift in the structure of the South African economy away from its former dependence on the mining and agricultural sectors, towards a growing dominance by secondary industry. The numbers employed in manufacturing, compared to those of other sectors, rose rapidly and the proportion of black to white workers rose significantly as well¹. Politically (and developments here must be related to these economic changes), the war ushered in a period of growing militancy amongst blacks - the Alexander bus boycott of 1943, the squatter movements on the Rand, the Mineworkers' strike in 1946, the Passive Resistance Campaign launched by the SAIC also in 1946, and, in 1952, the Defiance Campaign organised jointly by the ANC and SAIC were all manifestations of this intensified political activity. In 1948 the National Party won the parliamentary general elections and slowly began to lay the foundations of the apartheid state; thereafter the political scene became polarised more and more sharply between the white supremacist state and its black opposition, centred on the Congress Alliance. Women were swept up, to an increasing extent, in both the economic and political currents of change.

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1. Between 1946 and 1951 the total numbers employed in these three areas showed the following shifts:

	<u>1946</u>	<u>1951</u>
1. Agriculture, forestry, etc.	1 912 939	1 508 642
2. Mining and quarrying	498 326	510 091
3. Manufacturing	359 745	502 100

From Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-2. Within private industry, the percentage of blacks amongst all production workers rose from 69% in 1939/40 to 75% in 1948/49, Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-9.

By 1951, the year of the 5th general census, economic opportunities open to women had become more varied when compared to the situation in 1921. The majority of women were still occupied with domestic responsibilities - only 23,7% of all women (this time the figure includes Africans) were described as "economically active", compared to 91,9% of the same sample of men¹. Furthermore, the largest single group of African women were still to be found living in the reserves, though they no longer formed a majority of all African women. Clearly, women's reproductive role was still paramount. Nevertheless, changes in the forms this assumed were beginning to take shape; women could no longer be defined so exclusively in terms of their domestic occupations.

One sign of this - in 1946, after many years of representation from various women's organisations (the National Council of Women, Die Vroue Federasie, the University Women's Association, Women's Christian Temperance Union²), Parliament finally appointed a commission of enquiry into the legal

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1. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-2. Since this figure includes African women, it is clear that there has been some advance in women "economically active" since 1921. The two groups to show an increase in the percentage of women in employment were the whites (from 19,2% in 1921 to 23,6% in 1951) and African (from 12,9% of those 10 years and older in 1936, to 13,5% of those 15 years and older in 1951). 'Coloured' women remained the largest group of "economically active" women but their percentage had shown little change, being 37,4% in 1921 and 37,5% in 1951. Asian women showed an actual decrease, from 12,6% to 7,3% in the same period. This seems to have been attributable mainly to a decline in those employed in agriculture, from 1 806 in 1921 to 773 in 1951.
 2. B. Solomon: Time Remembered, p.185. These were all white organisations.

disabilities suffered by women. (African customary law was excluded.)¹ The result, again after much delay and prevarication, was the Matrimonial Affairs Act of 1953 which relieved married women of the worst disabilities that their legal status as minors under the guardianship of their husbands had imposed upon them². However, and significantly, this Act did not touch the status of African women under customary law, an area where, as has been already described, women were far worse off than they were under civil law. This was no accident. Despite the degree to which African women were involved in the changes restructuring women's place in society, the state refused to lift the controls exercised over them under customary law. Rather, the move after 1948, was towards greater, not less control. (This is dealt with more fully below.)

Compared to before the war, women were now entering the public sector of employment in increasing numbers. The statistics shows that the increase in general employment was actually occurring at a more rapid rate among black women than black men. Within private industry the rate of increase of African women was faster than that of 'Coloured' women, while both these categories had outstripped the rate of

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1. For an account of the commission, as well as the long struggle involved to get its recommendations enacted, see B. Solomon, op.cit. Bertha Solomon, one of three women members of Parliament at the time, played a leading role in the lengthy struggle to reform the common law provisions with regard to the legal status of married women, so much so, that the Matrimonial Affairs Act was popularly known as "Bertha's Bill" in the press and in Parliament.
 2. To quote B. Solomon, op.cit., p.261: "No longer would a man be able to claim his wife's earnings as a right. Nor sell her tools of trade or seize her damages ... It would be possible now for an innocent wife in divorce to ask for, and get, alimony at the discretion of the courts. The courts could even grant her guardianship as well as custody of her children in a suitable case ...".

increase of the labour force as a whole¹.

Developments already noted in the pre-war period in the composition of the female industrial labour force were more clearly marked. The proportion of white women to black in the female industrial labour force was continuing to decline. In 1939/40 there were still more than twice as many white women as black in private industry. By 1951/52 this predominance had declined to the point where black women just outnumbered white².

Interestingly, the total female labour force in private industry remained more or less constant between these two periods, at approximately 14%. By the beginning of the 1950's, the proportionate increase of black women in private industry was still being counteracted by the proportionate decrease of white female workers. Only during this period, did the percentage of women in the total manufacturing labour

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1. One must stress that here one is talking of the rate of increase - in terms of actual numbers employed, men far exceeded women. Thus between 1939/40 and 1944/45 the following increases in employment in private industry were recorded (the figure in brackets represents the percentage of the total industrial labour force):

	<u>1939/40</u>	<u>1944/45</u>
African men	129 343 (45,7)	204 643 (51,3)
African women	1 254 (,4)	3 154 (,8)
'Coloured' men	26 025 (9,2)	35 109 (8,8)
'Coloured' women	11 263 (4,0)	19 910 (5,0)

From Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-6.

2. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-6.

force begin to rise again, with an accelerating influx of African women into industrial employment.

In the early 1950's the bulk of black women in industry belonged overwhelmingly to the 'Coloured' group. Although African women in industry were increasing at a faster rate than 'Coloured', they still formed a minute fraction of the manufacturing labour force at this time. In the period 1939/40 - 1951/52, the number of 'Coloured' women in private industry rose from 11 263 to 34 372, that of African women from a mere 1 254 to 7 810¹. (Asian women, numbering only 1 474 in this category in 1951/52, remained an insignificant force².) The real take-off for African women entering manufacturing only began during the 1950's, picking up momentum in the 1960's³. The composition of the female industrial labour force had important implications for trade union work amongst black women. 'Coloured' women were clearly a more important area for organisation than African. Since the bulk of the 'Coloured' population lived in the Western Cape, this was the major area of union activity amongst women workers, though the Rand and Port Elizabeth were important centres as well. From the point of view of the FSAW, it was in the Western Cape where the role of the trade unions as politicising agents amongst women was most marked.

A further feature of the pattern of female employment in industry during these years was the continued sex-stereotyping

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. S. van der Horst, *op.cit.*, p.56, provides figures which show the dramatic increase in African women's share in the total manufacturing labour force after 1950. In 1946 and 1951 they accounted for 1%; by 1960 this had doubled to 2% and by 1970 had reached 7%, by which stage they had reached a par with 'Coloured' women.

of jobs. The influx of women workers was still directed primarily into a few areas of manufacturing which corresponded broadly to traditional, domestic occupations for women. Here the clothing and textiles and, to a lesser extent, food industries dominated. In the clothing and textile industry, the total female labour force increased from 17 293 in 1937/38 to 43 527 in 1952. The 1952 figures represented a very large slice of the total female work force in private industry - roughly 50% of a total of 87 049 women¹.

In other spheres of employment, the diversification of jobs for women was greatest for white women. The trend already noted, that of their upward job mobility, was continuing - increasingly white women were being drawn into clerical and sales posts. By 1960 clerical work was by far the largest area of white female employment, while sales work had outstripped industry to rank third after the 'professional and technical' category. For black women, the largest area of employment was still overwhelmingly in the service sector, primarily in private domestic work, where the difficulties of organising, either politically or as workers, were immense².

Although women's reproductive role continued to be primary, by the 1950's this had undergone some significant structural changes. In particular, African women's reproductive function within the reserves had come under enormous strain. By the 1950's it was clear that the reserves were no longer functioning as viable subsistence bases for migrant workers. In 1949 an economic and social survey carried out in the Keiskammahoek district of the Ciskei, the Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, noted that

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1. Census of Industrial Establishments, 1937-1938, Table 2 and Industrial Census, 1951-52, Special Report No. 206, Table 5. The 1952 figure includes footwear workers as well.
 2. Population Census, 1960, Vol. 8, No. 2.

"the dependence of the villagers upon the earnings of their emigrant workers is so great that it would probably be more accurate to say that the economy of the district rests firstly upon the fact that it is a reservoir of labour for the mines and industries of the Union and secondly upon the subsistence farming of those who remain behind."¹

Overpopulated, but with an unnatural preponderance of the young, the old and women, overstocked, eroded and neglected by the state, the reserves were economically exhausted and sunk in acute poverty².

The survey painted a grim picture of what life was like for the 46% of the African female population still living in these areas in the early 1950's.

"By the time a woman has passed the reproductive years she has borne, on the average, 7 children which means that at any given time, 1 in 5 of the youngest and strongest of the female workers

1. Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, Vol. II, p.4-5.

2. The Keiskammahoek Rural Survey calculated that in that one district of the Ciskei, per square mile, there were approximately 53 children and aged to 28 adult workers, of whom only 9 were male, Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, Vol. II, p.139. In addition, it estimated that even in "an exceptionally good year", the district produced only enough food to supply half the nutritional requirements of its inhabitants (op.cit., p.177).

One effect of this - it estimated the infant mortality rate at 453 per 1000 births, while 40% of all children died before the age of 10 (pp.45, 182). This was by no means atypical of the reserves in general. A survey in the Lovedale district in 1940 found that 70% of all babies between 7 and 12 months and 92% of all children between 8 and 11 years were underweight, P. Walshe: The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa, p.301.

is pregnant, and as many have suckling infants. Before the normal housekeeping tasks of cooking, washing and cleaning even begin, the women have usually long distances to go to fetch water in buckets from the rivers; wood is collected and carried in large bundles from the forest; and then the mealies must be stamped and ground, preparatory to their cooking. The trading stations are sometimes miles away ... and the women must walk the distances bringing back the small quantities of tea, coffee, sugar and groceries which their available cash enables them to afford. The huts in which they live are sometimes poorly constructed and always require a certain amount of upkeep."¹

The survey calculated that on an average, women and girls spent one quarter of a 56 hour week on "the wastefully uneconomic tasks of fetching water and wood and stamping and grinding mealies"². For women "burdened with childbearing and household tasks", their work as peasant farmers amounted to the "bare minimum" - on an average only about 10% over the year of a woman's time was spent on the cultivation and harvesting of crops³. Yet women were, more than ever, the mainstay of the reserve agriculture. The 1953/54 annual report of the Department of Native Affairs put the number of African "small farmers" at 2 073 356, of whom over two thirds (1 428 617) were women⁴.

Despite the appearance of unhurried calm and picturesque, tradition-bound life that the reserves presented to casual travellers passing through, reserve society had become increasingly unstable. The migrant labour system involved a constant turnover of the members of a family resident in the reserves. The family itself was in disarray. Marriage was being undermined - many men abandoned their reserve families on moving to town, leaving their wives and children

1. Keiskammahoek Rural Survey, op.cit., p.140.

2. Ibid., p.140-141.

3. Ibid., p.182.

4. Report of the Native Affairs Department, 1953/54, p.10.

to cope as best they could. Illegitimacy was on the increase. The Keiskammahoeck survey found roughly one quarter of all children born in the district were illegitimate; nearly half the mothers interviewed had borne one or more illegitimate children¹. While the rate of female migration was on the increase, the preponderance of adult women over men was enormous. In the 25-29 age group in Keiskammahoeck in 1946, the masculinity rate was a mere 36,1². Furthermore, as more women moved to town, the burden of childcare on those women left behind in the reserves was on the increase as well. Migrant women frequently left their children in the care of older female relatives; sometimes even older children had to bear the responsibility when both parents were away. In Keiskammahoeck in 1936 there were 119,3 children under 9 years of age for every hundred women of childbearing age (15 - 44 years). By 1946, the ratio of children to women in these age-groups had increased to 135,1:100³.

This, then, was the condition of life for nearly one third (31,09%) of all South African women in 1951. Life was a daily struggle for existence at its most basic level. The secure framework of tribal society, marriage and the family had collapsed but little had arisen to take its place. The fund of accumulated frustration, bitterness and despair amongst these women was enormous. Although political organisation in the reserves was difficult - they were too isolated, backward and dominated still by outmoded tribal institutions - the potential for spontaneous outbursts of anger, directed against particular institutions and manifestations of the inhabitants' oppressed living conditions was there. It only needed to be triggered off, as the unrest amongst rural women in the Zeerust district in 1957 against passes and later, in Natal, in 1959, against cattle-dipping stations revealed⁴.

1. Keiskammahoeck Rural Survey, op.cit., p.111.

2. Ibid., p.36.

3. Ibid., p.40, Table 16.

4. See below, pp. 239-243, 256-258.

The mounting rate of urbanisation amongst African women was one indication of the collapse of the pre-capitalist subsistence sector. By 1951 the percentage of African women living in the urban areas had increased to 21,57%¹, more than three times what it had been in 1921. The half-hearted official attempts of the 30's and 40's to curb this flow to the towns had not been particularly successful and the urban female population had been increasing at a more rapid rate than the male. By 1951 the average masculinity rate amongst the urban African population had dropped to 157,5, although the Rand, Durban and Cape Town continued to have a larger excess of males over females than the average².

For the Industrial Legislation Commission of 1951, the declining masculinity rate amongst urban Africans was an indication of the development of a "normal family structure" amongst them³. However, a normal family structure depends on far more than a mere overall improvement in the balance of the sex ratio of a population. The available material suggests that the urban African family, like its rural counterpart, had become far less stable, not more so, by the 1950's.

In the late 1950's, a survey of Africans living in East London revealed marriage amongst them to be in "an uncertain and insecure condition"⁴. While it remained the ideal, it was becoming far less binding and permanent with the number of couples living in extra-legal unions on the increase. In

1. Calculated from figures supplied by the Population Census, 1951, Vol. 1, Table 11(a), pp.94-95.
2. In 1946 the average masculinity rate for the urban areas of the Union as a whole was 186, that of the Rand 275, Durban 271 and Cape Town 223, Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.14. In 1951, the rate for greater Cape Town was given as 193,7 but in Langa, one of the African locations, it was as high as 486 in 1952/53. Wilson and Mafeje: Langa, pp.54.
3. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.13. For the full quotation, see below p.49.
4. Pauw: The Second Generation, p.130.

the towns, illegitimacy was considerably higher than the rate already noted for the reserves. In the East London survey, mentioned above, more than 40% of the children belonging to the women in the sample were illegitimate¹. Such a figure was by no means unusually high for the African townships. In Durban the illegitimacy rate amongst African births between 1955 and 1961 fluctuated between 59 and 64 per 100 births; in Pietermaritzburg in 1960 the comparable figure was 67². The rise in illegitimacy and increased instability of marriages was leading to the emergence of a new form of household, the matrifocal or female-headed household. Thus the East London survey already cited, found 2/5 of its sample households to be headed by women³. In their book on social conditions in Langa, Cape Town (which appeared in 1963), Wilson and Mafeje described female heads of households as "common"⁴. A further index of the declining importance of men in the urban family could be found in its low masculinity rate. In East London, this rate for the total population of the sample households was only 81; when just the population 15 years

1. Pauw: op.cit., p.137.

2. Simons, op.cit., p.221, gives the following approximate figures for the illegitimacy rate per 100 births in these other large towns:

Kingwilliamstown, 1955-1960	40 - 58
Pretoria, 1962	42
Port Elizabeth, 1960-1963	37 - 33
Bloemfontein, 1962	42
Cape Town, 1962	32

Because the register of African births is incomplete, the figures are not reliable, but, argues Simons, "there is no reason to believe that they are an exaggeration. It is more likely women would conceal illegitimate, rather than legitimate, births".

3. Pauw, op.cit., p.146.

4. M. Wilson and A. Mafeje, op.cit., p.79.

and older was taken into account, it dropped to 68¹. (Yet in town, as a whole, men greatly outnumbered women.) Families showed "a strong tendency to lose the father at a relatively early stage"². At the same time, there was a tendency for households to extend in a multi-generational form on the matriline - a woman, her daughters (legitimate or illegitimate) and their daughters.

In this state of flux and uncertainty that surrounded the urban family, the position of women was often contradictory, their status confused. On the one hand women tended to gain in independence and authority. In many cases they were playing the strongest part in holding their families together, an important factor in explaining why the opposition of African women to the pass laws should have been so deeply felt and militant. On the other hand, women's new position was not sanctioned by society. In the eyes of the law they were still subordinate to men, while their right of residence in town was increasingly insecure, especially after 1952 when tighter influx control measures were introduced. Furthermore, within their own community, patriarchal attitudes and values were still deeply entrenched.

"... in spite of structural conditions working towards a matrifocal family structure, traditional values relating to patriarchy and patrilineal kinship ties are still strongly in evidence, even among urban Bantu."³

In 1954 the magazine Drum put the question "Should women have equal rights with men?" to the vote of its readership. Out of 159 replies, 101 readers answered no. The winner of the prize for the best letter said:

1. Pauw, op.cit., p.150.

2. Ibid., p.149.

3. Pauw, op.cit., p.161.

"Let us give them courtesy but no rights. They should continue to carry no passes for they are harmlessly inferior; put on their bonnets everywhere, for it is a shame for a woman to go bare-headed."¹

For women themselves, their own perceptions of their position were often ambivalent. The East London survey already mentioned, recorded the following conversation with a 64 year-old woman, head of a three-generation household, which captures something of the contradictions women were experiencing.

"Q: When a mother lives with her children as you do here in town, what is the custom. Who is taken as head?

A: The son, Makhwenkwe, is the head here ..."

But, later,

"Q: Who really rules all the people in this house?

A: I do, all these things are mine and he (Makhwenkwe) is also mine."²

These ambiguities and ambivalent attitudes would colour the FSAW membership's assessment of the position of women as well. At the same time, the crisis of the urban family would be an area of major concern for it after 1954.

Both the reserves and the white farms were contributing to the increase in the African female urban population. By 1951, the threat this posed to women's reproductive role in both these areas was receiving the attention of the state. Thus the Minister of Native Affairs in 1950:

1. Drum, May 1954. Drum itself is a mirror of such attitudes. Though it carried many serious feature articles and provides a valuable record of the 1950's on both a cultural and political level, its treatment of women is often sexist, preoccupied with them as beauty queens and cover girls.

2. Pauw, op.cit., p.71.

"It is constantly being said that the natives in the cities deteriorate. The undesirable conditions are largely caused by the presence of women who in many cases leave their homes contrary to the wishes of their fathers or guardians and contrary to tribal custom. To my mind there are already too many urbanised blacks who have turned their backs on the tribal customs and I do not intend to assist the process."¹

From this time on, the position of African women became even less secure in the urban areas, as the government sought to enforce the system of migrant labour and eliminate all Africans other than productive workers from the towns. This further attack on their security was one of the most important factors in politicising African women in the 1950's. Here, very briefly, the reasons behind this shift with regard to women and the pass laws will be considered.

PASS LAWS FOR WOMEN AFTER 1948

After 1948, with the coming to power of the Nationalist government, the system of state control over the African population, embodied in the pass laws, came under review. In particular, the terms on which Africans were to be allowed access to the urban areas were stringently restructured - and now, female town dwellers, hitherto largely exempt from influx control measures, came under attack as well. In 1952 two very important pieces of legislation passed through Parliament which restructured and refined the whole pass system. The Native Laws Amendment Act, inter alia, amended the Urban Areas Act and greatly strengthened the existing influx control measures. Henceforth, it would be an offence for any African, women included, to remain for longer than 72 hours in any urban area without special permission, unless he or

1. House of Assembly Debates, 1950, Col. 3766.

she fell within a limited range of exempted categories¹. The so-called Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act, far from abolishing passes, extended them under the new euphemism of 'reference books' to the entire African adult population. Despite repeated assurances to the contrary, that it was not intended to administer these new provisions with regard to women, women were now in line for the compulsory carrying of passes.

Some theorists, notably H. Wolpe, have analysed these new measures (and indeed, the establishment of the apartheid state) largely in terms of the collapse of the reserve subsistence economies². In the face of this collapse, the government was obliged to extend its coercive powers to uphold the crucial cheap migrant labour system, despite the erosion of its subsistence base. A critic of this thesis, M. Morris, has argued that the function of the pass legislation in 1952 was rather to control the distribution of the African labour force through the different sectors of the economy and ensure an adequate supply for the agricultural sector. This, before 1948, had been largely neglected by the United Party Government³. However, despite the value of his argument with regard to African men, simply to slot the extension of pass laws to African women into this general framework is inadequate. Women, as already discussed above, have occupied a distinctive place in the economy, and their incorporation within

1. In order to be exempted an African had to prove he/she had lived in the area continuously since birth, or had worked continuously for one employer for a minimum of 10 years, or had lived there continuously and lawfully for a minimum of 15 years prior to the Act, or was the wife, unmarried son or daughter under 18 years of age of a man who qualified for urban residence in terms of the above. M. Horrell: Legislation and Race Relations, p.36.

2. H. Wolpe, op.cit.

3. M. Morris, op.cit.

the pass laws system must be understood in terms of this¹.

Women's primary function in the early 1950's was reproductive, rather than productive. This applied to the agricultural sector as well - women were not that important a source of farm labour². Nor, in the various farm labour reports and agricultural congresses referred to by Morris, were representatives of the farming community urging action to control the exodus of women, specifically, from the farms³. What they were urging was the creation of a permanent, in place of the temporary and migrant, labour force. Thus, despite the lack of references to it, it seems that insofar as the new pass laws were designed to check the migration of women from the white countryside, it was not the control of them as workers, but rather as reproducers of the agricultural workforce, that was important.

However, the major interest of the state in African women, as indicated by official reports, statements and the parliamentary debates, was in the growing permanency of the urban African community that this revealed. In 1951 the Industrial Legislation Commission described the declining masculinity rate amongst urban Africans as:

"a clear indication that the native population in urban areas is, to an increasing measure, beginning to assume a normal family structure which is indisputable proof of a growing tendency towards permanent urbanisation."⁴

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1. The whole question of women's place within the pass laws system and the changes this has undergone, is a fascinating area that has been more or less entirely overlooked by researchers. It would be very fruitful an area for study, not only for the light it would throw on the place of women within the political economy of South Africa but also for insights it would provide into the workings of and rationale behind the pass law system itself. Here I do no more than suggest an approach.
 2. See above p.17. In 1954, according to my calculations, black women amounted to some 13% of the total number of farm employees. Based on figures supplied by Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-3.
 3. See especially the Report of the Native Farm Labour Committee, 1937-1939.
 4. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.13.

For both economic and political reasons, the government was not prepared to tolerate this permanent urbanisation. The economic reasons related to the maintenance of the migrant labour system and the distribution of the labour force to all sectors of the economy, not just the urban-industrial (as Morris has argued). The political reasons were to do with the aggressive challenge being posed to the state in the late 1940's and early 1950's by the national liberation movement in the cities. In these circumstances, the function of the reserves was being overhauled. No longer capable of acting as a viable subsistence base, their traditional tribal institutions of authority and control in a state of decay, they were now being restructured to serve a political control function, in addition to their severely attenuated reproductive function.

The Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 began the process of diverting African political aspirations to ethnically based, decentralised regional authorities in the various reserves. Since women were regarded as the basis of the family and a stable community life, their previously relatively uncontrolled access to the towns could no longer be allowed. Furthermore, because traditional tribal patriarchy was no longer exercising sufficient control over their mobility, the direct surveillance of the pass laws had become necessary¹. The impact of this, coming on top of the already heavy pressures squeezing African women, in both town and country, was severe; the reaction against the new passes, particularly in the towns, would be explosive.

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1. However, at no stage did the government intend to eliminate women from the townships completely. The 1952 legislation provided for wives and unmarried daughters of men who qualified for permanent residence to stay with them. In this way, these women were incorporated within the capitalist mode of production, again not as workers so much as reproducers of the already existing urbanised work force.

Thus by the early 1950's the position of women was in a of flux compared to the early 20th Century. The economic changes that the country had experienced had loosened many of the constraints on women's positions that operated in Schreiner's day. With their greater economic mobility and independence, more women were in a position to organise themselves politically than ever before. At the same time, the contradictions and pressures they faced in adjusting to these new conditions were mounting as well, raising the need for further and more radical adjustments in their position. This was especially the case for black women. Yet the scope for political activity amongst women should not be exaggerated. In the early 1950's it was still severely restricted. Apart from the general restrictions operating against black political activity, patriarchal ideology, though under pressure from various quarters, was deeply entrenched amongst both men and women. This tended to counteract the more radicalising effects of the changes described above on women's perceptions of themselves and on the degree of independence and mobility they enjoyed. Furthermore, the bulk of women were still absorbed by domestic concerns, their time, energy and skills directed towards this sphere rather than the public-political one. In addition, as the above survey must make abundantly clear, women had not been uniformly affected by the process of change. In many ways, the gulf separating black women from white had increased over the years, as witnessed by occupational stratification along colour lines and discriminatory legislation (the Women's Enfranchisement Act, the Matrimonial Affairs Act).

This gulf extended to the political sphere as well. While white women could, for the most part, look to the white state for the protection of their interests and for reforms in areas where they still felt themselves to be discriminated against as women, black women stood in a fundamentally different relation to the state. For them, reforms in their subordinate status as women required radical changes

in the very nature of the state itself. (For instance, on the issue of women's suffrage alone, it was impossible for black women to demand the vote without coming up against the question of the unenfranchised state of blacks in general.)

For this reason, political organisation amongst them did not, historically, develop along separate, feminist lines but always within the broader framework of black political resistance movements.

THE ROOTS OF THE FSAW, 1910 - 1939

The previous chapter has outlined the material basis on which the increased participation of women in the political sphere during the course of the 20th Century rested. The diversity of women's experience found expression in the diversity of the political positions found amongst them. The FSAW in the 1950's represented one particular direction that women's political involvement had taken. Even though it envisaged the establishment of a broad movement, open to all women, it was certainly not representative of all women politically. The FSAW took shape within the context of the national liberation movement. Its membership, programme and even the timing of its first appearance was determined largely by that movement. Its roots, therefore, must be looked for in the history of the national liberation movement itself. It is to this that the next two chapters will turn.

Five main organisational strands were represented in the FSAW in 1954 - the ANC, the SAIC, COD, SACPO and a segment of the trade union movement. While COD and SACPO were both recent organisations, the other three had long histories, stretching as far back as the 1890's in the case of the SAIC¹. A further important organisation that before 1950 contributed to the pool of leaders and ideas from which the FSAW would draw, was the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Even though by 1954 it was no longer a legal organisation, its influence within the Congress Alliance could still be felt². Within these different organisations the

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1. The Natal Indian Congress, one of the components of the SAIC, was established by M.K. Gandhi soon after he arrived in Natal in 1893.
 2. The Suppression of Communism Act was passed in June 1950. The CPSA dissolved itself, rather than be declared illegal, while the Bill was being debated in Parliament. Several of its former white members became involved in COD once this was formed in 1952.

evolution of ideas and practice on the political role of women varied - the tradition of women's organisation that the FSAW inherited in 1954 was a diverse and unevenly developed one.

In the years between Union in 1910 and the Second World War, the period dealt with in this chapter, the three areas of organisation most important for the subsequent development of the FSAW were the ANC, the CPSA (after 1921) and the trade union movement. There was contact and overlap between all three organisations, most marked in this early stage between the CPSA and various of the trade unions. However, for the sake of convenience, but also because the position of women varied within each, this chapter will deal with these three areas separately¹.

1. WOMEN AND THE ANC

In the 1950's the ANC would be the single most important source of membership for the FSAW, through its women's section, the ANC Women's League (ANCWL). However, in 1912, when the ANC was formed, women were completely peripheral to the organisation and were not, immediately and automatically, granted membership. At that stage, the public sphere of politics and political parties was an exclusively male domain. In 1911, the establishment of the women's suffrage body, the WEAU, in Durban had prompted the following response from the newspaper, Natal Mercury:

"We hope the women suffragists have enjoyed their picnic in Durban, but we do not think the political effect of their visit can have rewarded their endeavour, and we cannot pretend that we have any regrets for their non-success."²

1. It is not possible to provide more than a very brief and cursory account of general developments within these different organisations. For a more detailed history, the reader is referred to general histories, e.g. Roux: Time longer than Rope, Simons & Simons: Class and Colour in South Africa, Wilson and Thompson (eds.): The Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. II. On the ANC, see Walshe: The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa.

2. Natal Mercury editorial, 20.10.1911.

This complacent rejection of the idea that women had any legitimate claim to the franchise was shared by the ANC. Its own franchise claim in 1912 was an echo of Cecil Rhodes' dictum "equal rights to all civilised men from the Cape to the Zambesi"¹. It was only in the 1940's that it was to come out unequivocally in support of universal suffrage, by which it meant votes for women too.

The ANC leaders of 1912 were preoccupied with defending the limited rights Africans still enjoyed, particularly in the Cape, not with extending them into so radical an area as women's rights. Pixley ka Izaka Seme who played a leading part in the convening of the first conference of the ANC, set out its concerns as follows:

"Chiefs of royal blood and gentlemen of our race ... we have discovered that in the land of their birth, Africans are treated as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The white people of this country have formed what is known as the Union of South Africa - a union in which we have no voice in the making of laws and no part in their administration. We have called you therefore to this conference so that we can, together, devise ways and means of forming our national union for the purpose of creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges."²

In many ways, there are some striking parallels between the early ANC and WEAU. Both were composed of people who were seeking to extend rather than overthrow the existing power base in society, so as to incorporate themselves. The leaders of the ANC were drawn from the tiny westernised and educated African elite - the lawyers, ministers, teachers. Very few women qualified in terms of education or economic security, for inclusion within this category. Conservative men, reared in a strongly patriarchal tradition, the early ANC leaders aspired to full partnership within a parliamentary democracy with the whites. They had embraced the system

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1. Kariis and Carter: From Protest to Challenge, Vol. I, p.53.
 2. Walshe, op.cit., p.34.

of values of the dominant group within society, the white bourgeoisie, and adopted without questioning its views on the subordinate place of women, views which did not conflict with their own patriarchal tradition. Right up until the 1950's and beyond, the ANC continued to see women primarily as mothers and wives, a view that conditioned the outlook of its female members as well.

Politics in the early 20th Century was a male-defined occupation. However, in 1913, African women themselves burst onto the public political stage in a widespread campaign in the Orange Free State against pass laws for women. This campaign provided the momentum for the foundation of the Bantu Women's League which affiliated to the ANC and was a predecessor of the later ANCWL. Opposition to passes was one of the key issues round which African women in the 20th Century would rally. The anti-pass campaign in the Free State was an early example of this and one of the earliest expressions of discontent by black women in modern South Africa. As such, it came to assume a symbolic importance in later years.

The Anti-Pass Campaign in the OFS, 1913-1920

The pass laws in South Africa¹ have been one of the crucial mechanisms of state control over the African population. However, as already mentioned, until the 1930's women were generally exempt from any systematic attempt at pass control.

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1. In 1946 the 'Fagan Commission' gave the following definition of a pass, a document "(a) which is not carried by all races but only by people of a particular race, and which (b) is connected with restrictions of the freedom of movement of the person concerned or (c) must at all times be carried by the person concerned on his body, since the law lays the obligation on him of producing it on demand to the police and certain other officials and the mere failure to produce it is by itself a punishable offence." (Native Laws Commission, p.26). A "Pass", then, is more than a mere travel permit and can refer to a variety of different documents for instance, permits to live in an urban area, tax receipts, and even certificates of exemption from pass laws.

The Orange Free State in the early 20th Century was a notable exception in this regard. There the whole black population was enmeshed in the pass laws net.

The Free State pass laws dated from before Union. However, according to Sol Plaatje, a leading ANC figure at the time, it was only after 1910 that they came to be stringently applied against women¹. Local municipalities were given wide powers to levy a whole range of permits on all black town dwellers, male and female, African and 'Coloured'². These included "stand permits, residential passes, visitors' passes, seeking work passes, employment registration certificates, permits to reside on employer's premises, work on own behalf certificates, domestic service books, washerwomen's permits and entertainment permits"³. Each of these cost money (5s a month to work on one's own); failure to possess the necessary papers led to arrest. In addition, Plaatje also states that "no native women in the Province of the Orange 'Free' State (sic) can reside within a municipality (whether with or without her parents or her husband) unless she can produce a permit showing that she is a servant in the employ of a white person, this permit being signed by the Town Clerk"⁴.

To answer the question why women should have been included within these provisions when elsewhere they were excluded,

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1. S. Plaatje, Native Life in South Africa, p.92.
 2. In all, the 'Coloured' population of the Free State was 27 054, compared to 175 189 whites and 325 824 Africans. The percentage of this figure which would have been urbanised is unavailable. In 1921, less than 7 000 'Coloureds' were urbanised, compared to 67 500 Africans. The 'Coloured' urban population was not therefore of great significance numerically. Union Statistics for 50 Years: Tables A-3, A-5, A-10.
 3. Inter-Departmental Committee on the Native Pass Laws, 1920, pp.3-4.
 4. S. Plaatje, op.cit., p.91.

requires a separate study of conditions prevailing in the Orange Free State historically, in both the rural and urban areas. Obviously, in general terms, the revenue accruing from the issue of all these permits was an attractive prospect for the white municipalities. The pass laws also ensured a far-reaching degree of control over the black labour force in the Free State, where shortage of labour was a chronic complaint of the white farmers. In this connection, of relevance is the fact that in the Orange Free State, compared to the other provinces, very little land had been set aside as African 'Reserve' areas¹. The bulk of the rural African population were living on white owned land, as squatters, share-croppers or farm labourers². Furthermore, in the towns stable black communities with a reasonably balanced sex ratio developed from the start. In Blomfontein, for instance, the 1921 population census showed 9 330 African men and 8 588 African women residing there - the masculinity rate was a mere 109 compared to the Union-wide urban average of 299³. Thus, in the Free State, African women were, on the whole, in a far more direct contact with white society than in other parts of the country, a factor which could help to explain the unusual degree of direct, state control (as opposed to indirect, tribal) that had developed over them.

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1. In 1955 the Tomlinson Commission gave the total area of the reserves in the OFS as 64 289 morgen, compared to e.g. 4 944 517 morgen in the Transkei and 923 974 morgen in the Ciskei (Cape), and 1 841 355 morgen in Zululand (Natal). (UG 61/1955, pp.42-44.)
 2. The labour shortage white farmers were complaining of, was linked directly to the prevalence of African squatting and sharecropping in the Free State and thus fuelled demands for the abolition of such land practices. These demands were met by the Natives Land Act of 1913, which is mentioned below.
 3. 3rd Census, 1921, Part I, UG 15-23, Table VIII, p.64. The masculinity rate was calculated by the Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.14, Table 16.

The burden of the pass laws was widely resented, but the fact that women were involved as well, drew special condemnation from black political organisations. They stressed that nowhere else were women subject to such regulations. One of the strongest arguments used, was that the risk passes imposed on women, of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, directly threatened the well being of the family. If mothers were taken off to goal for falling foul of the pass laws, children would be neglected and the family suffer. This was an argument that would recur constantly, throughout the history of African opposition to passes for women - women's domestic role of wife and mother merited special treatment. At the same time, passes were also seen as endangering and insulting women's virtue. For women, a system "which makes it lawful for any class of man coming under the title of policemen to interfere with them and demand a pass from them"¹, was particularly evil. Two cases of rape, in both of which an official (an African constable and a white location superintendent respectively), stopped a young girl on the pretext of checking her pass, received much publicity at the time and underscored these sentiments².

In addition to the strongly felt resentment against passes for women, the African population in the Orange Free State was also deeply roused at the time because of the impending Native Land Bill. This Bill, in terms of which land ownership by Africans was to be confined to proclaimed 'reserves' (eventually to amount to no more than 13% of the total land area in the country) and African squatting and sharecropping on white owned lands outlawed, posed a particularly grave

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1. 'Petition of the OFS Native and Coloured women', printed in A.P.O., 21/3/14. The petition was addressed to the Governor General, Viscount Gladstone.
 2. The 'Petition of the OFS Native and Coloured Women' (A.P.O., 21/3/14) referred to these two cases. The Interdepartmental Committee on the Native Pass Laws of 1920 (p.14) also mentioned the danger of sexual abuses of this nature in applying the pass laws to women.

economic threat to the African population in the Free State, where the amount of African-owned land was negligible and squatting on white farms extensive. Alarm and unrest concerning the Land Bill intensified the mood of resistance engendered by the pass laws.

Lobbying against the pass laws was fairly intensive in the first years after Union. Both major black political organisations of the time, the African People's Organisation (APO)¹ and the ANC (after its foundation in 1912) took up the issue in deputations, press statements and petitions to the Government. Then, from 1912, women themselves started taking an active role in the campaign, with the establishment of an organisation called the 'Native and Coloured Women's Association'. In September 1913 the newspaper the A.P.O. referred to this Association collecting funds for women convicted of pass offences². It seems likely that it was already in existence during 1912 and involved in organising the petitions and deputations that began to appear from women in that year.

Unfortunately - but revealingly - it is difficult to know who the members of this Association were. It seems to have had close links with both the ANC and APO, judging from the coverage it received in the A.P.O. newspaper. In the reports, however, the members of the Association are faceless. The A.P.O. refers to the "ladies" without giving their names, a hint of the male prejudices and blinkers that operated against women in politics. What is interesting is that the organisation involved both African and 'Coloured' women. It showed clearly that where common problems existed, so-called racial barriers need not be an issue in organising a common defence against them, amongst women.

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1. The APO was founded in 1902. Its membership was primarily 'Coloured' and its leader Dr. Abdurahman, a member of the Cape Provincial Council, Walshe, op.cit., p.16.
 2. A.P.O., 23/9/13. This newspaper was the official organ of the APO.

From early on, the male-dominated APO and ANC showed a degree of ambivalence towards the women activists. While strongly supporting the campaign, they yet adopted a critical tone at signs of too great an independence on the part of the women. In March 1912, apparently dissatisfied with the response given by the Minister of Native Affairs to a Congress deputation, a group of women travelled to Cape Town to seek redress themselves. The APO's newspaper commented:

"We think ... the deputation might have awaited the Native Congress. It is also regrettable that the coloured women of the Orange Free State did not consult the Executive of the APO Women's Guild. We feel sure that no deputation of Coloured men of the APO would have come to Cape Town without first acquainting the Executive with the object of its mission."¹

In the 1950's there would be signs of a similar tension in the relationship between the FSAW and the ANC.

The central government appeared cautiously sympathetic to the view that women should be leniently treated, if not actually exempted. But it was reluctant to damage its already fragile political base in the Free State by intervening decisively, and matters were allowed to drift. The flashpoint came in mid-1913. Some Bloemfontein women, presenting a petition to the mayor, were arrested for not having passes - and the simmering opposition boiled over into open defiance:

"Friday morning, the 6th June, should and will never be forgotten in South Africa. On that day, the Native women declared their womanhood. Six hundred daughters of South Africa taught the arrogant whites a lesson that will never be forgotten. Headed by the bravest of them, they marched to the magistrate, hustled the police out of their way and kept shouting and

1. A.P.O., 6/4/12.

cheering until His Worship emerged from his office and addressed them, thence they proceeded to the Town Hall. The women had now assumed a threatening attitude. The police endeavoured to keep them off the steps ... the gathering got out of control. Sticks could be seen flourishing overhead and some came down with no gentle thwacks across the skulls of the police, who were bold enough to stem the onrush - "We have done with pleading, we now demand", declared the women."¹

This incident was the beginning of a widespread campaign of passive resistance, involving hundreds of women, which spread to all the major Free State towns. In Bloemfontein, 34 women convicted as a result of this demonstration forfeited the option of a fine "as a means of bringing their grievances before the notice of the public"². Their example was followed in other centres and there are reports of goals being too full to handle all the prisoners³. In Kroonstad, Winburg and Senekal, women defied the pass laws and came forward for arrest. This period of unrest coincided with the period when the Native Land Act was being enforced - the Bloemfontein anti-pass demonstration took place a week before the Land Act was passed.⁴ The Free State was thus in a state of ferment generally, one which directly affected women and must undoubtedly have added to their spirit of defiance⁵.

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1. A.P.O., 28/6/13. The report continued - "In the meantime, we, the men, who are supposed to be made of sterner stuff, may well hide our faces for shame and ponder in some secluded spot over the heroic stand made by Africa's daughters."
 2. A.P.O., 23/9/13.
 3. S. Plaatje, op.cit., pp.94-97.
 4. The Native Land Act was passed by Parliament on 20th June, 1913.
 5. S. Plaatje, op.cit., documents the misery and acute hardship experienced by evicted squatters and sharecroppers, engaged in a fruitless search, in mid-winter, for alternative places to live.

During the war, the campaign subsided but it flared up again at its conclusion, spreading to the Rand where it was linked to the general anti-pass campaign led by the ANC at the time¹. As late as 1920, 62 women in Senekal were reported to have refused residential permits and gone to gaol rather than pay a £2 fine².

The Bantu Women's League

According to Walshe, it was under these circumstances that the Bantu Women's League was formed - "by the second half of 1913 this Free State unrest (against the passes - CW) was widespread and led directly to the formation of the Bantu Women's League"³. Under its president, Charlotte Maxeke, it took up the question of the pass laws. In 1918 Maxeke led a deputation of women from the League to the Prime Minister, Botha, to present the women's case⁴. It appears to have been well received. No actual legislation was passed, but it seems the SAP government did appeal to the Free State authorities to relax their enforcement of the pass laws with regard to women, and the unrest subsided. Faced with a number of threats to its existence, chiefly from white labour, the government was certainly unwilling to provide a diffused, still fairly muted black opposition with so emotive a rallying point as "the sanctity of women". Exemption of women from the pass laws did not seriously threaten control over the African labour force, of which women constituted a minute percentage. The Free State demonstrations had in fact introduced a new and uncertain dimension for the State with regard to the pass laws - for years, the memory of the unrest was to temper its approach to black women.

1. See E. Roux: Time Longer than Rope, pp.117-21, for a description of this campaign.

2. International, 26/11/20.

3. Walshe, op.cit., p.80.

4. Walshe, op.cit., p.81.

This anti-pass campaign represents the first large scale entry of black women, operating in terms of the modern (non-tribal) political structure in South Africa, into the political arena. The issue round which they rallied to form the Bantu Women's League, that of passes, was to remain a central area of concern. From the beginning, then, African women's political outlook was shaped in terms of their community of interest with African men. While their opposition to passes focused strongly on the particular evils they saw as inherent in applying the pass laws to women, these laws provided an area of common experience for both men and women that was exclusive to the African group¹. What was at stake in 1913/14 was not the emancipation of women as such, but rather the threat the pass laws posed to the stability and coherence of the family. Nevertheless, the anti-pass campaign dented stereotypes about African women's passive, submissive nature² and nurtured an incipient political consciousness amongst a section of them.

The affiliation of the Bantu Women's League to the ANC took this a step further. However, in terms of the constitution drawn up by the ANC in 1919, women were not to be full members but were accorded the status of "auxiliary membership" only, without voting rights³.

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1. The inclusion of the 'Coloured' people in the Free State pass laws was an exception that did not long continue.
 2. A white suffragist, LK. Cross, writing about the women's movement in South Africa and elsewhere, for instance, registered surprise at the "rather amusing" anti-pass demonstrations of the Free State women which showed that even they were joining in the world-wide movement to emancipate women. Her patronising account of the demonstrations was revealing of the wide gulf across which she and other white suffragists viewed African women. See T.H. Lewis (ed.): Women of South Africa, p.307.
 3. Walshe, op.cit., p.206.

Walshe has described the function of the Women's League during this period as "providing shelter and entertainment for delegates" (to conferences)¹. The community of interests of African men and women did not extend to the kitchen. There was, at that stage, little attempt to broaden established views on women's role on the part of either the men or the women of the ANC.

Unfortunately, very little material on the subsequent development of the Bantu Women's League is available. One catches a tantalising glimpse of it at Potchefstroom, in 1928. There, a system of residential permits for Africans, enforced by the local municipality, had sparked off a wave of unrest at that time. Women were deeply involved in this, demonstrating once again the power of any pass-related issue in mobilising them to action². The momentum seems to have come largely from local sources but the ANC did send a female member, Mrs. Bhola, to at least one women's meeting held in Potchefstroom location. She travelled to the meeting in company with two women from the CPSA, Rebecca Bunting and Mary Wolton, indicating that contact between women within these two organisations had been established by that time³.

Apart from this one fragmentary reference, the available records are silent on women in the ANC at this time. It would appear that with the partial success of the anti-pass campaign and its removal as a rallying point, the League went into a decline. There was not, as yet, a sufficient basis on which it could build itself amongst women in the towns. In addition, the subordinate status of women within

1. Walshe, op.cit., p.206.

2. This is another topic that, as far as I know, has not been researched. For the reference to it, I am grateful for access to an interview with Josie Palmer, conducted by J. Wells (South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, 1977). On Palmer, and her political activities, see below p.83.

3. See below, p.82, for a fuller discussion on their meeting. The reference to the meeting comes from Roux: S.P. Bunting, p.103.

the ANC, as well as the stagnation of the parent body itself during the 1920's and 1930's, would have contributed to its slump as well¹.

By 1935 the League was still in existence. It was the only women's body that was specifically invited to the All African Convention (AAC) held in that year². At this conference, Charlotte Maxeke was one of the speakers. However, the League was obviously in a weak state and during the course of the Convention, the following resolution was passed by a group of the women delegates:

"that the time has come for the establishment of an African Council of Women on lines similar to those of the National Councils of other races, in order that we may be able to do our share in the advancement of our race."³

This was later agreed to by the convention as a whole and thus the National Council of African Women (NCAW), whose intended functions would seem to have superceded those of the Bantu Women's League, came into being⁴. Charlotte

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1. On the ANC at this time, see Walshe, op.cit., Chapter X.
 2. On the AAC, see Walshe, op.cit., Chapter 6. It was called to register a broad-based African opposition to the "Hertzog Bills" then before Parliament. These, inter alia, would remove the common roll voting rights still enjoyed by a minority of 'qualified' Africans in the Cape and consolidate the Native Reserve Territories. Subsequently, friction developed between the AAC and the ANC as to which was truly representative of the African people. The AAC then linked up with radical 'Coloured' groups in the Cape to form the Non-European Unity Movement which was critical of both the ANC and later the Congress Alliance.
 3. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 2, Document 9, p.39.
 4. According to an undated typescript, 'National Council of African Women' amongst the Rheinhalit-Jones papers, the foundations of the NCAW were laid in 1933 by a group of African women in Kimberley, anxious to form an organisation "to care for Non-European Welfare". Other centres initiated similar councils "quite independently". It would seem, then, that at the AAC in 1935 these amalgamated to establish a National Council.

Maxeke became the first national president of the NCAW¹ and thereafter the Bantu Women's League appears to have been totally eclipsed.

The NCAW itself does not appear to have lived up to the expectations vested in it. Like its European counterpart, the National Council of Women (NCW), with which it developed links, it did not regard itself as primarily a political organisation, but rather one involved in "non-European welfare"². Its support was derived from the tiny group of African professional women (teachers and nurses for the most part), not from the masses of working class and peasant women. From an early stage, it came under the influence of white liberals in the Joint Councils Movement, with Mrs. Rheinhalit-Jones, wife of the first director of the South African Institute of Race Relations, playing a particularly dominant role in its affairs³. This earned it the criticism of more radical black organisations. In 1940, the then National President, Mrs. M.T. Soga, referred to "the belief amongst Africans that the NCAW is being run by white people" in a letter written to Mrs. Rheinhalit-Jones. She added, "I hope that you did not strengthen that belief"⁴. The CPSA, too, was critical of it for failing to organise African women effectively⁵. By the Second World War, the organisation of African women, both within and without the ANC, was in a poor state.

1. 'National Council of African Women', op.cit.

2. Ibid.

3. This becomes manifestly clear from the correspondence in the NCAW files, in the Rheinhalit-Jones Papers. The Joint Councils movement, in which both Mr. & Mrs. Rheinhalit-Jones were prominent, was set up in 1921 by white liberals sympathetic to the political aspirations of moderate black bodies like the ANC and wishing to initiate dialogue between black and white and thus improve race relations.

4. Correspondence, 1/4/40, NCAW File, 1940, Rheinhalit-Jones Papers.

5. See below p. 87.

Charlotte Maxeke

Charlotte Maxeke (born Manye), president of the Bantu Women's League and later of the NCAW, was certainly the most prominent woman in the ANC in the pre-World War II period¹. At the All African Convention of 1935 she was introduced to the delegates by Dr. Xuma of the ANC as "the mother of African freedom in this country"². Since something is known of her life, while the Women's League itself is so poorly documented, it is useful to look at it in greater detail, as a way of throwing light on the make-up of the League³.

According to the African Yearly Register of 1931, she was born in 1874 near Beaufort West and educated at Uitenhage and Port Elizabeth. Little is known of her parents and schooling except that she was brought up within a Christian framework and educated in mission schools. As with many of the leaders of the early ANC, Christianity remained a dominant and moderating influence throughout her life. Later she moved with her parents to Kimberley and there was offered an opportunity that for a black South African woman at the end of the 19th Century was virtually unheard of - to join an African choir and tour England. As a member of this same choir, she later toured Canada and the United States as well. In the States she was offered a scholarship to attend a segregated Negro college in Ohio, Wilberforce University, and thus joined that tiny group of African students (estimated by Walshe at between 100 and 400 at the beginning of the 20th Century⁴), able to

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1. The only other woman who appears to have been at all prominent in the ANC at the time was Mrs. Bhola, who has been mentioned in connection with the 1928 meeting at Potchefstroom. Simons and Simons, op.cit., p.400, describe her as the first woman to stand trial on a "hostility" charge - incitement of "racial hostility" in terms of the Native Administration Act of 1927 - and an organiser in the women's section of the ANC (presumably the Bantu Women's League).
 2. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 2, Document 9.
 3. Biographical material is sketchy. This account draws mostly on G. Gollock: Daughters of Africa and T. Skota: The African Yearly Register. Maxeke herself helped in the compiling of this Register.
 4. Walshe, op.cit., p.8.

continue their higher education abroad. In the US she would have come into contact with the ideas of the prominent American Negro leader, Booker T. Washington, whose influence on black thinking in South Africa was considerable¹.

At the same stage, she had joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, the earliest and one of the largest of the African separatist churches². In 1901 she returned to South Africa with a B.Sc. degree to begin "active pioneer work"³, within that church. She subsequently married the Rev. M.M. Maxeke, an AME minister and another graduate of Wilberforce. Through him she had links with the ANC from its beginnings, for he was involved in it from 1912. These links were strengthened for her, personally, through the anti-pass campaign and the establishment of the Bantu Women's League. Later, she also developed contacts with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) of Clements Kadalie, a short-lived, but major channel of African political aspirations in the 1920's⁴.

1. See Walshe, op.cit., p.12. He describes Washington's political philosophy in these terms: "essentially an optimist, Washington expected justice without Negro political assertion, but rather through economic self-improvement and the goodwill of his Southern neighbours ...".
2. See Sundkler: Bantu Prophets in South Africa for a discussion on the political implications of the separatist churches and their relationship to African nationalist sentiments.
3. Gollock, op.cit., p.138.
4. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 4, mention this in their biographical sketch of Maxeke. See below, p.95 for a reference to the ICU attempting to establish a female branch in Cape Town, 1920. The ICU was founded by Kadalie in 1919. It rapidly developed into a general union for black workers and acquired a mass character that challenged the ANC's claim to lead and represent African opinion. It collapsed in the late 1920's because of poor management and internal disagreements. See e.g., Roux, op.cit.

The Maxeke's work centred on the church and social and educational work connected to that. They lived in a number of different places before settling finally in Johannesburg. Here Charlotte Maxeke became "a leader in church work and social service" and President of a missionary association.¹ With the death of her husband (the date is not known) she was thrown on her own resources. At a time when hardly any black women had entered the professions, she first set up an employment bureau and was later appointed a probation officer, attached to the courts, by the Johannesburg municipality. E. Rosenthal describes her as the first African social worker in South Africa².

By the 1920's her reputation had travelled beyond the confines of the ANC. In 1921, the Women's Reform Club, a white women's suffrage group in Pretoria, invited her to speak at a public meeting called to coincide with the annual conference of the WEAU which the Reform Club was hosting. It would seem that she was the first and the last African woman thus singled out by the suffragists³.

Her topic was on conditions of life for African women in the towns, a subject on which her probation work made her an authority. Significantly, despite the fact that it was a meeting convened by a women's suffrage organisation, no reference to the vote was made by either the suffragists or Maxeke herself. The idea of the enfranchisement of African women was an outrageous one for the white Establishment at which the WEAU's campaign was directed and with which it identified. Educated black and white women might meet in the area of social reforms, with its emphasis on charity and soup kitchens; political rights were of another order. A report on the meeting noted the indifference with which

1. Gollock, op.cit., p.138.

2. E. Rosenthal, Southern African Dictionary of National Biography.

3. Women's Outlook, August 1921.

Maxeke's speech was greeted by all the white reporters present - despite the fact that she spoke "fluently, clearly and with dignity" and represented those "most nearly concerned", they all sat back and stopped taking notes as soon as she began to speak¹.

Subsequent references to Maxeke are scanty. During the 1920's she became involved in the Joint Councils Movement², where she would have come into contact with Mrs. Rheinallt-Jones. How significant a movement she considered it to be, is unfortunately not known. Nevertheless their approach recommended itself to her sufficiently for her to propose the setting up of similarly structured "Joint Service Councils" amongst white and African women in 1930³. Here, too, the meeting ground between white and black was in the social rather than political sphere - the focus of these councils was to be on solving the problems faced by young black domestic workers in town.

In 1928 Maxeke represented the AME church at a General Conference held in America. By 1930 she seems to have retired from her job, but was still in demand as a speaker. In that year she addressed a conference of the 'European and Bantu Christian Students Association' held at Fort Hare on a similar topic to the one in 1921 - "Social conditions among Bantu women and girls"⁴. In 1935, as already mentioned, she was a speaker at the All African Convention in Bloemfontein. Presumably she played a leading role in the drafting of the resolution which led to the establishment of the NCAW

1. Women's Outlook, August 1921.

2. See above, p. 67.

3. See her speech to the 'European and Bantu Christian Student's Association', Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 1, Document 51c. Whether anything materialised out of this suggestion is not known. No further references to it have been encountered.

4. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 1, Document 51c.

of which she was subsequently elected President. She was then 61 years old. Four years later, in 1939, she died¹.

While the biographical material is sketchy, it is clear that Maxeke's life experience was far removed from that of the average black woman at the time, as described in Chapter One. Her career was remarkably similar to that of contemporary male leaders in the ANC. From an early stage she was exposed to the same influences that had helped shape their political aspirations - Christianity, negro aspirations in the USA, the Joint Councils Movement in South Africa. Furthermore, her education and her work qualified her for membership of that tiny fraction of the African population described variously as the petit bourgeoisie, middle class or elite. Thus, while the momentum for the establishment of the Bantu Women's League had come from that broad swelling of popular agitation in the Free State anti-pass campaigns, its leaders in this period, as in the ANC itself, came from this tiny and relatively privileged fragment of the population.

Yet at the same time, because she was a woman, Maxeke did not enjoy an equal status within the ANC leadership hierarchy with the men. She did not, for instance, have the vote. How her ideas might have developed on this point is unfortunately now known. However, even though her own life did represent a radical break from the conventional pattern of women's lives, she did not reject convention out of hand either. In her speech to the Women's Reform Club in 1921, she referred to the "unhappy consequences" of the breakdown of the old system of parental control "under which native women had had all the virtues of noble women"². She did not question the assumption that women's primary function was

1. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 4, biographical sketch of Maxeke. E. Rosenthal's estimate of the year of her death as 1930, in his Southern African Dictionary of National Biography, is incorrect.

2. Women's Outlook, August, 1921.

was a domestic one. Speaking to the Students' Christian Association in 1930 she described the home as the centre of family life and women as its "keystone"¹. Under existing conditions in the townships, the traditional African family was being destroyed. Maxeke's chief concern was how to preserve it, not how to restructure it to allow greater autonomy to women.

Maxeke's work in Johannesburg brought her into daily contact with the reality of the destruction of family life. The devastating effects of the migrant labour system were particularly marked on the Witwatersrand where Maxeke worked. That area had the highest masculinity rate amongst Africans in the country² and slums, crime, prostitution and illegitimacy flourished under such conditions. These conditions reinforced Maxeke's middle class values of the stable nuclear family, in which women played a central role, the source of its physical and spiritual wellbeing. Such values represented the standard by which the disruption and decay of African family life could be measured, the alternative at which political and social reformers could aim.

This theme, of the sanctity of the family and the special role of women within it, remained a dominant one within the ANCWL and was strongly established in the FSAW in the 1950's as well. It was, as has been seen, a major strand in the arguments condemning pass laws for women. Those criticisms and re-evaluations of the primacy of women's domestic role which surfaced occasionally within the FSAW, came from other sources than the ANC.

Maxeke was also clear on the common struggle to be waged by African men and women together, against the disabilities

1. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 1, Document 51c.

2. In 1921 there were 863 males per 100 females on the Rand compared to a Union-wide urban average of 299. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.14, Table 16.

they suffered, although her association with the Joint Councils Movement indicates that she was committed to a multi-racial society. In a speech to the AAC in 1935 she stressed the former point. The convention, she said, represented not only the various parts of the country, but also the two sexes - and unity, she affirmed, was strength.

"The Non-Europeans, while thanking their European friends for their support, had to go ahead themselves. The Natives were not a peculiar people who had to be carried on the backs of others forever. They had to be helped to help themselves."¹

Yet the basis on which women and men were to work together was not, at this stage, even on paper, one of equality. The Bantu Women's League was still a mere adjunct to the ANC, its members auxiliary members only.

The scope for African women in politics in the pre-war period was thus very circumscribed. By the outbreak of the Second World War, however, some important lines of thought had been established, which would guide the subsequent development of women's participation within the ANC. The emphasis was on women working alongside their men, to overthrow those structures that oppressed them as blacks; women were not seeking to change established patterns of relationships with men and their families. Yet there were signs, too, of some consciousness that women had particular interests and difficulties which necessitated their organising as a distinct group from the men. This consciousness had led to the establishment of separate women's organisations within the broader movement. During the war it would find expression in the setting up of the ANC Women's League.

1. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol. 2, Document 9.

2. WOMEN AND THE EARLY COMMUNIST PARTY

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) had a tiny membership in the 20's and 30's¹. S.W. Johns has estimated it as 300 in 1921, its inaugural date, rising to nearly 3 000 by the end of 1928 and then dropping drastically in the early 1930's as a result of internal dissension and turmoil². Beginning with an all-white membership, it expanded into having a predominantly black membership, although the whites within it retained an importance beyond their numbers. Despite its smallness and the unfamiliar radicalism of its ideas, it yet exerted considerable influence on black opposition politics.

In the pre-World War Two period, the CPSA's relationships with the two leading political organisations among Africans, the ICU and the ANC, were far from amiable. Its radical class analysis conflicted with the more moderate, assimilationist approach of both bodies, even though its non-racial stand recommended it to Africans smarting under a system of racially oppressive laws. Thus in 1926, the ICU expelled all its communist members, accusing them of preaching a "doctrine of murder" and inciting "subject races like the Natives to act unconstitutionally"³. Within the ANC, the CPSA was to enjoy favour during the presidency of Josiah Gumede (1927-1930) and several leading Party members were front-rank Congress members too, e.g. Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyane. However, after 1928, the programme it adopted (under pressure from the Communist International) of an "independent South African native republic

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1. For a detailed history of the Communist Party between 1921 and 1932, see the thesis by S.W. Johns: Marxism-Leninism in a Multiracial Environment. Walshe, op.cit., gives considerable attention to the relations between the CPSA and the ANC and ICU and the influence of the Communist Party on African political aspirations.
 2. Johns, op.cit. pp.245, 399, 577.
 3. Walshe, op.cit., p.174, quoting from The Workers' Herald, 17/5/27.

as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government"¹ conflicted with the more cautious approach of the ANC. According to Walshe, for the ANC "freedom, which meant equality of opportunity and not African domination ... was to be achieved by consultation and the growth of a more enlightened public opinion rather than by African political assertion and mass action"².

The fortunes of the CPSA went into a serious decline during the 1930's as the party split over the "Native Republic" programme. It was only towards the end of the decade, with its emphasis on a "United Front against Fascism" and a consequently more moderate approach to South African politics, that it began to revive and relations with the ANC improve - although tension between communist supporters and Congress members was to remain a feature of black opposition politics right up to, and including, the period of the Congress Alliance in the 1950's.

While there are no figures available for the extent of its female membership, it is certain that this was far smaller than its male membership. Yet in the area of women's emancipation, the CPSA brought new perspectives to the incipient national liberation movement of this time. It also produced important leaders - Ray Alexander, Josie Palmer, Hilda Bernstein, all of whom played leading roles in the establishment of the FSAW, were party members.

The emancipation of women and their full participation in all spheres of public life has always been a feature of official Communist doctrine. In 1922 a circular from the Executive Committee of the Communist International to all executives of National Communist Parties, set this out clearly. It stressed the importance of "communist work" among proletarian

1. Walshe, op.cit., p.177, quoting from The South African Worker, 30/11/28.

2. Walshe, op.cit., p.178.

women, arguing that if women were not drawn into the workers' struggle, a serious breach in proletarian unity would result. Men and women workers had common interests against the bourgeoisie: proletarian peasant and petty bourgeois women represented "sources of fresh, untapped fighting power". Communist Parties were urged to put all their energy into the more systematic training of women "comrades" - "The Communist work among women is half the battle"¹.

The Communist perspective was that it is capitalism that oppresses women. Women workers therefore have a common interest with men in fighting for the establishment of a socialist state. Conventions and practices that prevented women from joining the fight had thus to be abolished. Locating the source of women's inferior status to men in their exclusion from the production process in society, the Communist International rejected (with practice frequently falling far behind theory) the bourgeois argument that women's reproductive capacity proved the truth of the cliché "women's place is in the home".

Here there were new perspectives to broaden the conventional view of women's political role as understood by the Bantu Women's League. While the community of interests between men and women was stressed (and working class women's sexual exploitation by working class men underplayed), this community was delineated not on racial but on class terms. This perspective deflated the importance of 'race' and held out the prospect of a broader, non-racial alliance amongst opponents of the State. Furthermore, women were to be regarded as a central part of the political struggle to be waged and the fact that they suffered special disabilities, requiring special attention, was recognised. However, while the slogan "no discrimination on the grounds of race or sex" was endorsed by the CPSA from the beginning, the reference to sex reflected

1. Reprinted in International, 10/11/22.

a theoretical agreement rather than a practical commitment, particularly in its early years.

When the CPSA was formed in 1921, it brought together the several tiny groups and socialist and leftwing thinkers which had been established in the main urban centres by the end of the 19th Century. Marxism was brought to South Africa by those among the influx of European immigrants responding to local mining and industrial developments, who had been in touch with leftwing labour movements in their home countries. In South Africa they faced a very different labour situation from the one they had left in Europe - a racially unhomogeneous working class in which the vast mass of workers were black, most of them still rooted in a foreign, tribal culture and divided from white workers by all sorts of barriers, political, economic, legal and social. It was the relationship between the CPSA and the great mass of workers, the black proletariat, that was to dominate the course of the party's development. In the 1920's women were not members of the non-domestic labour force in any significant numbers. At the same time, the early male leaders of the CPSA upheld conventional views on the institutions of the family and marriage and the sexual division of labour within them. Among the workers they were attempting to organise as well, patriarchal attitudes were deeply entrenched. For these reasons, the question of women's emancipation was completely overshadowed by other party work.

Thus although individual women were active within leftwing organisations in South Africa from the start, it was on an individual basis at first. As in the Bantu Women's League, the early activists were members of the privileged middle class. They were also white. Before the CPSA was founded, the flamboyant Mary Fitzgerald, nicknamed 'Pickhandle Mary' for her use of the pickhandle against strike breakers, was

probably the most prominent woman in socialist circles¹. During the 1920's Rebecca Bunting, Fanny Klenerman (who was married to C.F. Glass) and later Mary Wolton, participated actively in party work.

Significantly, they were all wives of leading men within the party and it was in this context that their contribution tended to be seen. For instance, Johns refers to Mary Wolton as one of the most significant recruits to the CPSA in the late 1920's, along with her husband, Douglas Wolton, and a "fiery orator"². Yet it was her husband who was elected to the posts as Party secretary and newspaper editor, while her role was supportive - "Throughout he was backed by his wife"³.

The CPSA views on women as expressed in its newspapers and statements made by party members, were frequently inconsistent. On the one hand, it subscribed to the official viewpoint as already set out. The "heroic achievements" of Russian women in breaking with the past after 1917 received a fair amount of coverage and much praise⁴. Both leftwing

1. Mary Fitzgerald (1880's - 1960) was described by Walker and Weinbren: 2000 Casualties, p.291, as a "typical Irish beauty", "a rousing speaker" and someone who "knew no fear and took the lead in many struggles". In the early years of the century she was actively involved in the 1913 miners' strike; she was particularly involved in socialist organisations on the Rand. After the war she moved away from her earlier radicalism towards a moderate trade unionist stance, becoming an official government delegate to the ILO Conference in Geneva in 1921 with her husband, Archie Crawford. She was elected to the Johannesburg City Council that year and became deputy-mayor.
2. Johns, op.cit., p.400.
3. Ibid.
4. For instance, the following extract from an article by Bertrand Russell on 'Communist ideals' (reprinted in International 18/11/21): "The position of women and the relations of men and women seemed to me to be more free, more decent, more self-respecting in Russia than in any other country I know. Incidentally, prostitution has been almost entirely abolished wherever the Bolsheviks rule". This theme was constantly re-echoed by the numbers of South Africans who visited the USSR in the 20's and 30's in letters, articles and speeches on their visits.

newspapers, the International and later Umsebenzi, printed a number of serious articles dealing with the problems of women's emancipation and the need to involve women more actively. In 1922 International carried a pioneering piece, an article called 'Words to Women', which was the first article of its kind written by a South African woman, Alice Harrison, and addressed specifically to women¹. This urged women to join the workers' movement - "The time for sitting at home and waiting is past".

In keeping with its support for women's emancipation, the CPSA also began to commemorate International Women's Day (March 8th) fairly regularly from the 1930's². In 1936 Mrs. Denys Reitz, the first woman elected to Parliament, was taken to task by Umsebenzi for suggesting that women's domestic role should be paramount for them³. A few years later criticism of this viewpoint emerged in an even more radical form. In response to an article carried by the leftwing newspaper, the Guardian, on whether or not women should be paid for housework, a correspondent argued that "socialism will be a very poor and lopsided affair if it does not involve pretty drastic changes in domestic life"⁴. Wages for wives would be a poor solution, however, as that was "simply subsidising incompetence". Domestic work should rather be

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1. International, 10/11/22. This appeared in the same edition as the one carrying the Communist International circular on women already referred to. Presumably it was a response to that. Alice Harrison was the wife of W. Harrison, a prominent figure in Cape Town Socialist circles for many years.
 2. International Women's Day was established on the international communist calendar as a day designed to focus attention on the progress made and the problems faced in the emancipation of women.
 3. Umsebenzi, 28/11/36: 'Women's Place in the Kitchen?'
 4. This letter from "Housewife" appeared in the Guardian, 19/5/39. The Guardian was established in 1937 under the editorship of Betty Sacks, later a CPSA member.

communalised, to free housewives from its drudgery and allow them to earn their living at work in which they could take pride.

"The real fact is that ordinary domestic life fails to satisfy the material, mental and emotional needs of the housewife".¹

Yet on the other hand, and despite such progressive sentiments, many of the CPSA's references to women throughout this period revealed an unquestioning acceptance of stereotyped and sexist attitudes to women². Thus, in 1919 women participating in the Mayday celebrations had "asserted working class dictatorship by arranging which tea rooms were needed open for the day"³. Black women in 1928 were even further removed from direct and active participation in the Mayday celebrations of that year. According to Douglas Wolton:

"Bantu housewives rushed from cooking the evening meal to the doors to see their men-folk celebrating the first of May just like the white workers had always done."⁴

Their exclusion from the celebrations was not even remarked upon. Such inconsistency was not confined to the men only. In 1931 the Women's Department of the CPSA (which is described below) issued the following call to women on the occasion of International Women's Day:

1. Guardian, 19/5/39, op.cit.
2. Under 'sexist' I include views of women as inherently (and biologically) silly, frivolous, unintellectual, etc. An example from the pages of International would be the following joke, printed on 21/7/22. When asked how she had voted, a girl replied, "In my brown suit and squirrel toque".
3. International, 2/5/19.
4. Wolton: Whither South Africa? p.73.

"Women organise! Don't let your menfolk keep you back. To win their freedom, they need your help."¹

During the 1930's more attention came to be focussed on the position of women as workers, yet the regular 'Women's Page' feature of the Guardian continued to be filled mainly with recipes, advice on nutrition and childcare, fashion and beauty hints. Thus prevailing views on women's apolitical, domestic nature were tacitly endorsed.

However, despite its inconsistencies, the CPSA did take a lead in expanding its political work to include women as well. The extent and depth of its attention given to the organising of women increased even though this remained very much a subsidiary issue. By the late 1920's, the first approaches to black women were being made, with the recruitment of the first black female members into the party. The non-racialism inherent in the CPSA's class analysis thus began to penetrate into the sphere of women's political consciousness. Roux, in his biography of CPSA leader, S.P. Bunting, refers to a meeting organised by the CPSA outside Vereeniging location in 1928, at which several hundred new members, "including numbers of women", joined the party². His special mention of the women makes it apparent that this was an unusual, noteworthy occurrence.

That same year, 1928, saw the poorly documented meeting of women at Potchefstroom, already mentioned, which both the CPSA and ANC women attended. This was possibly the earliest meeting where black and white women came together within a common, explicitly political framework. The reference is frustratingly sketchy, appearing in a letter from S.P. Bunting to E. Roux, written at the time. This mentions that

1. Umsebenzi, 20/2/31.

2. Roux: S.P. Bunting, p.79. According to Simons and Simons, op.cit., p.399, 63 women joined at this meeting.

"Becky (Rebecca Bunting, his wife) went to Potchefstroom to a women's meeting with Molly (Mary Wolton) and coloured Mrs. Bhola, a new chum from the African National Congress"¹. Although Bunting does not mention the purpose of the meeting, it seems more than likely that it was connected to the unrest then centred on the local permit system in Potchefstroom.

The permit question in Potchefstroom was clearly of deep concern to women. There appears to have been two main issues at stake - firstly, the cost of the permits and secondly, the fact that children over the age of 18 were required to take out permits in order to be able to continue living with their parents². In identifying itself with the local campaign, the CPSA was making an important start in popularising itself amongst black women. At that stage, the whites-only suffrage campaign was nearing its completion. Here, in marked contrast to the suffrage campaign, an attempt was being made to reach out to women across racial barriers and deal with issues of vital popular concern. In this attempt, the antecedents of the FSAW's own multiracial and populist political philosophy can already be seen.

At this time, and undoubtedly through these contacts, the first black woman to play any significant role within the CPSA was recruited. This was Josie Palmer, a Potchefstroom resident who was deeply involved in the anti-permit campaign³. She was to play an important part in the events leading up to the establishment of the FSAW. Through her, the CPSA was

1. Roux, op.cit., p.103.

2. This is based on the information supplied by J. Palmer in the J. Wells interview, op.cit.

3. Roux, op.cit., p.86, has described her as "the only African woman who played any part in the Communist movement at this time". According to Palmer herself, she was not, strictly speaking, African, but 'Coloured'. (J. Wells interview, op.cit.). This is a peculiarly South African distinction - and obsession. What is relevant is that she lived in African areas and always identified herself strongly with issues affecting blacks, African or 'Coloured'. In early newspaper reports her name is frequently spelled in an Africanised version, Mpama, not Palmer.

able to disseminate more radical ideas on the part women should be playing in black opposition politics, amongst black women.

The early 1930's saw a sudden flurry of activity amongst women within the CPSA which coincided with the recruitment of new, energetic women members. Apart from Josie Palmer and Mary Wolton, another extremely important woman who joined the party at this time was Ray Alexander. She arrived in South Africa from Latvia in 1929 and became active in leftwing trade unionism almost from the moment that she first set foot in South Africa. It would be difficult to overestimate the extremely large part Alexander played in preparing the ground for the establishment of the FSAW over the next 25 years. Both within the CPSA and in various trade union organisations, she actively promoted issues concerning women - their need to organise, their poor working conditions, the difficulties for women who combined two jobs, one within the home and one within the shop or factory¹. The greater degree of attention paid to women workers by the CPSA from this time was in large part her responsibility.

By February 1931 the increased participation of women within the CPSA had led to the establishment of a Women's Department within the party. Its earliest statements showed an unself-conscious acceptance of women's supportive, rather than directly involved political role - it was this group that urged women to organise so that their men could win their freedom, at the 1931 International Women's Day Celebrations. But it soon showed signs of beginning to explore the wider possibilities.

1. During the 1930's Umsebenzi and its successor, the Guardian, printed several articles by her on these subjects, for instance 'Working Women and War' (Umsebenzi, 22/8/36) and 'The Mother's Means Test, Inadequate Confinement Allowances' (Guardian, 14/4/38). A number of other unsigned articles in this vein were probably written by her too. At the 6th Congress of the CPSA, in September, 1936, she spoke on the great increase in the numbers of women employed in the clothing, textile and leather industries, where hardly any trade unions were operating. She appealed to the Congress on the need for organisational and educational work among women (Umsebenzi, 19/9/36).

in the organisation of women as well. In June 1931 Umsebenzi carried an announcement that it would be convening a Women's National Conference shortly and preliminary meetings to elect delegates should be organised by local Women's Departments. At these meetings, "all questions affecting women should be discussed ... and linked up with the men's struggles"¹. In August the aims of the proposed conference were set out more fully:

"This conference is being called in order to unify and consolidate the sectional struggle of women ... and in order to bring into existence a permanent organisation of struggle for the working women of South Africa."²

The immediate issue prompting this conference was an attempt to enforce curfew regulations on the Witwatersrand for African women. Umsebenzi had reported this as pending on June 12th 1931, and vigorous protest, harking back to the anti-pass campaign in the Free State, followed within the African community. It seems that the CPSA saw this opposition as a lever for raising the level of resistance to the state on a number of other issues and extending the base of this resistance to include women as well. In this vein, 'Umsebenzi' urged African women that they "must not content themselves with struggle against this incident of persecution, but ... must fight against the whole system of Imperialist oppression, for a Native Republic, in defence of the Soviet Union ..."³ The Women's Department described the forthcoming conference as a "fitting answer" to attempts by Pirow (Minister of Justice) "to force the women of Africa into the position of serfs by the imposition of passes".⁴

1. Umsebenzi, 26/6/31.

2. Ibid, 21/8/31.

3. Quoted by Johns, op.cit., p.556.

4. Umsebenzi, 21/8/31. The month before this report appeared, garment workers on the Rand had come out on strike. This strike, one of the longest and largest by women workers yet witnessed, received considerable publicity and no doubt contributed to the feeling already present that women were ripe for organising into a national body.

It does not appear that the conference ever took place. The original date in September was postponed¹ and thereafter no further references to it appear in the pages of Umsebenzi. Several reasons can be advanced for this. At that time, The CPSA was in a state of confusion over the expulsion of Bunting and his supporters². Furthermore, the degree of actual support the party generated among women was too small to sustain so ambitious a project as a national organisation of working women. In this proposal one can see the germ of an idea which later would re-emerge and lead to the establishment of the FSAW. In the early 1930's, however, given the position of most women at the time, the proposal was premature.

The attempt to convene this conference marks a highpoint in practical efforts to organise the women as a group within the CPSA before the war. Thereafter such attempts subsided, although the need for such activity continued to be propagated by women members. In 1935 an article in Umsebenzi complained that the party was neglecting its work among women, and "must endeavour in the course of the next year to set up special organisations for drawing women into the struggle"³. This call was repeated by Ray Alexander at the 1936 Congress of the party⁴ and again, in 1937, by Josie Palmer. Palmer followed up her call for women to "join the struggle against

1. Umsebenzi, 18/9/31.

2. S.P. Bunting was expelled in 1931, along with a number of other CPSA members accused of being "right wing, social democratic and vacillating elements" by a new 'Bolshevik' leadership under the Woltons. The effect of this on the party and its black support was damaging. On this, see Roux: Time Longer than Rope and S.P. Bunting.

3. Umsebenzi, 16/5/35.

4. See above, 84 footnote 1.

oppressive laws",¹ by an article, printed in Umsebenzi, in which she dealt with the need for African women specifically to organise². In this article, Palmer criticised the NCAW that had been set up by the AAC two years previously, as an ineffective body - it had fallen into the wrong hands, its leaders had "buried it".

In addition to attention paid to African women, women in the CPSA were making some overtures to 'Coloured' women as well. They were helped in this by the ferment produced within 'Coloured' politics in the Cape by the passage of the whites-only Women's Enfranchisement Act of 1930. This Act drastically reduced the effectiveness of the 'Coloured' vote within Parliamentary electoral politics³ and had a radicalising impact on 'Coloured' people's thinking. Their ambiguous status, halfway between that of the privileged whites and grossly exploited Africans, was being more clearly defined in terms of their common "non-whiteness" with the latter group, though recognition of this was still confined largely to a small group of intellectuals.

One of the most important contacts the CPSA developed amongst 'Coloured' women active in politics at the time was Cissy Gool, the daughter of the veteran Dr. Abdurahman (of the APO) and a Cape Town City Councillor after 1938⁴. The passage of the discriminatory Women's Enfranchisement Act had certainly

1. Umsebenzi, 20/1/37.

2. Umsebenzi, 26/6/37.

3. In 1929 Black voters in the Cape accounted for 19,9% of the total voters roll. In 1931, after the franchise laws had been amended to grant universal suffrage to whites, male and female, they dropped to only 10,9% of the roll. See Walker: The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa, Appendix B, p.124.

4. Roux, Time Longer than Rope, p.357.

had a radicalising effect on her. At a protest meeting held in the Cape Town City Hall to voice opposition to the Act she declared, in the less security-conscious language of the time, "I am afraid that I am slowly going Red"¹. Subsequently she came to play a prominent part in radical black circles in the Cape during the 1930's and 1940's. As president of an organisation called the National Liberation League (NLL), Cissy Gool worked closely with the CPSA in Cape Town². In the late 1930's she cooperated with attempts by the CPSA to launch a 'Non European United Front' which envisaged drawing in the NLL, CPSA and the ANC in a broad programme of political action in the form of demonstrations, boycotts and strikes³.

Although work amongst women specifically was by no means Cissy Gool's major preoccupation, she did initiate several attempts at organisation by 'Coloured' women, none of which appear to have survived very long. Thus, in 1938 she presided at a meeting to establish a 'League for the Enfranchisement of Non-European Women'⁴. In 1938, with 'Coloured' men still enfranchised, women's suffrage could appeal to the tiny section of 'Coloured' women who, if it were not for their sex,

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1. Empire Group of South Africa: Franchise Rights and Wrongs gives a description of this meeting and Cissy Gool's speech.
 2. The NLL was established in 1937. Roux, op.cit., p.357, describes it as "largely communist-inspired", a "reflection of the growth of radical ideas ...".
 3. This formed part of the CPSA's 'United Front' against Fascism in the face of the rise of Nazism, both in South Africa and Europe, and the threat of the Second World War. See below, p. 119.
 4. Guardian, 26/8/38. A speech made by one of the participants, Hawa Ahmed, is reproduced in van der Ross: A Political and Social History of the Cape Coloured People, Vol. 3, Document 36. At about the same time, Cissy Gool was also busy setting up a more local women's organisation, the 'Salt River and Observatory Ladies Welfare Organisation', to protest a proposed Residential Segregation Ordinance in Cape Town (Guardian, 21/8/38). What became of this has vanished into obscurity as well.

would otherwise have qualified for the vote in the Cape. Women's suffrage was not an issue with broad appeal to black women, however, and little more was heard of the League.

CPSA work amongst black women in Cape Town became more pronounced with the establishment of a 'Consumer Vigilance Council' in 1939. This Council, dealing with rising food costs, was first formed to protest the prosecution of a local baker for selling bread below the official price¹. Its reception was more promising than that afforded the suffrage League.

Rising food costs was an issue with a broad appeal, as shown by the wide range of organisations represented on the Council, including the NCW, NLL, South African Trades and Labour Council, South African Railway and Harbour Workers' Union, Chemical and Allied Workers' Union, South African Socialist Party and the CPSA². Although the Council was not an exclusively female body, the issues it took up were of primary concern to women, especially housewives, and women, including Ray Alexander and Cissy Gool, were actively associated with it³. During the war, this area, the rising cost of living, would become a particularly fruitful one for the CPSA round which to organise black women of Cape Town.

Throughout the 1930's the overriding concern of the CPSA in organising women, whether against passes, rising food costs or discriminatory legislation, was to mobilise them for a common struggle with men against the white supremacist state. While Communists might debate the tactical precedence that they should grant the black nationalist struggle over the struggle for a socialist society - was it to be a two stage

1. Guardian, 31/1/39.

2. Ibid.

3. A deputation it organised to see the Mayor, about the prosecution of the baker, consisted of the following individuals: Mrs. Chapman Handley, Mrs. N. Abdurahman, Cissy Gool, Ray Alexander, B. Honman, Bill Andrews, J.C. Cunningham, H. Snitcher, J. Morley-Turner, J.A. La Guma, E. Weinberg, and S. Kahn. (Guardian, 31/1/39).

or one-stage route to a Workers' and Peasants' Republic?¹ - the view that women's struggle for emancipation from sex-based discrimination was subordinate to the broader general struggle was never in doubt within communist circles. This perspective would be an influential one within the national liberation movement.

Nevertheless, it was within the CPSA that the idea of a broad-based political organisation of women was most successfully nurtured during the 1930's. Individual women assumed a far more prominent part in it than in any other political body and several important female political leaders of the 1940's and 1950's emerged publicly at this time. Although the number of women actually involved within it was very small, the influence of the CPSA was more extensive than numbers might imply. Through the leftwing press, it managed to disseminate its ideas more widely, amongst other black political organisations and within the trade union movement where it was actively involved. Some of these ideas endorsed established conventions on women's domestic, apolitical role uncritically, as we have seen. Yet, for all its contradictions, the CPSA was encouraging new ways of thinking about their position amongst women, particularly by focussing attention on the position of working women and trying to establish contact between women of different colour groups.

"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."²

In the 1930's these were subversive words indeed.

1. This was at stake in the split within the CPSA over the 'Native Republic' programme of 1928. On this see Legassick: Class and Nationalism in South African Protest.

2. Umsebenzi, 10/2/32.

3. WOMEN AND THE TRADE UNIONS

The trade unions were an important area of organisation for women from the point of view of the FSAW. To illustrate this, one need look only at the list of sponsors which appeared at the bottom of the invitation to delegates to attend its inaugural conference¹. Many of these women had come to prominence and received their early political training in trade union work. Ray Alexander, who has been mentioned already, is the most outstanding example. During the 1930's and 40's she was extremely active in unionising previously unorganised industries (shopworkers, chemical, sweet, laundry, tin, shoe repair and, in 1941, the food and canning industries²). In organising the FSAW's inaugural conference, she drew on contacts thus built up with women workers throughout the country, over many years. Other trade unionists on the list of sponsors included Nancy Dick and Hetty McLeod in Cape Town Betty du Toit, Lucy Moubeb and Hetty du Preez in Johannesburg, Frances Baard, Gus Coe and Lily Diederichs in Port Elizabeth³.

The importance of the trade unions for the FSAW operated at two levels, leadership and general membership. On the leadership level, the trade unions were an important recruiting and training ground for potential women leaders denied access to other means of political expression (for instance, the vote). The career of Liz Abrahams of the Food and Canning Workers' Union illustrates this⁴. Having gone to school to Standard 4, she started work in a fruit canning factory in Paarl at the age of 14. At first her outlook was apolitical - she has described how she preferred to spend her lunch times

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1. See Appendix A for a full list of sponsors.
 2. See R. Close: New Life for an account of this.
 3. 'Conference to promote Women's Rights', 16/3/54, FSAW AI.
 4. The following is based on interviews with Ms Abrahams.

knitting rather than attending union meetings. The banning of the Union's President, Frank Marquard, in 1955 made her reconsider the role of the union. She became active in union affairs at a factory level and thereafter rose quickly to prominence within the union, till in 1956 she was elected national General Secretary. Through the union she came into contact with a wide circle of people opposed to the political status quo in South Africa. She was thus drawn into other spheres of political work and subsequently became an executive member of SACPO and of the FSAW's Cape Regional Committee, both bodies linked to the Congress Alliance.

At the level of the general membership, trade unionism introduced a wider circle of women to new techniques and concepts of organisation and encouraged a more critical attitude towards their experience as workers within society. For most women workers, generally poorly educated, without political rights, the trade unions were the one area where they could come into contact with ideas and issues stretching beyond their narrow experience within the home or factory. Certainly the more radical unions, which were prominent in the efforts to organise black workers in South Africa, included political education of their members in their programmes. This was the case in the Food and Canning Workers Union which, with its predominantly female membership, affiliated to the FSAW after 1954.

In the trade union movement, many women came into contact for the first time with new ideas about black-white relationships. These challenged the dominant ideology of white supremacy and its corollary, racial exclusivism. The non-racialism which the CPSA was espousing, received much wider dissemination through those trade unions which stressed the need for workers to stand together, regardless of race (and, less prominently, of sex), against exploitative bosses. This fundamental principle of trade unionism was bitterly disputed in South Africa and led to deep divisions within the movement. Yet

non-racial ideas did take tentative root among important sections of the working class in the pre-World War II period. In the 1940's when trade unionism among Africans was making considerable headway, this proved an important ideological influence.

Women workers were not exempt from the fierce disputes dividing the trade union movement. Yet the potential for non-racial cooperation, based on perceived common interests, was probably larger in this sphere than in other areas regarded as more purely 'political', for instance, that of the suffrage. The history of the Garment Workers Union (Transvaal) illustrates the slow, uneven spread of ideas of worker solidarity amongst an important section of the white female industrial labour force at this time¹.

The notion of working class solidarity regardless of race or sex also reinforced these ideas already noted in the Bantu Women's League and the Communist Party, of the common struggle to be waged by men and women, in this case, working men and women. In the early years, when the numbers of women in industry were very small, some attempts were made to unionise women into a general union, on the basis of their sex. These did not take root. Women were drawn into the trade unions within the existing framework of industry-based unions embracing all employees within a particular industry, for instance, leather or steel. Because of sex-stereotyping of industries, however, women tended to be concentrated in those few industries whose line of production conformed most nearly to work previously done by women privately, in the home, notably the clothing and food industries. The unions established in these areas therefore developed a predominantly female membership and, to some extent, leadership. As a result they did take a more active interest in issues relating particularly to female work conditions (for example, pregnancy leave and compulsory overtime).

1. See below pp. 96-99.

However, in the period before World War II, the impact of trade unionism on the political consciousness of women in general, was very limited. This period should rather be seen as a preliminary to the more significant period of female unionisation that followed in the 1940's and 1950's. As the previous chapter has pointed out, there were relatively few women employed in industry in the 1920's - in 1924/25 the figures for private industry were 154 403 men to 15 273 women¹. The numbers of women in factory work were on the increase, but at this stage, it was primarily white women who were entering industrial employment. African women were almost entirely absent - only 709 of the 15 000 women working in factories in 1924/25 were African. The importance of trade union work amongst women was obviously tempered by the smallness of the female labour force. At the same time, the fact that so few African women were involved, probably shifted trade unionist attention away from women workers still more, since the trade union movement was preoccupied with the issue of whether and how the African labour force should be organised.

As individuals, women were involved in labour activity from an early stage. In 1911 Mary Fitzgerald organised and led a group of women to assist a tramway workers' strike in Johannesburg². By sitting down on the tracks outside the tram depot, they effectively prevented scabbers from taking trams out. According to Walker and Weinbren, the first strike in which women workers predominated, took place in 1917, in the printing industry in Johannesburg³. Led by the newly formed Printers' Assistants Union, the workers struck for higher wages with apparent success. By 1919 an attempt to organise women within a single general union had materialised in the form of the 'Women Workers Industrial Union' - this

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1. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-6.
 2. Walker and Weinbren, op.cit., p.29.
 3. Ibid.

was the women's group that took part in the Mayday celebrations of that year as tea stewards¹.

How far women workers were from organising themselves on a unified basis was highlighted that same year by strike activity within the clothing industry. A successful strike for higher wages conducted by 112 white clothing workers (88 of them women) ran almost simultaneously with an unsuccessful one by 'Coloured' women workers at another factory nearby². Unlike the white women, all these women lost their jobs. At no stage was there any show of solidarity or attempt to link the two strikes together, although the newspaper International, did draw attention to the anomalies of the situation³.

The following year a remarkably early and, it would seem, premature attempt at organising black women was made by the ICU in conjunction with the APO, according to van der Ross in his Political and Social History of the Cape Coloured People⁴. These two bodies arranged a meeting in Cape Town in September 1920 which was attended by about 50 women⁵. Unfortunately information on any subsequent developments is unavailable. With a mere 709 African women in private

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1. See above, p. 81. The reference to it is made in International, 2/5/19.
 2. International, Oct/Nov, 1919.
 3. International, 24/10/19.
 4. Van der Ross, op.cit., p.108. It is interesting that in their biographical sketch of Charlotte Maxeke, Karis and Carter (op.cit., Vol. 4), mention that she was in touch with Kadalie and Msimang of the ICU in its early stages. Whether she had any influence in prompting this step is a matter for speculation, however. There is no available evidence that she ever visited Cape Town in this regard.
 5. Van der Ross, op.cit., loc.cit.

industry in 1924, it is hard to know what the scope of a women's section of the ICU could have been - except for helping with "shelter and entertainment" on the lines of the Bantu Women's League.

A further attempt to get a general 'Women Workers' Union' off the ground surfaced in 1925. Fanny Klenerman of the Communist Party was a moving force behind this, declaring that "the conditions under which the majority of working women live and work in South Africa is a disgrace to civilisation"¹. A meeting was held and a committee elected², but thereafter no further references to the union appeared in newspaper columns. In view of the tremendous problems encountered in organising the male industrial labour force, the lack of consciousness about the position of women in evidence in the major political bodies of the time, white and black, and the small numbers of women actually involved in production, these attempts were almost bound to fail. However, as stages in the spread of trade unionist consciousness among women in South Africa, they are worth noting.

From about this time, the most significant and well documented trade union work among women was taking place among garment workers on the Rand, under the auspices of the Garment Workers' Union³. In later years this Union moved away from its early radicalism towards the so-called 'centre' in South African trade union politics. It broke with the more leftwing tradition of trade unionism that led, in 1955, to the establishment of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), the trade union body with the closest links to the FSAW. Thus

1. Forward, 27/3/25.

2. Forward, 3/4/25.

3. See E.S. Sachs: Rebels' Daughters, for an 'inside' history of the union. Sachs was General Secretary of the Union from the early 1920's till 1952 when he was forced to resign in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. Sachs was a member of the CPSA during the 1920's but in 1931 he was expelled along with S.P. Bunting and others.

in a history of the FSAW, the Garment Workers' Union does not occupy a special place. However, in the 1930's it did have a radicalising effect on many of its members and contributed several prominent organisers to the union movement, for instance, the sisters Johanna and Hester Cornelius and Betty du Toit (who was a signatory to the invitation to the inaugural conference of the FSAW). The history of the union, particularly in its early days, is a stirring one and reveals the high degree of trade union militancy that South African women workers have, on occasion, shown. It also provides an insight on the nature of racial divisions between black and white workers and the exploitation of these divisions by white political parties.

In the 1920's and early 1930's most of the employees in the clothing industry were young, white Afrikaner women who were flocking to the towns from the country to escape the rural poverty described in Chapter One. The race attitudes they brought with them were deeply rooted, centering on notions of white 'baasskap' and Afrikaner exclusivism. Johanna Cornelius (after 1934, President of the Garment Workers' Union) summed them up thus:

"It took me years to get used to the notion that even the English - let alone the natives - were human beings."¹

The harsh conditions of work these women encountered, have been described already - the long hours, compulsory "homework", low wages, rudimentary facilities. With the establishment of the Garment Workers Union, however, conditions began to improve. This won for the Union, as well as its General Secretary, E.S. Sachs, the strong support and loyalty of its members. Through the Union, the broader principles and more radical creed of working class unity undermined many garment workers' loyalty to the narrow exclusivism of Afrikanerdom,

1. Quoted in B. Davidson, Report on Southern Africa, p.179.

to the alarm of Afrikaner nationalists. For instance, during the 1930's, a number of prominent garment workers were included in delegations of workers to the USSR which were sponsored by the CPSA¹. They were thus exposed to new experiences and ideological influences and the effect on these individuals' political development was often profound. Johanna Cornelius, for instance, had no knowledge of Lenin or the Bolshevik Revolution when she went on board ship for the USSR in 1933². The extent to which her political outlook had broadened through the Union was demonstrated by a Mayday message she gave in 1938 along with two other Garment Workers' Union leaders:

"(Ons) stuur Meidag groete aan alle vrouiwerkers en hoop vir eenheid vir die vrou van Suid Afrika."³

Through report-back meetings and letters home, some of the new ideas which trade unionists abroad were absorbing, filtered down to the general membership as well.

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1. Garment workers who visited the USSR in the 1930's included Johanna Cornelius and Kathleen Parker in 1933 (Umsebenzi, 7/10/33), Julia Kruger in 1936 (Umsebenzi, 18/7/36), Anna Scheepers and Sophie Venter in 1938 (Umsebenzi, 16/12/38).
 2. Davidson, op.cit., p.179, quotes her thus: "I hadn't the slightest idea who Lenin was. And I remember on the boat that people began to talk about us as Bolshies and Katie Parker and I were worried about this and asked why they did. Then P. Farmer, the other delegate, told us about the Bolshevik Revolution and about Lenin". Delegates were also often struck by the economic independence and equality Russian women appeared to experience. K. Parker, for instance (at a report-back meeting in Johannesburg) commented on a woman she had met cleaning engines. J. Cornelius was struck by being addressed as 'Comrade' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.'. (Umsebenzi, 3/2/34).
 3. Guardian, 29/4/38.

By the late 1930's such radical sentiments as Cornelius was espousing, were coming under attack from both within and without the garment industry. For one thing, the influx of black women into the industry was getting under way. Non-racial working class principles were being put to a practical test. For another, after 1934, agents of the Nationalist Party engaged in a bitter struggle to gain control of those unions with a predominant or large Afrikaans membership. They aimed at smashing the influence of "alien" (non-Afrikaner) ideologies and harnessing these unions to the political service of Afrikaner nationalism. In doing so they exploited racial prejudices and fears. While the Garment Workers' Union resisted the attack on its leadership, which focussed particularly on the General Secretary, Sachs, its commitment to an open trade unionism was blunted. This was marked by the establishment of a parallel branch for 'Coloured' garment workers, instead of their incorporation within the existing body, in 1940¹.

Before World War Two, then, trade unionism was only just beginning to make headway among women workers in South Africa. Most union work was being carried out among white women, who, apart from several extremely important individuals, would not make a large contribution towards the establishment of the FSAW. Some new ideas on the need to organise women and their changing economic roles were, however, beginning to circulate in trade union circles, encouraged particularly by the CPUSA. During the war and after, these would take a firmer hold amongst an expanding black female labour force.

1. See below, p. 160.

SUMMARY : 1910 - 1939

A brief review of the material covered shows that by the time of the outbreak of war in 1939, some of the ground in which the FSAW was later to take root, had been prepared. The idea that women needed to organise themselves to deal with particular problems had already surfaced in a number of different ways, along with the belief that such an organisation must commit itself to a broader political struggle, involving both men and women, for the overthrow of the structures of white supremacy. Several women who would be important in getting the FSAW established, were already active - Ray Alexander, Josie Palmer, Betty du Toit. Contact between women of different races was sparse but the ideal of non-racialism was already present.

The actual organisation of women within the ANC, CPSA and trade unions was still in an early stage, sketchy and hesitant. For the most part, women were viewed by society and viewed themselves as apolitical and domestic beings. This was true whether they were living in the tribal reserves or the westernised towns. However, prompted by some far-reaching economic and demographic developments, women in the towns were beginning to stir. As far back as 1913, the Free State anti-pass campaign had revealed that a potential for political activism did exist amongst women. On this potential the coming of the war in 1939 was to act as a catalyst.

THE ROOTS OF THE FSAW, 1939 - 1954

During the 1940's the tempo of political work amongst women within the incipient national liberation movement quickened. Long term developments in their position in society were beginning to manifest themselves. The war ushered in a new phase in South Africa's economic development which encouraged trends already noticeable in the 1920's and 1930's. Changes in their economic position, the accelerating rate of urbanisation, among African women in particular, the decay of the traditional African family structure, the rising cost of living were some of the pressures pushing women into a more assertive political stance.

At the same time, women were being caught up to a greater extent in the general stirring on the political front which the war stimulated¹. During the 1940's the political positions of government and black opposition groups were becoming increasingly polarised. At first, the war appeared to be ushering in a more liberal spirit in the United Party government's 'Native Policy'; the Smit Report of 1942 and Fagan Commission of 1946 raised hopes of a gradual relaxation of some of the more oppressive laws². Such hopes proved unfounded. The Smuts government did nothing to restructure

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1. Some of the major developments in this process are mentioned below. There is not, however, space to go into the general background in detail and the reader is referred, once again, to general histories of the period, in addition to more specialised studies, e.g. P. Walshe: The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa, R.E. Johnson: Indians and Apartheid in South Africa.
 2. The Smit Report (Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Social, Health and Economic Conditions of Urban Natives, 1942) recommended relaxing the pass laws. The Fagan Commission (Native Laws Commission, UG 28-48) favoured a qualified recognition of a permanent African population in the towns.

existing economic and political relationships between white and black in any fundamental way. In 1948 the National Party was elected to power in an upset victory over the United Party and the 'apartheid' era in South African politics was introduced. This heralded an intensification of conflict between the State and the disenfranchised black majority as the government sought to buttress the system of cheap black labour in a changing economic environment, and consolidate its hold on power by stamping out any serious opposition. As the possibilities of compromise faded, political attitudes amongst blacks hardened; the ANC and SAIC expanded into mass-based organisations.

The repercussions on women's political consciousness were manifested in a broadening of the scope of political work amongst them. As the national liberation movement itself began to take shape, the possibilities for drawing women into this movement expanded. In addition to the areas already considered in Chapter Two - the ANC, CPSA and trade unions - other important areas of organisation amongst women at this time were to be found in the SAIC and various grassroots consumer organisations that sprang up in response to rising food costs. Developments in these organisations during and after the war were a prelude to the establishment of the FSAW in April 1954. In this chapter, the historical contribution of each to this event will be considered.

1. THE ANC AND THE REVIVAL OF THE WOMEN'S LEAGUE

The organisation and programme of the ANC underwent several significant changes in the 1940's. Under the presidency of Dr. A.B. Xuma (1940-49), its structure was overhauled and the basis for a mass political party laid. At the same time, the ANC programme was being reoriented in a more radical direction, the Congress Youth League (CYL), established in 1943, playing a large part in this regard. Increasingly, as successive governments refused to accommodate African

political aspirations, the Congress leadership was coming to accept the inevitability of confrontational rather than conciliatory politics.

Already in 1943 the ANC committed itself to a policy of universal adult franchise (thereby incorporating women into its political programme)¹. By 1946 the Congress was talking of a common voting roll (as opposed to the system of racially separate rolls instituted in place of the Cape franchise in 1936²), implicit in which was the endorsement of eventual African majority rule instead of mere partnership with the white minority group. In 1949, for the first time, the ANC's 'Programme of Action' called for such methods as boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience as the means to achieve its goal now defined as "national freedom", the "right to self-determination under the banner of African Nationalism"³. The first wide-scale implementation of such tactics came in 1952 when the ANC, with the SAIC, launched the Defiance Campaign, involving some eight and a half thousand volunteers in an organised campaign of defiance against selected targets of racial discrimination⁴.

These developments encouraged a growth in members from an estimated formal membership of just under 2 000 in 1944-45 to 5 517 in 1947⁵. (This does not take into account the

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1. Walshe, op.cit., p.276.
 2. Ibid., p.285.
 3. Ibid., p.291.
 4. For instance, by travelling on whites-only trains or using whites-only Post Office facilities. According to L. Kuper: Passive Resistance in South Africa, p.123, 8557 volunteers took part, the majority (5719) in the Eastern Cape. The government response was to introduce more stringent security legislation, the Public Safety Act and Criminal Laws Amendment Act, both of 1953. See also D. Carter: 'The Defiance Campaign - a comparative analysis of the organisation, leadership and participation in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal'.
 5. Walshe, op.cit., pp.19, 47.

informal membership - individuals who considered themselves ANC members and supporters but had not paid the annual subscription of 2/6.) Then, from 1950, with the adoption of the militant 'Programme of Action', the ANC witnessed a spectacular increase in membership. By 1952, under the impact of the Defiance Campaign, this had reached a peak of almost 100 000¹.

The 1940's also witnessed a move towards greater cooperation with other political bodies which were opposed to the white supremacist state, although the African identity of the ANC was jealously guarded. Relationships with the Communist Party continued to seesaw. Between 1943 and 1945 the ANC cooperated with the CPSA in the anti-pass campaign that the latter had launched², but the presence of communist members in the ANC, for instance, J.B. Marks and Moses Kotane, continued to be a source of tension and conflict within its ranks. However, mounting state repression against all radical opposition did lead to a more sympathetic and accommodating attitude towards the communists in the 1940's. For its own part, the CPSA tended to downplay ideological differences with the nationalist movement.

During this time, relationships also improved between the ANC and the Indian Congress. In 1945, this body was taken over by a radical leadership under Dr. Naicker in Natal and Dr. Dadoo in the Transvaal³. In 1947 the so-called 'Doctor's Pact' between Xuma of the ANC and Naicker and Dadoo of the SAIC confirmed the growing measure of cooperation between the two organisations. These developments foreshadowed the implementation of the Congress Alliance of the 1950's.

The revival of the ANC was, however, a slow, uneven process. Internal conflicts and organisational weaknesses continued

1. Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.403.

2. See below, p. 120.

3. See below, p. 132.

to undermine its potential strength. Xuma failed to eradicate friction between the centre and provincial Congresses which disrupted its functioning and dissipated its energies. Ideologically there were significant differences between the supporters of a radical, exclusive African nationalism (found mainly within the Youth League) and the supporters of a broader, non-racial approach. Nevertheless, the post-war period saw the emergence of the ANC as a major channel of African political expression. From an organisation representing the tiny African elite, it was coming to assume the proportions of the national liberation movement it later claimed to be. As such, it was identified as a dangerous threat by the state. After 1948 the coercive powers of the state to contain such threats were vastly extended and strengthened; ultimately the growing tide of popular resistance would be ruthlessly contained.

In this process of reorganisation and revival within the ANC, women did, to some extent, share. In its attempt to build up a mass membership, the Congress hierarchy identified women as one potential area of recruitment that had previously been neglected. Some steps to rectify this were taken. Thus in 1941 the following resolution was passed at the annual Conference:

"That this Conference recommends to the parent body the necessity of reviving the women's section of the Congress in terms of the provision of the Constitution. Further, that women be accorded the same status as men in the classification of membership. That the following means be made to attract the women: (a) to make the programme of the Congress as attractive as possible to the women, (b) a careful choice of leadership."¹

1. Karis and Carter, *op.cit.*, Vol. 2, Document 25C, 'Resolutions of ANC Annual Conference of Dec. 14-16, 1941'.

The following year, according to Walshe, women were again one of the areas specially mentioned at the annual conference in connection with a call by Xuma for a mass membership drive. This should aim at the "involvement of the chiefs, ministers of religion, women, youths, indeed 'every African'"¹.

The new concern with women did not reflect only a desire to attract greater numbers to the ANC. It also reflected the recognition that the position of women had undergone real changes since the first ANC constitution had been drawn up in 1919. Congress was lagging behind and it was time to grant women "the same status as men".

At the same time, it had become apparent that existing organisations, such as the NCAW, were not undertaking political work amongst the broad masses of African women. For this, a new structure, under the auspices of the ANC, was required.

In this process of re-evaluation of women's role within Congress, the influence of the American second wife of Dr. Xuma, Madie-Hall Xuma, must have been significant². Walshe refers in general terms to her influence, as an American Negro, in contributing to the ANC's continued identification with the Civil Rights struggle in the USA³. On the question of women, she certainly considered herself to have more advanced views than most South Africans⁴ and presumably played a large role in getting the ANC Women's League established.

1. Walshe, op.cit., p.390, citing Xuma's Presidential address to the Conference.
2. Madie-Hall Xuma is described by Walshe, op.cit., p.340, as an American from Georgia, an active social worker and a M.A. graduate from Columbia University. Xuma, whose first wife had died in 1934, met and married her on a visit to the USA in 1937-38.
3. Walshe, op.cit., p.340.
4. See below, p. 110.

This was finally achieved in 1943. At the annual conference of that year the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) was formally set up and Madie-Hall Xuma elected its first President¹. No longer auxiliary members, women were now granted full membership status, with the right to vote and participate in Congress affairs at all levels². At the same time, by setting up a separate organisation for them within the ANC, women were recognised to have "special additional duties and responsibilities" which, at a later date, were identified as:

- "(a) to arouse the interest of African women in the struggle for freedom and equality and assist the widespread organisation of women;
- (b) to take up special problems and issues affecting women, and
- (c) to carry on propoganda against apartheid and discriminatory laws among African women"³.

The precedence that the national struggle for "freedom and equality" took over that of the "special problems and issues" of women was clearly indicated and the dominance of the parent body over the Women's League further spelled out:

"It (the Women's League) is under the political direction and control of the Congress, and it follows the policy and programme of the Congress".⁴

In structure, too, the ANCWL followed that of the parent body, operating on three levels, national, provincial and

1. Walshe, op.cit., p.101.
2. Ibid., p.380, citing the 'Constitution of the ANC 1943'.
3. 'Rules and Regulations of the African National Congress Women's League', mimeo, p.1, FSAW II H1.
4. Ibid.

branch. According to an anonymous history of the League, provincial congresses were not set up until the late 1940's however, and the Women's League did not get going as a "real force" until then¹.

The establishment of the ANCWL in 1943 is a significant event in any history of political organisation among women in South Africa. A body aiming to represent the interests of the majority of South African women was thus set up and a structure created for channelling the still diffuse, largely inarticulate aspirations of African women into the national liberation movement, on an equal basis with men. The ANC had finally come to incorporate women, one half of the people it claimed to represent, into its political frame of reference. For the subsequent organisation of women in the FSAW it was an important step - after 1954 by far the largest proportion of the Federation's members were affiliated to it through their membership of the ANCWL.

Yet in 1943, only the barest outline of a structure was created. The large scale mobilization of African women that was aimed at was still to come. Material on the ANCWL during the 1940's is very thin. In the newspaper, the Guardian, a major source of information on black political groups at the time, the only reference to the Women's League for this period is in connection with a 'Women's Anti-Pass Conference' held in Johannesburg in March 1944². The ANCWL was one of the organisations represented. The main force behind the conference, however, was the CPSA not the ANC. The Conference is of interest in view of the very large role that the issue of passes would play in the rapid growth of the ANCWL after 1950. But in 1944 African women did not yet have to carry passes themselves. The focus of the conference was on the supportive role women should play in the national anti-pass campaign then being conducted by the

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1. 'The History of the ANC Women's League and the role of women', nd, carbon typescript, p.3.
 2. Guardian, 6/4/44.

CPSA against passes for men. Women were not directly involved on a large scale.

In his account of the ANC during the 1940's, Walshe, too, barely refers to the Women's League. The only direct reference is in connection with the constitution of 1943. There is one other possible, indirect reference to it - a fund-raising event organised by Madie Hall Xuma (a "successful stage production", the 'American Negro Revue') which contributed £216 to ANC funds¹. It is quite likely that the ANCWL was involved. In 1954, a woman delegate to the annual ANC conference was to complain that "women have been used as tools to raise money without representation in Congress"². It seems then that, certainly in the 1940's and despite its new formal status, the ANCWL was still in much the same position as the earlier Bantu Women's League had been - not very active, its work limited to conventional "women's work" such as fund-raising and catering. The gap between a theoretical endorsement of equality between the sexes and daily practice was still a very large one in the ANC.

In Chapter One the significance of economic and demographic developments in creating the preconditions for greater political involvement by women was discussed. Certainly, industrialisation and Urbanisation were having a profound effect on the traditional position of African women, destroying old patterns of authority and eroding the traditional family structure in which women occupied a junior role. The new ANC constitution was a pointer in the direction where changes were leading. However, the impact of these developments was uneven and their influence on political practice

1. Walshe, *op.cit.*, p.396.

2. Drum, February 1954, p.11. This photo-essay report on the 41st annual ANC conference did not elaborate on this statement but merely showed a photograph of Mrs. Gelana Twala, a delegate from Alexandra, Johannesburg, with the quotation as its caption.

often slow in taking effect. The pressures operating against the organisation of African men politically, were compounded in the case of women by additional forces relating to their female role in society. The dominant ideology of the family in the towns was still patriarchal and members of Congress, both male and female, were still conditioned by this.

In 1952 Madie-Hall Xuma, ANCWL president, herself testified to the power of patriarchal values in inhibiting the participation of African women in affairs outside the home. Interviewed for an article by Drum, titled 'Is a woman's place in the home?', she described how "in my country (the USA) women and men work on a 50-50 basis". In South Africa, however:

"some women have been reluctant to join our clubs¹ because their husbands feared they'd meet unsuitable women who might mislead them ... You see, the position of the women here is a little different from what it is in other parts of the world."²

Yet African women were by no means divorced from the political issues and campaigns of the time, which inevitably affected their political awareness too. Perhaps more than any other decade in the 20th Century, the 1940's were a transition period for African women politically. The rising costs of living and periodic food shortages that followed in the wake of the war, pressed particularly heavily on them as those most immediately involved in feeding and clothing their families with meagre resources. There are signs of their taking part in the demonstrations and deputations organised by local 'food committees' in response to these conditions³. Women were involved in the Alexandra Bus

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1. The reference here is not to the ANCWL but to the 'Zenzele' or 'Do-it-yourself' clubs which were run for women and in which Madie-Hall Xuma played a prominent role.
 2. Drum, September 1952, p.10.
 3. On the question of rising food costs and shortages and the grassroots, consumer responses to them, see below, p.142.

Boycott of 1943¹ and the squatter movements on the Rand from 1944², while in the trade unions African women were beginning to emerge as an area for recruitment. Several women who were later to play prominent parts, in both the Women's League and the FSAW, were involved in the Youth League at this time, notably Ida Mtwana³. In 1949 Ida Mtwana succeeded Madie-Hall Xuma as president of the ANCWL and thus the more radical, activist approach of the CYL filtered through to the women.

By the end of the 1940's the ANCWL was beginning to assert itself more strongly. 1949 saw the adoption of the 'Programme of Action' by the ANC annual Conference. The emergence of the ANCWL as a "real force" from this time was in part a product of the general heightening in the mood of black resistance that this programme both reflected and encouraged. As the ANC grew into a mass organisation, the scope of the ANCWL inevitably expanded as well.

The Defiance Campaign of 1952 was an important stimulus for the ANCWL and for the establishment of the FSAW as well. Many women participated in the Campaign⁴ and several important new recruits to the Women's League entered politics at this time. One of the most important of these was Lilian Ngoyi, later national president of both the ANCWL and the FSAW. Before the Defiance Campaign her background was extremely

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1. In August 1943 the busfare between Alexandra township and Johannesburg was raised by 1d each way. Rather than pay the increased fare, the township residents boycotted the buses and walked the 9 or more miles to town instead. After 9 days of boycott, the fare was reduced to the old level again.
 2. On this see, inter alia, M. Benson: The Struggle for a Birthright, pp.86-87.
 3. Drum, August 1953, 'Who's who in Congress'. Mtwana was described as one of the "backroom boys", a "Youth Leaguer, moving spirit among women, orator and heckler".
 4. D. Carter, op.cit., p.89, gives the following breakdown of male/female participation in two "sample groups" of defiers: in the Eastern Cape 1067 out of a total 2529 defiers were women; in the Transvaal, 173 out of 488 defiers were women. He does not explain on what the samples were based.

apolitical. Her family's answer to the hardships and inequalities they experienced was to seek comfort and hope in religion. Increasingly this failed to satisfy Ngoyi and, for her, the Defiance Campaign offered a dynamic, political alternative to religious quietism¹. Her rise to prominence within the ANC was rapid after 1952. Another woman very actively involved in the Campaign was Florence Matomela, at that stage president of the ANCWL in the Eastern Cape². Within a few months after the Campaign had ended, she was involved in the preliminary discussions on setting up the FSAW. The importance of the Defiance Campaign as an immediate spur to the founding of the FSAW can further be judged by the fact that it was from Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape, where the campaign was at its strongest, that the initiative for this step came³.

The single most important stimulus for the growth of the ANCWL at this time and, indirectly, the establishment of the FSAW in 1954, came from a familiar source that directly touched all African women - the threat of passes. In 1950 this issue came to the fore once again. As resistance to passes had led to the establishment of the Bantu Women's League, so now, some 35 years later, it precipitated a resurgence of political activity amongst a wide cross-section of African women in different centres throughout the Union. Although acting frequently with male support and direction, these women were roused by what was seen as a specific attack on them as women. While the ANCWL was not the only nor always the most important body involved in the demonstrations, the outburst of protest did politicise many African women, to the general benefit of the League.

1. Interview.

2. During the Defiance Campaign she was one of the 35 leaders arrested and charged by the state under the Suppression of Communism Act, in an attempt to break the Campaign. Drum, November 1952, 'Defiance in Durban'.

3. See below, p. 165 f.

These anti-pass protests of the early 1950's, localised and sporadic, do not compare in intensity and impact with the campaign that developed after 1956 when the actual distribution of passes to women was begun. However, they certainly encouraged many African women to adopt a more aggressive, critical attitude to their standing in South Africa. They were important in generating a mood favourable to the convening of the FSAW in April 1954. The next section will, therefore, look at the anti-pass protests before 1954.

Passes for Women, 1950 - 1954

As already described in Chapter One, after 1948, with the coming to power of the National Party, the system of state control over the mobility of the African population, which was embodied in the pass laws and influx control measures, was greatly strengthened and extended. One of the most significant innovations was the assumption by the state of the responsibility of enforcing these measures, on a systematic and comprehensive basis, with regard to women. Although it was not till 1952, with the passage of the Native Laws Amendment Act and Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act, that this revised system was legislated into existence, it is clear that the new government envisaged these steps from the beginning.

The threat of passes for women first emerged publicly in early 1950 when proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act were leaked to the press. These proposals included tightening up of control of the movement of African women to town, the registration of their service contracts and a compulsory medical examination for all African women town-dwellers¹. The African response to these proposals was

1. Guardian, 9/3/50.

immediate, vociferous and unequivocal in its condemnation of them. For several weeks the demonstrations, deputations and meetings organised in protest were front-page news in the Guardian which actively promoted the protests - "We will not carry any passes: African women indignant" (9/3/50), "African women up in arms, mounting opposition to passes for women" (30/3/50), "Campaign against passes for women 'gathers force'" (13/4/50).

Durban was a particularly strong centre of protest. Here, in March, a meeting of over 600 men and women asserted their opposition to the above proposals¹. This was followed in April by a march of hundreds of women through the streets to the Durban City Hall². A key figure in these protests was Bertha Mkize, provincial secretary of the ANCWL and chairwoman of the Durban African Women's Organisation. In an interview with the Guardian, she was extremely outspoken in her views, particularly about the proposed medical examination:

"African women will not tolerate a move which is most disgusting and which should outrage the conscience of all democrats. Our fight is on ..."³.

Other demonstrations were reported by the Guardian in Langa (26/3/50, 6/4/50), Uitenhage (2/4/50), East London (6/4/50), Kensington and Elsie's River in Cape Town (6/4/50), Phomolong (13/4/50) and Pietermaritzburg (13/4/50). In Cape Town an Action Committee was formed, representing the Langa Advisory Board, the CPSA (soon to be banned), Ministers' Wives Association, Women's section of the Vigilance Associations, African Students Association. With Sam Kahn and Fred

1. Guardian, 30/3/50.

2. Ibid, 6/4/50.

3. Ibid.

Carneson (Communist members of Parliament and the Cape Provincial Council respectively) they sought an interview with the Minister of Native Affairs to press their opposition to the proposed passes¹.

These demonstrations revealed that popular feeling against passes for women was as strong as it had ever been in 1913. In the far more polarised political situation of 1950 this question was a powerful rallying point for a much more militant African opposition. The response of the government indicates that it was unprepared for the extent and vigour of the outcry. Still consolidating its grasp on power after the elections of 1948, it was obliged to move warily on so emotive an issue. In Parliament, the Minister of Native Affairs, Jansen, hastened to describe the uproar as "premature" - the contents of the Urban Areas Bill were still to be finalised². Finally, in April, the Department of Native Affairs issued a statement denying that new control measures were to be introduced for women:

"It appears ... that practically no local authority had asked for permission to apply in its area the control measures in regard to Native females which are already available under existing laws. It appears therefore to be unnecessary to make provision in legislation concerned for stricter measures regarding matters in connection with which not even the existing control measures are being used."³

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1. Guardian, 13/4/50.
 2. House of Assembly Debates, 1950, Col. 3765 - "there has not yet been any final decision in connection with these provisions ... and the whole uproar ... is quite premature", and later, blaming the press for stirring up the trouble, "It is unfortunate that there has been premature publication of a Draft Bill which still has to be approved finally".
 3. This statement was quoted by Sam Kahn in the 1952 Parliamentary debate on the Native Laws Amendment Bill, House of Assembly Debates, 1952, Col. 737.

With these assurances, the popular outcry died down.

However, the idea of passes for women was not abandoned by the government, merely shelved. Its determination to push ahead with this measure was revealed again in 1952 when the Native Laws Amendment Bill, which extended urban influx control measures to women, was first published. "Slave Labour Bill means passes for African women", was the Guardian's headlined response¹. Once again, the government was anxious to discredit such views. Thus, Dr. Verwoerd, then Minister of Native Affairs, to Sam Kahn in the course of the debate on the new Bill:

"I repeat that notwithstanding the fact that these provisions are applicable to Native women, it is not our intention to proceed with its practical application at the moment because we do not think the time is ripe for that. Now I do hope the Honourable member will stop his agitation of telling Native women that we are introducing a law by which we are going to force them to carry passes because that is not true."²

Despite such promises, with the appearance of the Natives (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Bill shortly thereafter, it became clear that women were now in line for the compulsory carrying of passes.

Thus by 1952 the basis for the state's extended control over women had been laid, although it was not till 1956 that the first moves to issue African women with reference books were made. The government's cautious approach and deliberate downplaying of the coercive aspects of the new legislation with regard to women, testified to its awareness of the strength of popular feeling on the subject. However, from 1952, local municipalities themselves began enforcing Section 10 of the new Urban Areas Act and issuing their own permits

1. Guardian, 14/2/52.

2. House of Assembly Debates, 1952, Col. 2955.

of eligibility for urban residence to both men and women. Thus passes for women remained a constant source of unrest throughout the early 1950's. Periodically this took the form of local demonstrations and protests. Newspaper reports on these protests kept the issue alive for a wider audience than those women immediately affected¹.

Undoubtedly the question of passes was the major issue round which the ANCWL rallied in the early 1950's. It formed an important element in its subsequent willingness to work towards establishing the FSAW: the need for a strong national organisation of women that could resist this danger was being felt by Women's League leaders. Port Elizabeth, where in January 1953 the municipality announced that influx control measures would be introduced for the first time, took the lead in articulating this need. There, in the wake of the Defiance Campaign, the general mood of resistance to passes was very high - an ANC protest meeting held in January 1953 drew a huge crowd, estimated by one (friendly) source at some 20 000 people². The ANCWL in Port Elizabeth shared in the general militancy. A few months later, local ANCWL and trade unionist leaders, Florence Matomela and Frances Baard, organised a women's meeting with Ray Alexander, out of which came the proposal to convene a national conference of women³.

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1. The Clarion, successor to the Guardian (which was banned in May 1952) carried several such reports. In June 1952 an announcement that all women residents in the Oden-daalsrus district would have to be registered, led to riots in which 1 African man was killed, a woman wounded and 71 arrested, of whom 47 were brought to court (44 of them women). Clarion, 26/6/52, 31/7/52. In early 1953 the municipalities of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Oudtshoorn and Stellenbosch announced they would be enforcing influx control measures against women, occasioning protests involving the ANC. See Advance, 1/1/53, 8/1/53, 22/1/53, 26/2/53.
 2. Advance, 22/3/53.
 3. This is dealt with in further detail in Chapter Four.

While passes were the immediate spur to action and the focus of protest, the attention of African women participating in these protests was being directed to the wider political-economic context in which the pass laws operated as well. An example of this came in February 1952 when the Transvaal section of the ANCWL announced it would hold several women's conferences to register opposition to the Native Laws Amendment Bill then before Parliament. In its announcement, passes were regarded as just one link in the chain of exploitation. What right, the statement demanded, did the government have:

"to force us off the land and then to seek cheap labour for the farmers? To divide us into racial groups so as to rule us even better? To starve us and expose us to tuberculosis? To have jailed our men day in and day out and now to come and say: You women must carry passes too?"¹

With passes as a galvanising issue, the ANCWL of the early 1950's was in a much stronger position than it had been in the 1940's. Little is known about its day-to-day organisation which probably was not particularly efficient or extensive, judging by reports on the later period.² Nevertheless, the League was showing itself capable of rallying women on particular issues on a greater scale than ever before. Membership was evidently increasing, although here too, actual figures are unavailable. At the same time, the ANCWL was expanding its scope of activities beyond a "tea and typing" capacity. In 1953, apparently for the first time, the Women's League celebrated International Women's Day³. In this way it took over a function which had formerly been sponsored by the CPSA before its dissolution in 1950. This signalled its willingness to take the lead in organising women to promote a greater awareness of their position within society.

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1. Guardian, 6/3/52.
 2. See below, p.309.
 3. Advance, 5/3/53.

2. THE CPSA AND WOMEN, 1939 - 1950

Like the ANC, the CPSA enjoyed a period of revival in the 1940's after internal difficulties in the 1930's. By the time of its forced dissolution in 1950, with the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act, its membership had risen to an estimated 2 000¹. The great majority were Africans - Karis and Carter estimate about 150 whites and 250 Indians amongst these 2 000 members².

By the late 1930's, the party had abandoned its early Bolshevikization programme. It concentrated instead on a 'United Front' with liberal organisations against Facism, which it regarded as the major threat in both Europe and South Africa. The Second World War encouraged this policy of cooperation with other organisations for common, short-term goals. Although the CPSA originally opposed the war as "imperialist", when the Soviet Union entered the war on the side of the Allies in June 1941, it swung round in support of the war effort in South Africa.

The war years saw a remarkable softening of previous, hostile attitudes towards the Soviet Union among the Allied powers and to some extent this rubbed off onto national Communist Parties as well. Within South Africa, Communist-sponsored organisations supporting the Soviet Union were well patronised. The 'Friends of the Soviet Union', for instance, was apparently a flourishing body in 1942 with the Minister of Justice, Colin Steyn, one of its patrons; collections for medical aid for the USSR were well supported³.

1. Karis and Carter, op.cit., Vol 2, p.107.

2. Ibid.

3. In her novel A Ripple From the Storm, Doris Lessing creates a vivid picture of war time fraternising between liberals and communists in a similar environment in the neighbouring colony of Rhodesia.

In 1941 the annual conference of the CPSA adopted a moderate programme of democratic aims that reaffirmed the 'United Front' approach and allowed for continued cooperation with black resistance groups. While the final aim was "to organise the workers as a class to establish working class rule and a socialist republic", in order to "prepare the way" and "defend and promote the interests of the workers and oppressed nationalities", the party would work for the abolition of imperialism, a universal adult franchise, the removal of all "political, social and economic colour bars", wage increases, improved living conditions and a redistribution of land¹.

On the basis of this programme, the party involved itself in the political issues of the time among blacks - passes, the squatter movement, bus boycotts, wages, demonstrations against the rising cost of living. Its relations with the ANC improved as that body revived and radicalised, although ANC suspicions against the communists were not completely allayed. By accepting the chairmanship of the anti-pass campaign sponsored by the CPSA between 1943 and 1945, Dr. Xuma, ANC president, underlined the closer working relations between the two organisations. Within the Indian Congress, communist influence was increased when Dr. Dadoo, a member of the Central Committee of the CPSA, was elected national president of the SAIC in 1947. In the trade unions, too, the CPSA continued to work actively, propagating a doctrine of non-racial class solidarity while concentrating on the organisation of black workers. The more moderate line of the party at this time was shown by its participation in white elections at both a national and local level. It saw these as opportunities for educating the white electorate and raising issues otherwise ignored in the sphere of white party politics.

With the ending of the war, however, any signs of official leniency towards the CPSA ended too. In January 1947,

1. Guardian, 19/6/41.

arising out of the CPSA's support for the African mineworkers' strike of 1946, the Central Committee of the party was arrested and charged with sedition. (These charges were eventually withdrawn). The hostility of the white establishment towards the communists was intensified once the National Party came to power in 1948. For long it had singled out "communist agitators" as the real menace in both trade unions and black political organisations. Now in power, it turned its attention towards suppressing this menace in a far more ruthless and decisive fashion than the previous United Party Government had dared.

In 1950 the Suppression of Communism Act was passed. This Act contained an extremely wide definition of statutory communism, the propagation of which was henceforth outlawed. It also vested in the executive branch of government extensive powers to ban individuals and organisations from any political activity, also widely defined. (This Act was the first in a long chain of legislation passed by the Nationalist government that greatly strengthened the hands of the state in suppressing the national liberation movement.) The passage of this Act meant the end of the CPSA as a legal political party in South Africa and, in the face of this, the party chose to disband in June 1950. However, ex-members continued to work in the trade unions and the various Congress bodies and its ideas and influence were not finally destroyed. In addition, in the Congress of Democrats (COD) set up in 1953, many white ex-members found a new political home within the national liberation movement.

When one comes to look specifically at the political organisation of women at this time, the CPSA was again a major influence, an influence that here too, did not disappear when the party disbanded in 1950. Yet once again, this was not an issue of central importance in the party programme. While the aims of the party, as set out in 1941, recognised sex discrimination as something to fight against - it talked

of the "extension to all adults, regardless of race, colour or sex, of the right to vote and be elected to ... representative positions"¹ - the problem of sex discrimination was certainly seen as a minor one in the South African context. The importance of mobilising women on the political front was recognised, but what tended to be emphasised was the contribution they could make to a common struggle, along with men, against exploitation - as workers or as blacks - and as opponents of white supremacy. An editorial in the Guardian in 1940, on the occasion of International Women's Day, reflected this line of thought. March 8th was described as "the day on which women throughout the world demonstrate their opposition to war, to oppression and injustice ...". The particular forms of oppression that women suffered, as distinct from men, were not mentioned².

Separate figures for male and female members are unavailable, but one can safely assume that the majority of the 2 000 members belonging to the CPSA in 1950 were men. Nevertheless, in the 1940's, a number of women associated with the party at the leadership level definitely increased and there are a few indications that this was true at the rank and file level as well. Several energetic new women joined the CPSA during the war and soon began to feature prominently. In 1940 Hilda Watts³ left the Labour Party to join the Communist Party in Johannesburg. By 1945 she had become important enough in the party hierarchy to be elected to the Central Committee. Betty Sacks (née Radford), editor

1. Guardian, 19/6/41.

2. Ibid., 8/3/40.

3. Her married name was Hilda Bernstein but since she became prominent in the CPSA as Hilda Watts, I have chosen to continue referring to her by this name to avoid confusion. Similarly, I have used only Ray Alexander's single name, rather than her married name of Ray Simons - a practice followed by many of her colleagues in the 1940's and 50's as well.

of the Guardian until 1948, joined the party in Cape Town in 1941 and she, too, was elected to the Central Committee in 1946.

Although white women still tended to dominate, some valuable black women were recruited at this time as well. In 1942 Dora Tamana, later a leading figure in the Cape Western Branch of the ANC and ANCWL, joined the CPSA. Her background was very different from that of the white recruits - rural, poor, working class - and a sign that the party was beginning to broaden its base among women. For her the CPSA was the gateway into greater political involvement in Cape Town. Another black woman who appears to have been recruited at about this time was Rahima Ally, a trade unionist and associate of Ray Alexander.

Women were also featuring more prominently on committees and in executive posts. In 1938 Ray Alexander and Cissy Gool were elected to the new 'Political Bureau' of the CPSA when the party headquarters were shifted to Cape Town¹. In 1945 two out of the fifteen members elected to the Central Committee were women - Ray Alexander and Hilda Watts. In 1946 Ray Alexander was re-elected to this committee, along with Betty Sacks². A further sign that women's role within the CPSA was increasing, lay in the number of women put forward as communist election candidates. In the 1943 general elections, Joey Fourie, a trade unionist, was one of three unsuccessful communist candidates. She contested the Cape Flats constituency. Two years later, in 1945, she was elected to the Cape Town City Council³. Also at this time, in 1943, Betty Sacks and Sam Kahn were elected to the

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1. Simons and Simons: Class and Colour in South Africa, p.485. Cissy Gool's relationship with the CPSA is not altogether clear. She does not appear to have been a member consistently, although she undoubtedly worked very closely with the CPSA in this period.
 2. Guardian, 10/1/46.
 3. Guardian, 2/8/45.

Cape Town City Council¹, while the following year, Hilda Watts became the solitary communist member of the Johannesburg City Council, representing the Hillbrow Ward². In no other political organisation at the time were women as active or as respected as in the Communist Party.

The impact of these women was not confined just to the CPSA either. While for the party as a whole, the organisation of women was not a question that received priority, several of the women already mentioned, notably Ray Alexander, Hilda Watts and Josie Palmer, did feel strongly on the subject. They directed much of their work towards this end and extended the CPSA's policy of cooperating with other progressive organisations to working with the women of these organisations as well.

In the trade unions, the ANC and the SAIC contact between women was fostered and steps to organise women within these fields encouraged. Ray Alexander, Joey Fourie and Betty du Toit were all prominent trade unionists, with Alexander again playing a particularly large part in unionising hitherto unorganised black workers. She did not narrowly confine her attention to women workers, but continued to pay them special attention as an especially exploited and neglected category of workers. The union most closely linked to her name, the Food and Canning Workers Union, established in 1941, had a largely female membership. It developed rapidly into a militant, cohesive body and contributed several leaders to the FSAW in later years. The question of passes in relation to women was taken up by Josie Palmer, a member of the CPSA's Anti-Pass Campaign Committee between 1943 and 1945. In March 1944, she convened a special Women's Anti-Pass Conference in Johannesburg to discuss the part women could play in the national campaign³. This conference drew

1. CPSA: Communists in Conference.

2. Guardian, 2/11/44.

3. Ibid, 6/4/44. *

a number of different African Women's organisations together, including the ANC Women's League. In 1950, when women themselves were being threatened with passes, the CPSA strongly identified itself with their opposition, participating in demonstrations and deputations.

At the same time, CPSA women involved themselves in another area of considerable importance in the general politicisation of women during the 1940's, the agitation against the rising cost of living and recurring shortages of basic foods. This issue and the organisations that emerged in response to it, the People's Food Council of Johannesburg and the Women's Food Committee of Cape Town, are looked at in more detail in a separate section below. Communists appear to have played a large, possibly decisive, role in channelling the general discontent and unrest among black women, about the food situation, into its organisational forms in the two main centres of Johannesburg and Cape Town. Josie Palmer recalls that the CPSA was "most active" in fighting domestic issues - "they were working for all-round improvement in the townships on all kinds of domestic issues. It was more a matter of bread and butter issues"¹.

Once again, the material is frustratingly sketchy. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the role of CPSA women in nurturing and spreading ideas of political organisation among women was a particularly large one at the time - and that they were thus performing a major task in preparing the ground for the subsequent establishment of the FSAW. Despite their small numbers, their leadership role in encouraging contact among women and focussing on issues of direct concern to them was a key one.

Evidence of the degree of contact between different women's organisations, achieved by 1946, could be seen at the International

1. J. Wells, Interview, op.cit., p.4.

Women's Day meeting held in Johannesburg that year. This meeting brought together a remarkably broad cross-section of women's organisations, from the CPSA (in the person of Hilda Watts) and the SAIC (represented by Dr. Goonam) to the Child Welfare Association and the League of Women Voters, the broadest grouping of women yet witnessed such at such a meeting. In addition, messages of support were received from the 'Moscow Anti-Fascist Committee', Josie Palmer, Betty Sacks and two women MP's, Margaret Ballinger and Bertha Solomon. Included in the resolutions was one that stressed the need for all women to support the removal of all legal political and economic discrimination against black women¹.

By this time, the idea of drawing together these different areas in which women were involved and establishing a national organisation had already emerged among CPSA women. In 1941 the annual conference of the party passed a resolution supporting the idea of an organisation which would represent working women². The following year, at a women's meeting held to pay tribute to the contribution of Soviet women to the war effort, the subject of women's political role was raised again:

"We look forward to the day when ... the women of the world will play their part in the building of the future - freedom, justice and security for all mankind."³

Similar resolutions had, as already noted, been passed at conferences before and, as before, no immediate steps were taken to put them into practice. Then in 1945 vague plans about creating a national organisation of women at some future date crystallised for communist women in South Africa,

1. Guardian, 14/3/46.

2. Ibid., 15/5/41.

3. Ibid., 21/10/42.

with the establishment of an international body claiming to represent women's interests, the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), in Paris. The WIDF acted as a definite example to the women of the CPSA and stimulated more intensive work towards creating a South African national body that could affiliate with it.

The WIDF was formed at a conference of leftwing women's organisations from 31 different countries, in November 1945¹. Although the WIDF certainly saw socialism as the key to the full emancipation of women, the aims it adopted in 1945 were very loosely formulated under three generalised headings, without any specific reference to socialist ideology. In the aftermath of the war, peace was its first priority -

- "1. The organisation of peace and the destruction of fascism.
2. Equality for men and women in all domains.
3. Protection for mothers and children regardless of their legitimacy."²

In the next few years, it campaigned on behalf of the "child victims" of the war and women political prisoners in Spain and sent commissions to Germany and South East Asia to investigate the conditions of women living there. It also called several international conferences which appear to have been well attended³. Then, in 1953, at a 3rd World Congress of Women, it issued a 'Declaration on the Rights of Women'. This is worth quoting at some length because of the importance of the WIDF in shaping ideas in South Africa on the purpose of a women's organisation.

1. Guardian, 20/12/45.

2. Ibid.

3. Handwritten notes on the WIDF, nd, FSAW E.

"There are too many countries in which women still have no rights. They are oppressed and their dignity as human beings is continuously insulted. Millions of peasant women live under tragic conditions.

In the midst of war preparations, when the economic conditions of the workers are deteriorating and the offensive against democratic rights and liberties is being intensified, women's lives are becoming still more difficult.

This is why the fight for the defence of women's rights and for winning full equality is today more essential than ever."¹

The statement then went on to list the rights to which all women, "irrespective of their race, nationality and position in society", were entitled. These included equal pay for equal work; equal opportunities in education, the economy and politics; equal legal status with men; state provision of creches; maternity care and welfare clinics. Throughout, the importance of ensuring that these rights were extended to peasant and rural women, as well as to urban women, was stressed. The Declaration concluded:

"The World Congress calls upon the women of the whole world to cooperate closely in organised and persistent action for their rights as mothers, workers and citizens.

Let us unite our efforts in the common struggle.² Unity is the condition of victory."²

Many of these ideas would find an echo in resolutions and statements made by the FSAW in later years.

The establishment of the WIDF in 1945 provided a definite impetus to the plans for establishing a national organisation of women, subscribing to similar aims, within the CPSA.

1. Advance, 16/7/53.

2. Ibid.

There do not appear to have been any South African representatives at the first WIDF conference in 1945, but in March 1947, Hilda Watts attended a second WIDF conference in Prague and managed to draw its attention to conditions in South Africa¹.

At the same time that she was attending this conference, the first moves to establish a national body in South Africa along similar lines were being made. These came together at the 1947 International Women's Day Meeting in Johannesburg, at which Mrs. Suriakala Patel (SAIC), Hetty du Preez (Garment Workers Union, No. 2 branch) and Josie Palmer (CPSA) were speakers. Here, during the meeting, a committee was elected to form a "non-colour bar women's organisation". The link between the proposed organisation and the WIDF was explicit - "The committee hopes to link up with women's organisations in other provinces and so to build up an organisation capable of affiliating to the Women's International Democratic Federation"².

In this way, an organisation of women calling itself the Transvaal All-Women's Union came into being. Unfortunately, information on this organisation is sketchy. It certainly was linked to the CPSA, although it aimed to mobilise women on a much broader, non-party basis. Its committee in 1947 was made up of a Mrs. J. Mpanza, chairwoman; Rhona O'Meara, vice chairwoman; Josie Palmer, secretary; and Hilda Watts³. The latter three were all definitely members of the CPSA. (The identity of the chairwoman is not known.) The aims, as reported by the Guardian in April 1947, mirrored those of the WIDF - equal rights for all South African women, protective legislation for women and children, a commitment to join with women of other nations in a struggle for world peace, against fascism and racism⁴.

1. Guardian, 20/3/47.

2. Ibid., 24/4/47.

3. Ibid., 7/10/47.

4. Ibid., 24/4/47.

From the beginning, the Transvaal All-Women's Union was committed to the idea of a national organisation and can thus be seen as a forerunner of the later FSAW. However, despite several attempts to expand its membership, it does not seem to have succeeded in operating beyond the Transvaal. (In fact, it would appear that in the Transvaal it was confined to the Reef towns.) By July 1947 it was reported as making arrangements for a mass national conference of women in the "near future"¹ - the idea of the FSAW was thus clearly visible - but while meetings were held on the Rand to popularise the idea, the proposed conference did not get off the ground at that stage. A few references to the Union in the next couple of years show that it was still functioning - it made contact with Reef Food committees and also took up the question of housing in Benoni with the City Council². In 1948 it contributed material on South Africa to an exhibition held by the WIDE, in Paris, on the lives and conditions of women in different parts of the world³. That it had not abandoned the idea of setting up a national organisation was shown in 1949, when it changed its name to the 'Union of South African Women'⁴. The dropping of the 'Transvaal' label does not appear to have been accompanied by any actual expansion on a national scale however.

Unfortunately, not enough is known about the Union to explain why it did not succeed in its attempts to get a national organisation established at the time. A possible general explanation is that it was hampered by the serious external difficulties then facing the CPSA - first the sedition charge in 1947 and then the threat posed by the electoral victory of the National Party in 1948. The disbanding of the CPSA in 1950 further dislocated established communication channels between radical women activists in the different centres, contacts that at that stage were largely maintained by CPSA women. At the same time, other channels had not yet been effectively established. The ANCWL, for instance, was only

1. Guardian, 10/7/47.

2. Ibid., 10/7/47.

3. Ibid., 12/2/48.

4. Ibid., 3/3/49.

just beginning to get established on a provincial basis. It required the issue of passes to rouse African women to the importance of political organisation. Nevertheless, it seems the Transvaal Union did continue to exist in some form or other - Ray Alexander made contact with a women's group of this nature in Johannesburg when she was making arrangements for the inaugural conference of the FSAW in 1953. In 1954 the FSAW certainly drew on its leadership - Hilda Watts, Josie Palmer - and must have benefitted from the work the Union had done among women on the Rand, to popularise the idea of a radical national women's body.

The dissolution of the CPSA in 1950 thus disrupted a gathering momentum within the party towards establishing a national women's organisation. Another four years were to elapse before such plans materialised in the form of the FSAW. However, by 1950, the idea of such an organisation had already taken on a concrete, if limited, shape under communist sponsorship in the form of the Transvaal All-Women's Union. Overall, the contribution of the CPSA towards the founding of the FSAW was considerable. Not only were ex-members, particularly Ray Alexander and Hilda Watts, to play a leading role in organising the inaugural conference. Throughout the 1940's the CPSA had been active in encouraging and shaping an emerging political consciousness among women, within the national liberation movement, towards this end.

3. WOMEN AND THE INDIAN CONGRESS

This is an area that before the Second World War was not of particular importance in mobilising women politically and has not, therefore, been looked at before. In the pre-World War Two period, with the exception of the passive

resistance campaign led by Gandhi between 1906 and 1913¹, the SAIC was not a politically active organisation. Indian women, as a group, were particularly isolated and secluded from public affairs. With the coming of the war, however, the SAIC became far more active and amongst Indian women, too, some stirrings on the political front were discernible.

By 1945 the SAIC had undergone a radical transformation². A struggle for leadership between the old guard, representative largely of the Indian merchant class, and, opposed to them, radical intellectuals with worker support, had resulted in victory for the latter. In the Transvaal, Dr. Dadoo, a member of the CPSA, assumed the presidency of the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) and then, in 1947, of the SAIC itself. The leadership struggle in Natal was more protracted but there too, by late 1945, the radicals, under the presidency of Dr. Naicker, had captured control of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). At the same time, and part of the reason for their success, the membership of the SAIC

1. The original spark came from a Transvaal law making a form of pass compulsory for all Indians, male and female, over eight years of age. Passive resistance later came to focus on a measure that aimed at preventing Indian migration into the Transvaal and a £3 poll tax on Indians in Natal. In 1913 a Supreme Court ruling declared that non-Christian marriages were invalid in the eyes of the law, thereby reducing Indian women married under Moslem or Hindu rites to the status of concubines. This led to Indian women joining the passive resistance campaign in large numbers, marking a radical change from their traditional passivity upon which all contemporary observers remarked. With the repeal of the offending measure in 1913, they retreated into the home once again. See Roux: Time Longer than Rope, Chapter X.
2. For a detailed history of the SAIC see R.E. Johnson: Indians and Apartheid in South Africa.

was being considerably broadened to include many more Indian workers, drawn into the Congress through the active trade union work of the radicals. Between 1943 and 1945, the NIC membership rose from 17 000 to 35 000¹.

The issues round which the leadership battle was fought, centred on successive attempts by the government to segregate Indians into separate residential areas and check the expansion of Indian traders into "white" areas where they were regarded as an economic threat by their white counterparts. The old guard called for a policy of negotiation and compromise with the government, advocating a system of voluntary segregation. The radicals rejected such tacit support for segregation and aimed, at the minimum, for full political and social rights. In opposing the government they turned to the methods of passive resistance and civil disobedience already pioneered within the Indian community by Gandhi.

Thus, when the segregationist Asiatic Land Tenure and Representation Act was passed in 1946, the NIC, with the TIC's backing, launched a sustained campaign of passive resistance against it². During this campaign over 2 000 Indian resisters went to jail for camping on "controlled" land, or on a smaller scale, defying the already existing Immigration Act (which prohibited Indians from crossing provincial boundaries without special permission). Although the campaign had reached its peak by the end of 1946, it was not officially called off till after the Nationalists had taken office in mid 1948.

1. Johnson, op.cit., p.66.

2. This Act had two aspects. The first set up "controlled" (i.e.White) and "uncontrolled" areas, Indians being prohibited from acquiring or occupying land in the "controlled" areas, (an early form of the Group Areas Act of 1950). The second aspect - "to sugar the pill" (Simons and Simons, op.cit., p.550) - proposed that Indians should be allowed to elect 2 white representatives in the Senate, 3 in the House of Assembly and 2 who could be Indian in the Natal Provincial Council. This latter aspect was never put into effect.

Despite the failure of the campaign in terms of forcing legislative concessions to the Indian community, it was of great importance on a number of different levels. It showed that the Indian community was being stirred by the new mood of resistance among the black population of South Africa that characterised the 1940's - here the specific inspiration of the movement towards independence in India played its part. It also paved the way for a greater degree of cooperation between the ANC and SAIC, witnessed in the Doctors' Pact of 1947¹. Although at the mass level hostility and suspicion between the Indian and African communities could not be discounted, the basis of the Congress Alliance of the 1950's was being laid. The Passive Resistance Campaign also signalled a new determination for mass action on the part of a black political organisation and in many ways foreshadowed the Defiance Campaign of 1952, a campaign launched jointly by the ANC and SAIC. From the point of view of its effect on Indian women, too, the Passive Resistance Campaign was a significant and politicising event.

Before the coming of the war, it has been said, Indian women were almost entirely secluded and isolated from political activity. The one exception to this came during the passive resistance campaign led by Gandhi in 1913. The participation of women in that set an historical precedent for 1946. However, unlike the anti-pass campaign in the Free State - a contemporary event - this early passive resistance campaign did not lead to any attempts to organise Indian women as a group. In the SAIC itself they seem to have played little, if any, part for the next thirty years.

The reasons for this must take into account the particularly lowly status occupied by women in the Indian community, a status which reinforced and compounded the obstacles put in their way, as blacks and as women, by the wider society.

1. See above, p.104.

Culturally, Indian women could be regarded as the most subjected group of women in South Africa. Both the Hindu and Moslem religions sanctioned an extreme form of submission and passivity among women. Prejudice from within the Indian community against women participating in any form of activity outside the home was deeply rooted. Even in the 1950's, by which time many of the general obstacles to female wage employment in society had, if not crumbled, weakened, these attitudes continued to prevail within the Indian community. Amina Cachalia, one of the most prominent Indian women within the FSAW, experienced enormous difficulties in the early 1950's in trying to get a society established among Indian women, in Johannesburg, which challenged these conventions. This society, the Progressive Women's Union, aimed at filling a perceived gap in the education of young Indian girls by teaching them skills such as typing, dress-making and literacy with the idea that they would then be able to achieve greater social and economic independence. The Union met with considerable resistance, however. The idea of Indian girls working was considered 'tabu' even among the poorer parents. Cachalia has described those girls who did join the Union as extremely isolated from events in the wider world outside their homes, "living in a rut"¹.

The effects of such attitudes can be seen in the employment statistics. Throughout this period (and even to the present day) very few Indian women were in wage employment. In the 1936 census a mere 3 710 Asian women, or 7,3% of those over 15 years of age, were found to be "economically active"². A little under two thirds of these were working either in service (1 263) or agriculture (1 082)³. The 1960 Census showed little major change. By that year, calculated on the basis of the total female population, only 4,9% of Asian

1. Interview.

2. Union Statistics for 50 years, Table G-2.

3. Ibid., Table A-32.

women were "economically active"¹. Unlike other sections, the war-time boom did not have a noticeable effect on Indian women by drawing them into public employment.

Thus the problems of mobilising Indian women - isolated, poorly educated, dependent - were very large throughout this period. However, by the beginning of the 1940's, the first signs of political activity among a tiny, privileged segment of Indian women could be discerned. In 1941 Hawa Ahmed, a member of the NLL in the Cape, addressed the Durban-based Liberal Study Group (composed of the radical element in the NIC) on the status of women. She concluded by saying that no nation could be free when "one half of it is enslaved in the kitchen"². The following year, a special 'Women's Class' was formed within this Study Group. Whether or not this was a direct result of Ahmed's speech is not known; certainly it represented support for her ideas. In opening the inaugural meeting, the president of the Study Group, I.C. Meer, noted that "non-European women had not had sufficient opportunity to contribute to the struggle of their people" and expressed the hope that from the class would come "a powerful Women's organisation"³. The object of the Women's Class, according to a Guardian report, was to show "the important part Indian women can play in the progress of a community"⁴. This would appear to have been the first such group established among Indian women.

These developments coincided with the emergence of the radical splinter group within the SAIC. Undoubtedly the radicals supported and possibly actively encouraged a greater

1. van der Horst: 'Women as an economic force in South Africa', p.51.

2. Guardian, 16/1/41.

3. Ibid., 23/4/42.

4. Ibid., 26/3/42.

female participation in the affairs of the Indian Congress. Here the influence of the CPSA would have played its part. Contact between the SAIC radicals and other organisations in which women were actively involved - the trade unions, the NLL - probably contributed to the growth of the more liberal ideas on the role of women within the Indian Congress as well.

Whether the 'Women's class' continued to function or not is unfortunately not known. However, its establishment marked a new era of female participation in the Indian Congress itself. In the 1940's, the most prominent woman in the SAIC was Dr. Goonam, one of the handful of black women doctors practising at that time¹. She was involved in the radical Anti-Segregation Committee within the NIC before 1945², and was one of the speakers at a meeting held in support of independence for India in February 1944 in Durban³. In 1946 she was described by the Guardian, in an interview report, as "one of the few Indian women playing a leading part in the political struggle of the Indian people of this country"⁴. By that time she was already a vice president of the NIC. In the interview Goonam spoke optimistically about the strides Indian women were making, citing the increasing number of university graduates and skilled workers among them as indices of change. The obstacles impeding their progress she blamed on the government and the widespread poverty. Community prejudices against women were, she felt, "rapidly disappearing"⁵.

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1. In 1946 there were five black women "medical practitioners, physicians, surgeons, radiologists" of whom 4 were Indian. Population Census, 1946, UG 41- 1954.
 2. Guardian, 4/9/47.
 3. Ibid., 3/2/44.
 4. Ibid., 21/3/46.
 5. Ibid.

Dr. Goonam was a member of a very tiny privileged professional class - in 1946 the total number of Indian women in the professions was only 302¹. Both at this time and later, in the 1950's, women activists within the SAIC were drawn largely from a small core of relatively well-off, educated women who, because of their education and work, were in a stronger position to reject the traditional submissive status that defined the great bulk of Indian women. Nevertheless, there are signs - unfortunately sketchy - that during the middle and late 1940's a wider circle of women than heretofore was being stirred by current political developments to take a more active interest in political work as well: the base of Indian women's participation in politics was, for a short period, broadened.

One of these developments was the loosely termed "food crisis" of the war years. The impact of this crisis - disruptions in the food-supply system and rising costs - and its politicising effect on women in general are looked at in more detail in the following section. As far as Indian women were concerned, although information on its specific impact on them is lacking, there are indications that Indian women in Durban were involved in public consumer protests. Some organisation among them over this issue was undertaken, though to what extent the SAIC was involved, if at all, is not known. In June 1946, just before the Passive Resistance Campaign was launched, the Guardian carried a report on a Mrs. L. Govender, an illiterate and widowed or deserted mother of five, who was taking a leading part in organising local women against the black market in food in Durban. The Guardian commented:

"Mrs. Govender, who is a leader of a food squad, is symbolic of the growing political consciousness of the Indian working class women in Natal who, day after day, since the commencement of the food raids have demonstrated in the streets

1. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table A-32.

of Durban, demanding the cessation of the black market and the selling and rationing of food."¹

Further, according to the report - whose optimism must be regarded with some caution - there was a growing realisation among these women that the food struggle was only one aspect of a wider struggle against "the oppressive laws of this country". While the polemical aspect of the Guardian's analysis must be kept in mind, it is worth noting that this same Mrs. Govender appears to have been one of the first women volunteers in the Passive Resistance Campaign².

More important in its impact on women - and better documented - was the Passive Resistance Campaign. The launching of this campaign in June 1946 initiated a new phase of political activism amongst Indian women. From the beginning, women leaders like Dr. Goonam were closely associated with the campaign and active attempts to draw in more women were made. In March 1946, when the Campaign was still in its planning stages, a large meeting of "hundreds" of Indian women was held in Durban to discuss what their role in it should be³. The Guardian described the meeting as the first of its kind among South African Indians; the size does indicate that interest in the campaign amongst women was widespread. At this meeting the speakers were Dr. Goonam, Fatima Meer and Mrs. N.P. Desai. The meeting pledged its support for the campaign and elected a committee to assist in this.

1. Guardian, 6/6/46.

2. The Guardian, 20/6/46, gave the names of the six women who took part in the first act of civil disobedience in the Passive Resistance Campaign by crossing from the Transvaal to Natal without special permission. Four of the women came from the Transvaal and two from Durban, namely Lakshini Govender, T.M. Pather, both married.

3. Guardian, 28/3/46.

The subsequent participation of women in the campaign itself received considerable publicity. In the Guardian's news coverage, photographs of women participants featured prominently. Six of the 17 people involved in the first act of resistance - crossing illegally from the Transvaal into Natal - were women¹. They included Zainap Asvat, sister of Amina Cachalia and later a prominent activist within the SAIC in the 1950's. In 1947, speaking at the anniversary of the launching of the campaign, Dr. Goonam singled out the fact that women had marched "side by side with the men" as "the greatest factor in the year's resistance"².

In fact, the number of women participating was not so large. According to Simons and Simons, about 300 of the 2 000 passive resisters who went to jail were women³. Nevertheless, the fact that these women did participate, and so prominently too, must have had an effect throughout the Indian community, as well as politicising the participants in a more immediate way. The image of women as passive, docile creatures was dented. Within the SAIC the status of women was undoubtedly augmented. In October 1946 three women were elected to the TIC executive committee for the first time. One of them was Zainap Asvat; the other two were Mrs. P.K. Naidoo and Mrs. Suriakala Patel⁴. In Natal Dr. Goonam was elected acting chairman of the Provincial Passive Resistance Council when Dr. Naicker was temporarily absent on a tour of India, and in 1947 she was asked to stand in for A.I. Meer, General Secretary of the NIC, while he was attending the United Nations General Assembly (to present the case of South Africa's Indian community against the Smuts Government)⁵.

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1. The other three women participants (apart from the two already mentioned, footnote 2, p.139) were Zahna Bayat, Amina Pahap, Zubeida Patel. Guardian, 20/6/46.
 2. Guardian, 10/6/47.
 3. Simons and Simons, op.cit., p.552.
 4. Guardian, 24/10/46.
 5. Ibid., 4/9/47.

Another important development taking place at this time was the establishment of contact between Indian Congress women and women of other political groups. Here, too, Dr. Goonam was in the forefront. In 1946 she appeared on the platform at the International Women's Day Meeting organised in Johannesburg by the CPSA¹. The following year Suriakala Patel was a speaker at the next Women's Day meeting where the decision to launch the Transvaal All-Women's Union was made². At the same time, with the closer co-operation established between the ANC and SAIC after 1947, contact between the women of these bodies was fostered as well. The appearance of Dr. Goonam on the platform at one of the women's anti-pass meetings, organised in Durban in 1950, was an indication of the progress made in this sphere. At this meeting she pledged the support of Indian women to the fight against passes³.

Thus, during the 1940's Indian women, on a strictly limited scale, were beginning to cross barriers that had previously kept them out of the political sphere. A number of active women had appeared in the Indian Congress movement who could liaise with other women political leaders; there were signs of a wider awareness among Indian women about the current political issues that affected them. The establishment of Amina Cachalia's Progressive Women's Union in 1950 was both an indication of the new horizons being opened up and an acknowledgement of the enormous social and economic barriers that yet existed to block the emancipation of Indian women. Individuals who would work within the FSAW and wished to see changes in the traditional position of Indian women had emerged. The mobilisation of Indian women on a large scale lagged far behind, however. In this connection, the fact that the

1. See above, p.126.

2. See above, p.129.

3. Guardian, 6/4/50. However, race riots in Durban the previous year had served as a pointed and painful reminder that antagonisms and suspicions between the Indian and African communities, outside of the small group of political leaders, were still real obstacles to solidarity between them.

SAIC and its provincial organs appear to have slumped organisationally after the Passive Resistance Campaign, was an added problem¹.

4. THE 'FOOD CRISIS' OF THE 1940's²

The war years did not only mark an increase in the participation of women in the established political organisations already described (ANC, CPSA, SAIC). A wider range of women than were involved in these bodies, especially black housewives, became involved in protests and demonstrations over the rising cost of living and unsatisfactory food supply situation that the war provoked, women who otherwise would probably not have been exposed to any form of political organisation. In response to the pressures of rising costs and uncertain supply, organisations emerged in Johannesburg (the People's Food Council) and Cape Town (the Women's Food Committee) to fight for relief, while sporadic signs of activity without, apparently, a single co-ordinating body, could be seen in Durban as well. Closely involved in these developments were the CPSA and the NLL of Cape Town.

Numerous different sources detail the inflationary effects of the war in South Africa. According to Walshe, the cost of staple foods rose by 91% between 1939 and 1944, outstripping both cost of living allowances and increases in basic wages³. The following index of retail prices on all items (including food, rent, transport, clothing, etc.) between 1936 and 1948 show that the major jump in prices occurred after 1940 .

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1. See Johnson, op.cit., for a description and analysis of this.
 2. 'Food Crisis' was the term popularly used in newspaper reports and speeches to describe the prevailing situation and has been accordingly adopted in this account too.
 3. Walshe, op.cit., p.302.

Fig. 1: Index of Retail Prices, Average for the Union.
(1938 = 100)¹.

<u>1936</u>	<u>1938</u>	<u>1940</u>	<u>1942</u>	<u>1944</u>	<u>1946</u>	<u>1948</u>
94,3	100	103,4	117,3	128,8	134,1	147,8

The rise in prices becomes even more significant when one notes that in the 10 years between 1928 and 1938, retail prices as a whole had actually dropped (from 106,9 in 1928 to 100 in 1938)². The rise in food prices during the war years was even higher than that of the average on all items of consumption, moving from a base of 100 in 1938 to 156,8 in 1948. Basic foodstuffs that became more expensive (the figures are the averages for 1938 and 1947) included rice (from 2,7d to 7,9d per lb.), tea (25,7d to 50,7d per lb.), beef (8,2d to 11,5d per lb), eggs (21,7d to 37d per doz.), and jam (5,5d to 17,3d per lb.)³

The situation was further aggravated by dislocations in the marketing and supply system leading to periodic shortages of basic foods in the shops. Black marketeering contributed to the problems by causing artificial shortages and pushing up prices of food still further. One of the major demands of the Food Committees was for the government to introduce a system of rationing of basic foods. This was not done, but in response to public pressure, the government appointed a Director of Food Supplies and Distribution and introduced a system of mobile food vans⁴. These vans sold limited quantities of food and groceries which were in short

1. Compiled from Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table H-23.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., Tables H-22, H-16, H-17, H-18.

4. Government responses to this food crisis and the pressures it faced as a result, is an area of research I have not investigated thoroughly. It would appear that these mobile vans were operating by 1945/46. The Director of Food Supplies and Distribution was appointed in May 1946 (based on a report in the Guardian, 23/5/46).

supply, at regular places in the suburbs and townships. It was out of the queues of women that formed to wait for the vans that the Women's Food Committee in Cape Town grew.

How serious these price rises were for the average working class family in South Africa, becomes clear when one considers the level of black wages at the time. These wages, grossly inadequate to start with, were not keeping up with the cost of living. In 1951 a cost of living study, sponsored by the South African Institute of Race Relations, compared the average income of a black urban family of five with its "essential minimum expenditure" requirements, in both 1944 and 1951, in the Witwatersrand-Pretoria area¹. It found that, with the exception of Pretoria where the disparity between essential expenditure and actual income had remained roughly on a par, the minimum level of essential expenditure (greater than income to begin with) had increased more than average wages had. In 1944 the gap between the two was already as follows:

Fig. 2: Average African Family Income and Essential Minimum Expenditure, Monthly, 1944².

	<u>Income</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>
Johannesburg	£9.18.1	£12.18.6
Pretoria	£9. 6.4	£12.19.4
Reef Towns	£9. 7.9	£11. 0.11

This stark evidence of the extreme poverty in which urban Africans were living was not confined to the Rand only. In 1942, the Smit Committee, appointed to investigate "the social, health and economic conditions of urban natives" produced a report which covered the whole country. The report began by saying that what had impressed the committee "above all" had been the poverty of the "native community".

1. E. Wix: The Cost of Living, p.19.

2. Ibid.

Concerning nutrition standards it referred to "an appalling amount of malnutrition amongst urban natives both young and old" and cited a survey of African school children in Durban which found that over 40% were suffering from "clinical stages" of malnutrition¹.

Nor was this extreme situation confined only to Africans, as shown by a government report, The Economic and Social Conditions of the Racial Groups in South Africa, produced in 1948. This provided statistics for Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg on the percentage of the different race groups living below the Poverty Datum Line (PDL) in each city, an income level that barely covers the most basic items necessary for human existence. In Cape Town (the figure they give is for 1938/39), some 55% of 'Coloured' and 5% of white households were found to be earning below this line. In Durban, the comparable figures in 1943/44 were 70,6% of Indians, 38,2% of 'Coloureds', 24,8% of Africans and 5,2% of white families. For Johannesburg, the Report quoted from the Non-European Bus Services Commission of 1944 to show that in 1940, 86,8% of 'non-Europeans' were earning below the PDL².

With poverty as acute and widespread as this, any increase in food prices or dislocation of the market would threaten not just on abstract standard of living, but the very survival of a large percentage of black households - particularly when one bears in mind that the largest slice of black wages went on food (87% of the wage on average in Johannesburg)³. Black women, as mothers and those responsible for the catering for their families, could hardly ignore this 'food crisis'

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1. Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Social, Health and Economic Conditions of Urban Natives (1942), pp.1, 5.
 2. Social and Economic Planning Council: The Economic and Social Conditions of the Racial Groups in South Africa (UG 53-48). The report explained that the figure of Durban Africans living below the PDL was misleadingly low, since most African families in the area were not classified as living within metropolitan limits. Most Durban African workers were therefore classed as "single workers", disguising the dependence of families on their wages.
 3. Wix, op.cit.

- its effects were so insistent and immediate. Price rises and food shortages directly threatened the health and stability of their families and impinged on their daily lives in such a way as to force women to look outside the home to the wider political and economic context in which this crisis was located. Political organisations that took up the food question had a large appeal - political involvement over this issue was not in contradiction to women's domestic role, but sprang rather from vital domestic concerns.

The People's Food Council¹

Some signs of organisation round the question of rising food prices had already been seen before the war. In 1935 the newspaper Umsebenzi carried a single brief article on a committee established in Durban by "various women's organisations" and a group calling itself the League against Fascism and War, to encourage "all housewives" to boycott firms engaged in war profiteering². Four years later, in Cape Town, the prosecution of a local baker for selling his bread below the official price had occasioned a deputation to the Cape Town mayor in protest, organised by the Consumer's Vigilance Council³. This organisation included several individuals who would be active in the Women's Food Committee a few years later, notably John Morley Turner and Cissy Gool of the NLL and Ray Alexander and Sam Kahn of the CPSA. Already then, these two organisations, the NLL and CPSA, were active in this sphere.

The first indications of organised activity around the food question during the war came from Johannesburg in 1943. In

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1. Material on the Council is very thin. This is another area calling for extensive research. The following account is pieced together from newspaper reports and a couple of papers dealing with the Council found in the AB Xuma papers, University of Witwatersrand. For putting me on to these papers, I am indebted to Debby Gaitskell.
 2. Umsebenzi, 21/9/35.
 3. See above, p.89.

early November, a 'People's Food Council' was formed and subsequently called a public conference on the food situation in conjunction with the NCW¹. This seems to have been the first reported activity of the Food Council. At the conference, the chaotic food supply situation and unscrupulous profiteering by retailers was condemned. According to the Food Council:

"This conference resulted in increased interest in the food situation, which is the cause of the Minister of Agriculture calling for comments from the public on the Egg Control Board which is being formed."²

Information on the origins of the People's Food Council is difficult to uncover. What is worth noting is that a few months before this conference, in August 1943, an increase in the bus fare between Alexandra Township and Johannesburg had led to a massive and ultimately successful bus boycott by the Alexandra inhabitants. This boycott received much publicity and it is possible that its success prompted the formation of the Food Council to deal with the problem of rising costs in this other area - though given the dearth of documentation on the Council, this remains speculative. As in Cape Town, the CPSA was linked to the Council - in late 1943 Hilda Watts (Hilda Bernstein), the communist candidate in the Johannesburg municipal elections, was described as being a "prominent member" of it³.

That the NCW should participate with an organisation with such radical sponsorship is interesting. In part this was a sign of the times - after 1941 the military contribution of the USSR and the CPSA's wholehearted support for the Allied war effort had made the communists less suspect for the

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1. A circular from the People's Food Council, dated 11/3/44, refers to its having been in existence for five months. A.B. Xuma Papers, University of Witwatersrand, Box 1, 440311.
 2. People's Food Council Circular, 11/3/44.
 3. Guardian, 18/11/43.

white establishments. Yet this co-operation sprang too from the common interest that most South African women had, as wives and mothers, in finding a solution to the food crisis. The immediate problem of rising prices could unite women across class and race barriers because it affected them in a common area, that of their domestic responsibilities. In 1946, Mrs. A.E. McCallum, chairwoman of the Housewife's League, referred to this partnership when she described as a "noticeable feature" of the previous year, the "close co-operation" that had existed between women's organisations. "On all vital questions women are prepared to put aside pettiness and jealousy in order to work for the common good of all".¹

On other issues that touched black women in the 1940's, however, issues which were fundamentally linked to the structure of the state - e.g. passes and the unionisation of black workers - the NCW offered them no support. Its commitment to a greater equality for women and an improvement in the living standards of all, did not go beyond its basic allegiance to the institutions of white, bourgeois South Africa. When the Food Council began to look at these institutions more critically, the NCW parted company with it.

In 1943/44, the Food Council involved itself in organising co-operative Food Clubs "to obtain vegetables at about half the ordinary retail prices"². It described these clubs as "not charitable organisations, but clubs which are fostering united action on the part of housewives"³. By March 1944 it had eleven such clubs, involving more than 500 families⁴. Its tasks at that stage were described as:

1. Guardian, 21/3/46. That same month saw the broadly representative International Women's Day meeting in Johannesburg, described above, p.126.

2. People's Food Council Circular, 11/3/44.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. The clubs operated in the following townships and suburbs: Ophirton, Fordsburg, Jeppe, Vrededorp, La Rochelle, Noordgesig, Alexandra.

- "1. To form food clubs in every working class suburb of Johannesburg,
2. To persuade the Municipal Council to carry out its promise to open suburban markets.
3. To persuade the Government to form a Ministry of Food to watch the interests of consumers."¹

It also described itself as having the support of a number of Trade Unions, women's organisations (which were not specified) in "this struggle to put food within the reach of every family."²

While it seems that the People's Food Council did continue to operate in the next few years, the vigour and scale of its operations are not known. In May 1947 the Guardian carried another small article that showed that agitation on the Rand about the food situation had not yet died away. A deputation, chosen to represent the women of Kliptown, near Johannesburg, placed before the City Council a demand that rationing of food stuffs be introduced, as well as complaints about the way the food vans were operating. The Guardian's report did not refer explicitly to the People's Food Council, although the presence of Josie Palmer in the deputation shows that the CPSA, if not the Food Council itself, was represented in the protest³. Interestingly, this deputation came very soon after the Transvaal All-Women's Union, in which Palmer was so prominent, had been formed. By the late 1940's the overlapping of organisations and their leadership was becoming increasingly marked among radical women's groups.

1. People's Food Council Circular, 11/3/44.

2. Ibid.

3. Guardian, 29/5/47.

Women's Food Committee

When one comes to look at the Women's Food Committee in Cape Town, the material is more substantial. This could mean that it was a more active body than the Johannesburg group, but it could also be a mere reflection of the fact that the Guardian, a major source of information on these committees, was based in Cape Town. By 1945-46, the Guardian was reporting numerous manifestations of discontent among Cape Town women about the food situation. In September 1945 it carried a brief reference in its 'Women's Column' to a new campaign that would be starting "soon" to fight against the rising cost of living, but it did not elaborate on this¹. In mid-January 1946, the 'Food Crisis' was its main frontpage story. This story described the militant mood that was developing, and reported incidents of angry women raiding abattoirs in search of meat, threats of strikes by workers and anti-government meetings.

The following month, two women members of the CPUSA led a march of black women (predominantly 'Coloured') past Parliament in demand for the introduction of a government system of rationing of basic foods. Interviewed by the Guardian, none of the leaders, Pauline Podbrey, stressed the need for unity between black and white women on this issue:

"European women must not be too proud to join non-European women in the general demand for rationing... Unity of this kind between the races is terribly important ..."².

It is not clear whether this march was organised by the Women's Food Committee or not. The first explicit reference for such a committee comes a few months later. In April 1946 the Guardian carried an article describing the makeup

1. Guardian, 13/9/45.

2. Ibid, 14/2/46.

and aims of the Committee, as told by an anonymous woman member to John Morley Turner (of the NLL), which explained how it had come into existence.

"Recognising our troubles, and facing up to them practically, we organised a Women's Food Committee. At first it was difficult due to the fact that most of us had so little experience of organisation other than running a house which in itself is an excellent training ground."¹

As she described it, the Committee had grown out of the food queues that formed at each mobile food van. Each queue elected a queue committee to maintain order and ensure "fair deals" - any disorders, it was felt, could lead to the withdrawal of the vans. These committees in turn elected a representative to a General Committee which represented all the food queues. At that stage, in April 1946, 12 food queues were represented on the General Committee and a chairwoman and secretary had recently been chosen. In 1947, the chairwoman was a Mrs. G. Anthony and the secretary Hetty McLeod².

The Women's Food Committee was thus clearly a grassroots organisation. In 1947 the Guardian described it as "a working class organisation springing from the housewives who stood in the food queues"³. However, although it certainly was the product of a widespread mood of dissatisfaction among black housewives and was thoroughly representative of them, it seems clear that there was both prompting and advice from

1. Guardian, 25/4/46.

2. McLeod later married Reggie September who, by 1956, was secretary of the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO). She was herself a signatory to the letter of imitation to the FSAW's conference in 1954. Her role in the Food Committee would appear to have been more important than that of Anthony.

3. Guardian, 2/1/47.

existing political organisations. The two organisations most frequently mentioned in connection with it were the CPSA and NLL, two bodies whose membership and activities frequently overlapped in Cape Town. They provided speakers at many of the public meetings and spokesmen for the several deputations the Committee arranged to meet with various officials. The one person who seems to have been most closely involved in the Committee on a day-to-day level was John Morley Turner of the NLL. According to Katie White, a member of the Committee, it was actually his idea to start it, in conjunction with Hetty McLeod¹.

The Women's Food Committee grew rapidly till by the end of 1947 it claimed to represent 59 queues scattered throughout the Cape Peninsula². From all accounts it was a vigorous body. In March 1947 it organised a conference at which 200 delegates, representing not only the food queues but also trade unions, the CPSA and some churches, agreed to organise a demonstration on the 1st of May outside Parliament. The immediate issue seems to have been a threat to withdraw the food vans³. This demonstration drew "thousands" of Cape Town housewives to a meeting on the Grand Parade. Carrying banners - "We fight for food" - they marched through the streets while a small deputation, which included Sam Kahn and Joey Fourie of the CPSA, met with the Minister of Finance, J. Hofmeyr⁴. Hofmeyr agreed to meet a further deputation and the following week, 12 women, representing the Food Committee plus the Durban Housewives' League, the Food and Canning Workers Union and the Sweet Workers Union met with him. At this meeting they handed over a petition signed by 7 000 women in favour of keeping the food vans till an adequate system of rationing

1. Interview with White.

2. Guardian, 20/11/47.

3. Ibid., 2/4/47.

4. Guardian, 8/5/47.

could be introduced. Rationing was dismissed as impracticable, but Hofmeyr did promise that the food vans would continue to operate¹.

Another area of activity for the Food Committee at this time, was in organising so-called 'food raids' against merchants suspected of hoarding foodstuffs. Large numbers of women, with members of the Committee acting as marshalls, would descend on suspect individual merchants and attempt to pressurise them into unlocking their storerooms and selling their stock. The Guardian carried several reports on such raids which seem to have been generally effective².

By encouraging such demonstrations and organisation, the food crisis of the 1940's had a definite politicising effect on black women. Already in 1946, the Food Committee in Cape Town was showing signs of shifting its focus from the food situation to wider political issues. Their motto as quoted by the Guardian in June 1946 was:

"Today we fight for food, tomorrow for the vote and then for freedom for all."³.

By 1948, the question of the vote had moved to the forefront. Thus Mrs. Anthony, chairwoman of the Committee in January 1948, said:

"The vote is a weapon we must have so that we can safeguard the future of our children ... We women have to deal with the everyday things of life. We have to worry about managing with our husband's pay envelope, about keeping the

1. Guardian, 15/5/47.

2. For instance, the Guardian, 23/5/46, carried a report on a "rice raid" involving "hundreds" of women who first assembled on the Grand Parade outside the City Hall, before marching through the streets to the premises of suspected hoarders. Speakers included Sam Kahn and Cissy Gool.

3. Guardian, 27/6/46.

cost of living down, about getting enough bread for our children and seeing that they go to school. We want to put people in Parliament who understand our problems and will fight in our interests."¹

The Committee had come to see its actual political powerlessness in pushing its demands, as an organisation of individuals who were outside the existing political power structures. At that point, before the National Party had come to power and when 'Coloured' men had not yet been disenfranchised in the Cape, the political future was still seen by these women in terms of a sharing in the institutions of white supremacy - that these could be induced to broaden their base to include other 'race' groups, too.

In pursuit of these goals, a decision was made in July 1948 by the Food Committee to form a "Non European Women's League", to fight for the vote for all black women. The food issues and the franchise were described as inseparable - "whoever controlled the key of the food cupboard controlled the food" and the key was the vote². Unfortunately no follow-up to this decision was reported in the Guardian. It would seem that this League went the way of those earlier unsuccessful attempts to establish a black women's suffrage movement which Cissy Gool and the NLL had sponsored in the late 1930's³. The enfranchisement of black women was not a political goal that could be achieved in isolation from the wider struggle of blacks for full political and social rights in South Africa, a struggle which by the end of the 1940's was becoming more clearly defined as irreconcilable with the institutions of white supremacy (such as Parliament). A Non-

1. Guardian, 20/1/48.

2. Ibid., 5/8/48.

3. See above, p. 88. Whether Cissy Gool had any involvement in this most recent proposal would be interesting to know. Her name is not mentioned in the Guardian report but it seems very probable that she would have had some connection with it.

European Women's Suffrage League was too narrow a base on which to mobilise black women. The absorption of many of the leaders of this League, and the Food Committee as well, into the FSAW and Congress Movement in the early 1950's showed that this realisation had begun to permeate the consciousness of politically active black women by that stage.

By the early 1950's, the Women's Food Committee itself was more or less defunct. The last specific reference to it in the Guardian came in January 1950, when there was a small report on it organising a demonstration against the "serious shortage of meat and increasing cost of living"¹. By 1953, when the food crisis had eased off and the food supply situation was more stable, its functions had been transformed into a 'Christmas Club' - an organisation that offered differently priced Christmas food hampers at wholesale prices to members paying a weekly subscription throughout the year².

Yet the issue of rising prices was still a potentially important one for mobilising women. In August 1953 the threat of an increase in the price of bread reactivated the Food Committee network in Cape Town. With Ray Alexander playing a leading role, a delegation of women was organised to meet with the Minister of Finance, Havenga, to protest the price increase. At least three of the women, apart from Alexander, had been closely involved in the old Food Committee - Gladys Smith, Katie White and Dora Tamana³. This protest, as described below, was an important one in promoting the idea of a national women's organisation amongst Cape Town women, an idea that by that stage had already been raised in Port Elizabeth and was under discussion in other centres. According to Alexander, the bread issue in 1953

1. Guardian, 26/1/50.

2. Ibid., 18/6/53.

3. Ibid. On this see below, p.171.

was significant because it vitally affected women as mothers, and made the women's movement "imperative".

In the Women's Food Committee and People's Food Council, the beginnings of the growth of political consciousness among previously politically isolated black housewives and women workers, can be seen. The starting point was an issue that directly affected them and to which they could easily relate - increased prices and shortages of basic foods. In organising in protest against this, they came up against their actual political impotence in society and began to look more critically at the wider context in which both this and the food crisis itself were operating.

In contributing to the general climate that made the establishment of the FSAW possible, the food crisis was of special importance. Through the Women's Food Committees, numbers of black women, who would otherwise have remained uninvolved, were brought into contact with the political network then being established among women in the national liberation movement, itself in the process of coalescing in the main urban centres. Several of these women would later become active in the FSAW and Congress Movement. Such a woman was Katy White, a domestic worker living in the Harfield Road station area in Cape Town. Prior to getting involved in the Women's Food Committee, her background had been completely apolitical, but, beginning with the Food Committee, she went on to become one of the leaders of the FSAW in Cape Town in the mid-1950's.

The demonstrations and deputations organised by the Food Committees in Johannesburg and Cape Town were politicising experiences for those women who participated in them. They also highlighted for the national liberation movement the potential for political activism that existed among women on issues directly affecting them. In many ways, the Food Committees performed a function for black housewives (though on a more limited scale) similar to that of the trade unions for women in industrial occupations.

5. WOMEN AND THE TRADE UNIONS

The history of trade unionism in South Africa during the 1940's is an area that deserves far more research and attention that it has yet received from historians. The Second World War, it has been said, marked and encouraged a significant shift in the structure of the South African economy, away from its former dependence on the mining and agricultural sectors towards a growing dominance by secondary industry. With this shift, the numbers employed in manufacturing increased rapidly. Black workers came to dominate to a still greater extent at the unskilled and semiskilled levels while white workers tended to move up the scale into the skilled strata or into administrative and clerical posts¹.

The conditions for the spread of trade unionism among black workers thus appeared very favourable, particularly when one links their increased numbers in industry to the drastically inadequate wage levels and rising cost of living already described. The early years of the war were in fact a heyday for black trade unionism. According to a study by Davies, in 1939 there were 25 African unions with a total membership of about 37 000. By the end of the war he estimates that more than 100 000 African workers were union members². In 1944 the Transvaal Council of Non European Trade Unions was established to act as a centre body for black unions. Later it dropped its provincial delimitation to operate on a national basis and became the nucleus round which the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) was formed in 1955, on a radical platform of non-racial trade unionism and support for the Congress Alliance. The peak of African trade union activity during the 1940's was undoubtedly the massive mineworkers strike in August 1946. Under the leadership of the African Mineworkers Union, over

1. See above, p. 34.

2. I. Davies: African Trade Unions, p. 62.

70 000 miners came out on strike for higher wages¹. After three days, the strike was crushed by strong police counter-measures; subsequently over fifty radical political leaders within the trade union movement and the CPSA were arrested and charged with conspiracy and infringing War Measure 145, a law outlawing all strikes by African workers.

Black trade unionism, threatening as it did the very system of cheap black labour on which the South African economy was based, was regarded as a serious threat, both economic and political, by the State. Numerous obstacles militated against the African trade unions in particular, the most obvious being the exclusion of all male African workers from the definition of 'workers' under the Industrial Conciliation Act². While their trade unions were not declared illegal outright, they could not be registered and were forced to operate outside the existing conciliation machinery. After 1948 the National government intensified the attack on the radical strand in the South African trade union movement. The Suppression of Communism Act was used not only against the CPSA itself, but also against radical trade unionists. After 1950 "listed" communists were debarred from trade union work - this affected both Ray Alexander and Solly Sachs of the Garment Workers Union³ - while the banning powers conferred on the Minister of Justice were used extensively in the early 1950's against leftwing trade unionists, communists or not.

1. Roux, op.cit., p.341, puts the total number of workers involved at 73 557. For an account of this strike and African trade unionism at this time generally, see Chapter 26 of his Time Longer than Rope.
2. This Act, first passed in 1924, excluded all "pass-bearing" workers, i.e. African men, from its definition of "employee" in the industrial conciliation machinery it set up. Until 1944 it was generally assumed that African women were included in the "pass-bearing" category as well. In that year, however, the Garment Workers Union won a test case which established that since women did not carry passes, they were entitled to "employee" status in terms of the Act. See below, p. for the significance of the court ruling on the unionisation of African female workers.
3. Sachs was debarred from trade union work in 1952, Alexander in 1953. See below, p. 163.

At the same time, the ideological division between the left and the right undermined the trade union movement as a whole. In the late 1940's the Nationalist inspired attack on non-racial trade unionism finally led to the hiving off of several anti-black unions to establish 'Die Ko-ordinerende Raad van Suid Afrikaanse Vakverenigings'. The pressure from this quarter on unions with predominant or large Afrikaans membership were kept up. Though the Garment Workers Union continued to resist, it was under constant attack throughout the 1940's. In the 1950's, once Sachs had been removed, its leadership became increasingly conservative.

Within the Trades and Labour Council itself, differences of strategy in the face of the government attack and of commitment to the non-racial principle, continued to divide the conservatives from the radicals. This conflict was finally brought to a head by the announcement, in 1954, that legislation outlawing multi-racial unions would shortly be introduced. The Trades and Labour Council split, the majority of its affiliates grouping to form the Trade Union Council which was prepared to work within this new framework. Those unions which opposed this surrender of principle regrouped to form SACTU the following year.

Thus, by the 1950's, after an initial upsurge of activity during and shortly after the war, the trade union movement in South Africa was in considerable disarray. It is in this general context that trade unionism among women during this period must be viewed. While the 1940's marked a definite upswing in activity amongst women workers compared to the 1930's, the scope was still restricted, both by the general obstacles that hampered the trade union movement as a whole and, more specific to women, the relatively small, though increasing, numbers of women in industry.

As an area of mass organisation among women, the trade unions remained limited. As a training ground for women political

leaders, they were very important. During the 1940's the number of women working as trade union organisers was on the increase. The Guardian's coverage of successive annual conferences by the Trades and Labour Council makes this clear. Old stalwarts, such as Ray Alexander and the Cornelius sisters, were being joined by other women, several of whom were CPSA members, e.g. Hilda Watts, Pauline Podbrey, Joey Fourie. As the decade wore on, several black women became prominent as trade unionists too, e.g. Hetty du Preez and Lucy Mvubelo in the Garment Workers Union, Frances Baard in the Food and Canning Workers Union. This was a new and significant development and reflected the increasing importance of black women in the industrial labour force, already described in Chapter One. As this development became more marked, the scope of union work was coming to focus more upon black women than, as previously, white.

In 1940, the tremendous influx of black women (mostly 'Coloured') into the garment industry on the Rand led to the establishment of a separate branch of the Garment Workers Union, the No. 2 branch, to cater for them. This was organised as a parallel to the parent union which remained exclusively white. Thus, although it formed a major area of activity amongst black women workers, the establishment of such a branch represented a breach in the tradition of non-racialism within the Garment Workers Union. Nevertheless, the increase in 'Coloured' women in this sphere of industry was spectacular during this period and the No. 2 branch, with Hetty du Preez as organising secretary, expanded rapidly¹.

The following year, 1941, saw the establishment of the Food and Canning Workers Union in the Western Cape, largely as a result of efforts made by Ray Alexander². Though its membership was not exclusively female, women predominated and came

1. For an account of the Garment Workers Union at this time, see Sachs: Rebels' Daughters.

2. See, inter alia, R. Close: New Life.

to play a leading part in its management. The establishment of this union was an important event for the subsequent history of the FSAW. It was the only union to develop close and consistent ties with the FSAW. In the Western Cape, it was an active politicising agent amongst black female workers in the food industry, identifying itself with the tradition of radical, non-racial trade unionism that in 1955 would lead to the establishment of SACTU. Several leaders of the FSAW in the Cape - Liz Abrahams, Elizabeth Mafeking, Frances Baard - rose to political prominence through this union.

A further encouraging development of the 1940's was the breakthrough achieved by the Garment Workers Union on the question of unionising African women. In 1944 it established the right for African women to belong to registered unions by proving, in court, that they did not fall within the definition of the "pass-bearing" worker as laid down in the Industrial Conciliation Act. This meant they qualified to be treated on the same scale as other union members with regard to wages and general work conditions¹. Undoubtedly this facilitated union work amongst African women and held out the prospects of the development of a broad and non-racial trade unionism among women workers. However, since the numbers of African women in industry were still so small, the significance of the Supreme Court's ruling was limited, both amongst women and for the status of African workers in South Africa in general. Furthermore, once the National Party had come to power in 1948, this newly-won status of African women workers was in jeopardy and in 1953, the loophole through which they had squeezed in to the registered unions, was closed by the passage of the Native Labour (Settlement of Dispute) Act. This redefined "employee" in the Industrial Conciliation Act to exclude all Africans, male and female².

1. Sachs, op.cit., p.116.

2. In addition, the new pass legislation of 1952 had already brought women within the legal definition of "pass-bearing" worker.

By 1948 the female trade union membership in South Africa stood at 59 155 (compared to 278 740 for men)¹. Roughly two thirds of this membership was white (39 921). At the 18th annual conference of the Trades and Labour Council in that year, the Guardian pointed out, with a note of pride, that of the 200 delegates about 25 were women - "Among them are many veteran trade unionists who ... were scheduled to move some of the most progressive resolutions"². Obviously women were still a long way from approaching anything like parity with men, in either the trade union movement or industrial employment itself. Nevertheless, at that stage, the future of trade unionism as a politicising force among South Africa's growing number of black women workers looked fairly promising.

It was a promise that was not realised. The attack on the unions in the next few years undermined the groundwork already achieved amongst women workers. The listing and banning of prominent trade unionists - Betty du Toit, Ray Alexander, Solly Sachs, Hilda Watts, Joey Fourie³ - coupled with the exclusion of African women from the registered unions after 1953, deflected the course of trade union work among women into weakened and segregated unions. While female industrial employment and trade union membership continued to grow during the 1950's⁴, the growing potential of the unions as an area of mass political organisation among black women had been sharply cut back.

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1. Calculated from Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-18.
 2. Guardian, 1/4/48.
 3. Betty du Toit and Solly Sachs were banned in 1952, Ray Alexander, Hilda Watts and Joey Fourie in 1953.
 4. In 1961 the total female membership of registered unions was 86 126. M. Horrell: South African Trade Unionism, p.91.

This was not achieved without fierce resistance on the part of the more militant workers. In 1952, the government's enforced removal of Solly Sachs from his position of General Secretary of the Garment Workers Union (under the Suppression of Communism Act), led to a huge show of support for Sachs from garment workers, both black and white. Thousands of workers, from all over the Rand, gathered at an enormous public protest meeting outside the Johannesburg City Hall, to hear Sachs defy his banning order by addressing the meeting. Sachs himself estimated the crowd at 27 000¹. When he was arrested at the start of his speech, the meeting turned into a violent confrontation between police and workers which landed many women in hospital. This demonstration, coming shortly before the launching of the Defiance Campaign, added to the mood of crisis and confrontation that was prevailing in the national liberation movement. The treatment of the women demonstrators by the police also served a warning that women could no longer necessarily expect a more lenient approach from the state in its suppression of their protests, than that it displayed towards male demonstrations. By the early 1950's chivalry was for the drawing room only.

Yet despite the difficulties facing the trade unions, their importance as a recruiting and training ground for leaders within the FSAW needs to be stressed. The network of contacts built up within the post-war trade union movement, amongst women, was an invaluable one when it came to promoting the idea of a national women's organisation in 1953/54. Here, the years of work put in by Ray Aleander proved especially useful. In organising the inaugural conference, she relied on these contacts to popularise the idea of the FSAW and recruit delegates from among a broader spectrum of women than those already active within the various Congress organisations.

1. Sachs, op.cit., p.198. Several future FSAW leaders were there, including Helen Joseph - her first political demonstration - Lilian Ngoyi and Mary Moodley. Personal communications.

Summary, 1939 - 1953

In the years during and after the Second World War, then, the move to organise women gained increasing momentum within the national liberation movement, itself assuming a more unified shape. The underlying changes in women's position in society, which made this development possible, were considered in Chapter One. In addition, the politicisation of women was encouraged by a number of political campaigns that drew on women in greater numbers than previously. Here, the various food demonstrations during the war years, the Passive Resistance Campaign of 1946, the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and especially the anti-pass protests after 1950 were all important. The CPUSA, ANC, SAIC and trade unions were all paying increased attention to women within their ranks. They were encouraged in this by a small group of women activists who, over the years, had developed an overlapping network of contacts spread across several different organisations. Within these organisations, women were regarded as forming a special area for political work and some recognition of the special sex-based disabilities they suffered, had been granted.

By 1953, with the establishment of the Congress Alliance, the way was clear for women within this Alliance to form their own organisation. In the FSAW the many different strands described in the preceding two chapters, were woven together to form a new organisation, an organisation which adopted an ambitious, political programme that embraced not only women but society at large.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FSAW

The FSAW was formally established in April 1954, the product of a dual process - on the one hand, long-term changes in the position of women and, on the other, the rise of the national liberation movement and establishment of the Congress Alliance in the early 1950's. These two processes interacted to shape a particular perspective on the position of women and their political role in South Africa, one which emphasised women's contribution to the struggle against white minority rule as taking priority over their emancipation from sex-based oppression.

The establishment of the FSAW was in many ways the culmination of that long process of politicisation amongst women which had begun in 1913/14 in the Free State and had unfolded in the intervening forty years within the various organisations already described. By 1953 there was sufficient interest amongst women within the Congress movement to organise a national conference at which these different threads could all be drawn together. This chapter will focus on this, the immediate background to the inaugural conference itself and the rough outline of an organisation and its policy, that was created in April 1954.

1. PLANNING THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE: PORT ELIZABETH, APRIL 1953

The FSAW conference of 1954 was the culmination of months of planning. According to Ray Alexander, prime mover behind its organisation, the decision to initiate such a step was made in Port Elizabeth in April 1953¹. At the time, she was

1. The following account is based on interviews with her, May 1977.

in Port Elizabeth attending the annual Trades and Labour Council Conference. During the course of this conference she was asked to address an informal gathering of women that Florence Matomela, provincial president of the ANCWL in the Eastern Cape, and Frances Baard, of the African Food and Canning Workers Union in Port Elizabeth had organised.

It was at this meeting, attended by some 40 to 50 women - ANC members and trade unionists mostly - that the decision to launch the FSAW was made. Alexander began the meeting with a general talk on the position of women in the world. Thereafter discussion was open to the floor. What the women concentrated on particularly were immediate, basic issues that were confronting them as women, those responsible for their families' welfare - passes, rising food and transport costs. According to Alexander, the decision to press ahead to set up a national women's organisation came from the floor as a result of this discussion.

Unfortunately the meeting does not appear to have been documented. It was apparently an informal event, arranged at short notice: Alexander's presence in the area was probably the incentive behind its calling. For her, the speed with which the meeting was organised - relying on word of mouth - as well as the large turnout, despite the fact that it was an evening meeting and most of the women had household commitments, was impressive. It indicated how strongly the women felt about the need for them to establish a more active political role for themselves.

All the women attended in their individual capacities, rather than as official representatives of any organisation. They were, however, drawn from that loose grouping of organisations which by that stage had come together in the Congress Alliance. Most of the women were African, but several non-African women were there too - COD, SACPO, SAIC members and trade unionists¹.

1. Non-ANC women whom Ray Alexander remembers as present were a Mrs. Pillay, a Miss Damons, Gus Coe. Personal communication.

The multi-racial structure that the FSAW was to adopt was thus present at its very beginnings.

The information on this meeting is unfortunately very sketchy. From a general perspective, it was clearly a manifestation of that lengthy process of political awakening amongst women within the national liberation movement, already described. Both the ANC and trade union movement were strong in Port Elizabeth¹. The experience and perspectives of the CPSA in encouraging the greater politicisation of women before its forced dissolution in 1950, were brought to the meeting in the presence of Alexander. Clearly, her personal influence was important, not just at the actual meeting but in having focussed attention on women's position in the past, both as a trade unionist and CPSA member. Her contact with Matomela and Baard stretched back before 1953. The April meeting was not their first discussion on the need for women to mobilise themselves in South Africa².

At the same time, the timing of the Port Elizabeth meeting must be seen in the context of local political developments which provided Matomela and Baard with the incentive for calling the meeting when they did. At that stage, the political climate in Port Elizabeth was particularly highly charged. The Defiance Campaign of 1952 had only recently drawn to a halt: it had reached its peak in the Eastern Cape, centred on Port Elizabeth. Out of a national total of 8 557 resisters, fully 5 719 had come from the Eastern Province³. Both a

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1. According to Alexander, laundry and textile workers' organisations, both with large female memberships, were strong in Port Elizabeth, in addition to her own union, the Food and Canning Workers Union. Personal Communication.
 2. Personal Communication.
 3. L. Kuper: Passive Resistance in South Africa, p.123. For a comparison of the Defiance Campaign in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal, see D. Carter: 'The Defiance Campaign - a comparative analysis of the organisation, leadership and participation in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal'.

result and a partial cause of the success of the Defiance Campaign locally, the Eastern Province section of the ANC was very strong. Indicative of this, in October 1952 it had arranged a one-day general strike among the African residents of Port Elizabeth, which achieved a 90% stay-at-home¹. Women were directly caught up in these events. As already described, they had already participated in the Defiance Campaign in significant numbers as well as being subject to the general politicising impact of the Campaign. Florence Matomela, co-organiser of the April meeting, had been particularly prominent as a Defiance Campaign organiser and leader of women. She participated in the first act of defiance which launched the Campaign nationally. Later, in September 1952, she was amongst the group of ANC leaders arrested and charged under the Suppression of Communism Act in the government's attempt to crush the campaign².

Then, coming immediately on top of these events - and no doubt in response to them - in early 1953 the Port Elizabeth municipality announced that, for the first time, influx control measures would be enforced against Africans living within its boundaries³. This provoked a storm of protest which

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1. Benson: The Struggle for a Birthright, p.151. Kuper, op.cit., p.124, lists the following reasons for "the greater strength of resistance in the Eastern Province" - "the longer period of contact with Europeans, the extent of conversion to Christianity, the strength of the trade unions, the relatively more liberal policies and hence the sharper reaction to the deprivations of apartheid, political training acquired in the exercise of a limited franchise, the greater stability of family life and the more homogeneous character of the African population". On the "more liberal policies" and their effects, see below.
 2. Benson, op.cit., p.148.
 3. This is an area requiring a detailed study of its own. However, this would seem to be a clear case of influx control measures being used to disrupt and undermine African political organisation in Port Elizabeth.

boosted general ANC support still further - a monster protest meeting organised by the ANC in January 1953 drew, according to the newspaper Advance, some 20 000 people¹. The implementation of influx control measures (in terms of the newly amended Urban Areas Act) affected women even more directly than the Defiance Campaign had, and served to push their leaders into action.

Prior to 1953, Port Elizabeth had been one of the few large urban areas where no influx control measures operated to restrict African townward migration. In addition, a further manifestation of a more liberal approach to "native affairs", the local government had pursued a policy of concentrating on providing family housing, rather than "single" accommodation for contract, migrant (and hence mainly male) labour, in its African townships. As a result, a reasonably stable, sexually balanced African community had been allowed to develop in Port Elizabeth, in strong contrast to the other major cities (Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria and Durban). In 1946, the African population of Port Elizabeth stood at 23 728 males and 23 328 females². The masculinity rate was a mere 102, compared to a Union-wide urban average of 186. On the Witwatersrand, the rate went up to 275³.

Compared with women in other areas, African women in Port Elizabeth had thus enjoyed considerable security of residence and freedom of movement before 1953. This had undoubtedly made it easier for them to organise politically and must be regarded as an important factor in contributing to the general level of political maturity they displayed in Port Elizabeth, during and after the Defiance Campaign. Conversely, the threat posed to their security in January 1953 provided women with compelling reasons for wishing to organise still more effectively. The implications of the new influx control

1. Advance, 22/1/53.

2. Report of the Native Laws Commission, 1948, p.10.

3. Industrial Legislation Commission, 1951, p.14, Table 16.

measures were particularly disturbing for them since relatively few women, compared to men, would qualify for legal residence in terms of the amended Urban Areas Act.

This, then, was the particular context in which the women's meeting in Port Elizabeth, April 1953, must be placed. Women's issues had fused with general ones, local concerns encouraged a national perspective. Acting within the context of the national liberation movement and with the specific example of its campaigns before them, politically involved women had come to realise the necessity for women to mobilise round issues that particularly affected them, on a national scale. The energy that Port Elizabeth provided in 1953, in getting a women's organisation off the ground, continued to characterise the women's movement there. In the years to come it would remain a strong ANCWL and FSAW centre.

2. PLANNING THE CONFERENCE, APRIL 1953 - APRIL 1954

From these beginnings, the impetus towards convening the FSAW's inaugural conference shifted with Ray Alexander to her home base in Cape Town. Thereafter Cape Town and Johannesburg came to the fore as the main centres of organisation, Cape Town largely because of Alexander and Johannesburg because it was there that the Congress Alliance was at its strongest. Alexander assumed the primary responsibility for implementing the Port Elizabeth women's decision, by enlisting the support of other women leaders across the country. Energetic, enthusiastic, she was an ideal person for such a task. Her commitment to women's emancipation stretched back over many years to her earliest days in South African politics in the 1930's. In the trade union movement and CPISA she had been a tireless campaigner for women's rights, the need for women to organise and their disabilities to be treated as serious political issues. Over the years she had built up an extensive network of contacts amongst women in all the main urban areas and many of the smaller towns as well. These

ranged from highly politicised members of the ANC or CPSA to ordinary factory workers and housewives. In the next few months her contribution towards getting the FSAW off the ground was a major one.

In Cape Town there were already loose links among radical women activists dating from the Food Committee days and, more recently, the anti-pass protests. In July 1953, a threatened increase in the price of bread provoked further food protests along similar lines to those of the 1940's and stimulated local interest in a national women's organisation. For Alexander, the threatened price increase, vitally affecting women as mothers and housewives, made the women's movement "imperative" and she used it to popularise the idea of the Women's Conference¹. In August she led a deputation of women to protest against the price rise to Havenga, Minister of Finance. Included in this deputation were Gladys Smith (Cape Housewives' League), Katie White (Women's Food Committee) and Dora Tamana (ANCWL and CPSA), all of whom had been involved in the food protests of the 1940's². This group, with additional ANC Women's Leaguers, Annie Silinga, Mrs. Thaele, appears to have formed the nucleus of the planning group for the women's conference in Cape Town. By 1954 it was being described as the 'Women's Committee' in Alexander's correspondence and it was meeting regularly under her direction to discuss the shape the conference should take³.

In Johannesburg, Alexander turned to Hilda Watts, a former colleague in the CPSA, to take responsibility for the conference at that end. Watts, too, had a lengthy record of activity in various leftwing organisations on the Rand. Her own interest in women's emancipation had already led her to involvement in the Transvaal All-Women's Union in the

1. Personal communication.

2. Advance, 6/8/53. The other two members of the deputation were Hilda Lotz and Katie Altman, a trade unionist.

3. See FSAW correspondence, 20/2/54 and 11/3/54, FSAW BII.

late 1940's. In August 1953, Alexander visited Johannesburg for another Trades and Labour Council Conference - this time to discuss the Council's stand on the impending Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Bill. She took the opportunity to meet with Watts and discuss plans for the conference.

Whether a 'Women's Committee' on similar lines to the Cape Town group existed in Johannesburg is not known. It is clear from the list of signatories to the general invitation to attend the women's conference that ANC Women's Leaguers, trade unionists and members of the Transvaal All-Women's Union, Congress of Democrats and Indian Congress were all drawn into the planning stage. Women involved included Ida Mtwana (National President of the ANCWL), Josie Palmer (ex CPSA, Transvaal All-Women's Union), Helen Joseph (COD), Mrs. M. Cachalia, Mrs. M. Naidoo (SAIC), Betty du Toit, Lucy Mvubelo, Hetty du Preez (trade unionists)¹.

Yet, while both Watts and Alexander were working in co-operation with other politically involved women in their areas, it seems that their personal influence in shaping the final form of the conference was considerable. In September 1953 both women were served with banning orders which curtailed their public involvement in various organisations². The main thrust of the bannings seem to have been against their trade union work, however, and their work for the forthcoming women's conference was not impeded. The frequent correspondence that passed between the two women indicates that the main weight of organising the conference rested on them. In March 1954, Alexander was writing to Watts on an average

1. 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights, to be held in the Trades Hall, Kerk Street, Johannesburg, on Saturday, 17th April, 1954'. FSAW AI. Hereafter referred to as 'Conference to promote Women's Rights'.

2. Advance, 17/9/53 and 24/9/53.

of once every three or four days¹. They were responsible for relaying information and progress reports across the 1 609 kilometres that separated Cape Town from Johannesburg, as well as enlisting the support of other women for the conference. Final decisions concerning the agenda appear to have been made by them. (In this regard, Alexander showed a stubborn, hard-headed streak. Writing to Watts about a disagreement that had arisen with women in Durban about the agenda - they were opposed to including a talk by Walter Sisulu of the ANC on 'Women in China' - she declared emphatically: "We are not giving in on this ..."².)

At the conference, too, these two women appear to have retained a large measure of control over the proceedings. A letter from Alexander to Watts, written shortly after the conference, indicates that much of its behind-the-scenes planning and decision-making was vested in their hands. This letter refers to a meeting held the night before the conference began and attended by herself, Watts, "Helen" (presumably Helen Joseph, of the Johannesburg Congress of Democrats) and "Gladys" (Gladys Smith, a colleague of Alexander's from Cape Town). At least one of the topics discussed was what the new name for the organisation should be³. The meeting appears to have been a planning and strategy one; it is likely that it would have drafted the various resolutions adopted by the conference, and perhaps the 'Women's Charter' as well. It seems that the final report on the Conference in which the 'Women's Charter', 'Aims' and a summary of the speeches

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1. Her letters to Watts in the second half of the month were dated the 11th, 16th, 19th, 21st, 28th and 30th March, respectively; FSAW correspondence, FSAW B II. Unfortunately, none of Watts' replies (which would have been among the missing Cape Town papers of the FSAW) have been traced.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 2/3/54, FSAW B II. What exactly was at stake in the dispute is not clear. Alexander, however, had her way. Though Sisulu himself was unable to attend the inaugural conference, his speech was presented for him by Duma Nokwe, also of the ANC.
 3. FSAW Correspondence, 17/5/54, FSAW B II.

and proceedings appeared, was drafted by Watts¹.

Thus the initial conception of the FSAW owed much to the ideas on women that had been developed within the CPSA, even though once formed, the FSAW would pursue a path which, to some extent, was independent from that of its original sponsorship. Both Alexander and Watts perceived women's struggle for emancipation as part and parcel of a wider struggle for liberation, a struggle that ultimately was seen in class terms: by workers and peasants, against the bourgeoisie, for a socialist state. In 1954, however, the national liberation movement took precedence; they regarded its success as the essential pre-requisite for any subsequent socialist revolution. Thus, the invitation to attend the FSAW's inaugural conference, sent out in March 1954, declared:

"The most serious handicaps under which we labour are those imposed by the government and laws of this country under the policy of segregation and apartheid."²

In this respect, there was not much difference between the views of Alexander and Watts, and those of the ANC and other Congress bodies on what the priorities of a women's political organisation in South Africa should be. Both expected such an organisation to work within the general framework of the national liberation movement. Where the difference lay, was in the strength of their support for the idea that women needed to play a larger part in the general liberation struggle, as well as their continued emphasis that women needed to fight against sex-based oppression too. The national liberation movement as such took priority, partly because without it, no real change in the position of women would be possible; it took priority, but should not be allowed to eclipse the movement to eliminate sexism in society. As the conference

1. This is the impression gained from correspondence between Alexander and Watts, FSAW B II.

2. 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights', Op.cit.

invitation pointed out - "Most women of our country suffer discrimination as women, apart from discrimination imposed on non-white women because of race"¹.

The two women, and Alexander in particular, brought to the conference a degree of self-conscious feminism that was considerably more developed than that found in the national liberation movement, generally, and amongst most women activists within it. They were critical of sex-typed roles for women and saw the FSAW as breaking new ground in this regard. A suggestion by Watts that the catering for the conference be handled by male colleagues was enthusiastically received by Alexander -

"... am enjoying your arrangement that the men are to do the catering - excellent idea - and a taste of real emancipation for both men and women".²

The attack on sexism should begin with the Congress Alliance itself.

Another dimension to Alexander and Watts' perspective on the women's movement in South Africa, and one nurtured within the CPSA, was the stress they laid on the women's movement as part of an international struggle as well. The example set by the WIDF for the CPSA has already been mentioned. Both Alexander and Watts envisaged that the new women's body in South Africa would affiliate to the WIDF. Their speeches at the conference stressed the community of interest women in South Africa shared with women in other parts of the world, holding up the advances made by women in the socialist

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1. 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights'. Op.cit.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 5/4/54, FSAW B II. This suggestion was carried out and received much intrigued but generally approving comment in reports on the conference in Advance and Fighting Talk, the COD periodical. See below, p. 183.

countries (the USSR, China), as measures of what could be achieved¹. They were anxious to direct women's attention beyond a purely local perspective; here, the influence of the Communist Party's internationalist outlook could be clearly seen.

With the main axis of activity lying between Alexander in Cape Town and Watts in Johannesburg, other areas became drawn into the planning stages of the conference too. In mid 1953 Alexander made contact with individual women in Durban who responded favourably to the idea of the proposed conference. These contacts were strengthened in early 1954 by a visit from Alexander to Durban². Women involved at this stage in that city included Dr. K. Goonam, Fatima Meer and Fatima Seedat, all of the SAIC and Bertha Mkize and Henrietta Ostrich of the ANC. These two organisations would prove the only significant basis of support for the FSAW in Durban after 1954³.

After January 1954, the idea of the conference was popularised amongst a larger audience than that within the already existing

1. Alexander, in her opening speech, referred to the inspiring and "wonderful work" of the WIDF - "The women of the whole world ... are growing more and more aware of the need to participate actively in the struggle for peace, national liberation, and friendship of all people". Watts' speech on 'Women's struggle for Peace', concentrated on international affairs (the hydrogen bomb, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the international anti-war movement). See FSAW: 'Report of the first National Conference of Women', pp.3 and 7.
2. FSAW Correspondence, 8/2/54, FSAW B II.
3. Dr. Goonam, despite her impressive career within the SAIC, did not maintain her links with the FSAW after 1954. The reason is not clear, though from the gossip column in Drum magazine, it appears she had already come into conflict with the SAIC hierarchy; see 'Durban Diary', Drum, November 1952.

Congress network when Alexander was nominated to stand in the Parliamentary by-election for Native Representative, Cape Western Division. This gave her a prominent platform from which to promote the forthcoming conference. The by-election had been necessitated by the expulsion from the House of Assembly of the sitting representative, Brian Bunting, in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act. Exploiting a loophole that was closed too late to prevent her own nomination from going through, Alexander launched upon an extensive election campaign, under the slogan "Vote for Alexander. Vote for Afrika".

Her manifesto was based on the abolition of the colour bar in all spheres - politically, economically, socially - and on full support for "all progressive organisations ... in the struggle for liberation from unjust laws"¹. At the same time, she stressed the need to strive for full equality between men and women and used every opportunity to canvass the idea of the women's conference. Her election tours took her, inter alia, to Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Beaufort West, De Aar, and she used her many election meetings to discuss the proposed conference with women in all the towns she visited in her vast constituency. General political meetings were frequently followed by women's meetings where the conference was publicised, and arrangements made for sending local delegates to the conference, by then scheduled to be held in Johannesburg in April. "Am having meetings with women all over and they are electing delegates, undertaking to raise the money for fares", she reported to Watts from Beaufort West in March 1954². An enthusiast herself, she was impressed by the enthusiasm and interest displayed by the women she met. "... The interest and enthusiasm for the conference is beyond expectations", she wrote on the 30th March to Watts³.

1. Advance, 8/4/54.

2. FSAW correspondence, 11/3/54, FSAW B II.

3. Ibid., 30/3/54.

Alexander's personal prestige among the bulk of her electorate was very high - even hostile observers were conceding that hers would be a run-away victory¹. (In the event, she was elected by an overwhelming majority in early April, 1954, a few days before the FSAW inaugural conference, but forcibly prevented from taking her seat on the 27th April².) Through the election campaign, women in some of the more outlying towns were drawn into the planning of the conference. In mid-March, Advance reported that African women in Beaufort West were to send delegates to the conference³. Even though their delegates did not, as it turned out, make it to the conference itself⁴, the attempt to broaden the base of the conference was an important and necessary one. No women's organisation could consider itself truly national if it ignored those women who were living outside the larger urban centres of the country.

1. Advance, 28/1/54, when her campaign had just begun, quoted the following extract from an editorial in the Nationalist daily, Die Burger: "It is now too late to prevent her from participating in the election and I think I can just as well say that it's too late to prevent her from winning the election". On 25/2/54 Advance printed the following poem, translated from the Xhosa, which they had received from an African worker at a Hermanus hotel:

"We congratulate her for beauty - it is her
deeds which are beautiful;
We congratulate her for beauty - it is the
head of cattle we receive with her which
pleases us;
We congratulate her for beauty - it is her
humanity which is beautiful."

2. Advance, 29/4/54.
3. Ibid., 18/3/54.
4. See below, p. 188.

On the 16th March, 1954, a formal invitation to attend the conference was sent out to a wide range of potentially interested organisations - women's organisations, trade unions, township vigilance associations, the different Congress bodies and their branches. Women "of all organisations" were called upon to attend or send delegates to the conference which was described as one "to promote women's rights"¹. The invitation was thus an open one. It stressed that "any group of women, from factories or areas, can get together and send a delegate to this historical conference" - there seems in fact to have been no tight system for choosing delegates according to a strict quota. It also appealed to women in very general terms as "mothers of the nation - a half of the whole population"².

Despite the openness of the invitation, its political orientation was clearly slanted towards the policies of the Congress Alliance. The sixty-three women who signed the invitation were all prominently associated with the Congress movement³, while the content of their appeal ranged far beyond the question of just equal rights for women.

"We women, like men, want to be free to move about in the country of our birth, to live where we like, to buy land freely. We want an end to the migrant labour system ... We claim for ourselves and our daughters, as well as for men, the right to education and employment in all occupations and professions. While our main struggle is with men against racialism and the colour bar, to make our national struggle more effective, we ask that men support us in our fight for equality"⁴.

From the beginning, then, the FSAW labelled itself as a political body involved in the national liberation movement.

1. 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights', op.cit., p.1.

2. Ibid.

3. See Appendix A for list of signatories.

4. 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights', op.cit., p.1.

Not surprisingly, therefore, there was no response to its invitation from any of the numerous white women's organisations, with the exception of the women in the tiny Congress of Democrats. Some black women's organisations, too, looked askance at its politically activist stance. The NCAW, for instance, would not be drawn into the conference as an organisation, though its national president, M.T. Soga, did attend a preliminary meeting held by Alexander in East London in February 1954¹, and individual members may well have attended the conference in their personal capacities.

Within the Congress Alliance itself, the organisers of the conference appear to have had general support. Certainly in the Cape, the ANC leadership undertook to publicise the conference to all its branches. On the 19th March Alexander could report to Watts that she was working in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth "with full support of ANC"². Material on the other provinces is unavailable. In the Transvaal the main link between the conference organisers and the ANC would appear to have been Walter Sisulu, himself an advocate of the importance of establishing a national women's organisation³.

Yet the scanty preliminary coverage afforded the conference by the newspaper Advance makes it abundantly clear that not all supporters of the national liberation movement considered the conference an event of any major importance in the history of that movement.

The first mention of the conference in Advance was in passing, on the 18th March 1954, in connection with the election meeting held by Alexander in Beaufort West⁴. Thereafter it published

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1. FSAW correspondence, 8/2/54, FSAW B II.
 2. Ibid., 19/3/54.
 3. See FSAW correspondence, copy of circular addressed to Hilda Watts, 20/2/54, FSAW B II, for a reference to "Walter" and the Agenda.
 4. Advance, 18/3/54.

one small report, describing the conference in a phrase borrowed from the women's invitation as one "to promote women's rights"¹.

Even after the conference, it did not publish a report immediately. The conference was held on the week-end of the 17th April, but Advance (a weekly) did not bring out a report till two weeks later, on the 29th April². While the organisation of women was accepted as a useful project by most activists within the Congress Alliance, it was certainly not one that occupied the centre of the stage in 1954.

For the women who had been working to get the project off the ground, however, it was an event of major importance. Expectations of the conference were high. In March 1954 Alexander summed up this mood of optimism when she wrote:

"It is truly going to be a fine conference.
So much enthusiasm for it."³

3. THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE

In this spirit, the FSAW inaugural conference was finally held, a year after the Port Elizabeth meeting, on the weekend of the 17th April, 1954, in the Trades Hall, Johannesburg⁴.

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1. Advance, 1/4/54.
 2. Ibid., 29/4/54. No report appeared in its issue of the 22/4/54.
 3. FSAW correspondence, 19/3/54, FSAW B II.
 4. No correspondence has been found to know whether there was any discussion on where the best place to hold the conference would be. Johannesburg, although not convenient for the Cape delegates, was the political centre of the country, the headquarters of the various Congress Alliance organisations and this, no doubt, influenced the decision to convene the conference there.

Here - "with joyful enthusiasm"¹ - the skeletal framework of a national organisation of women was created, a 'Women's Charter' setting out the philosophy behind this new organisation adopted and its broad aims established:

"This organisation is formed for the purpose of uniting all women in common action for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities."²

From all reports, the conference was a spirited, festive occasion. Attending and participating in the proceedings was in itself a politicising experience for delegates. For most non-Johannesburg women it was probably their first visit to the Rand, for some their first long journey away from home. For them the conference provided a real break from their daily, pressured lives as workers and township housewives. It was also the first opportunity many women had had for meeting with other women political activists from different centres and discussing how they perceived their situation to be. New contacts were established, a national dimension introduced into the delegates' thinking. In this way the meeting fostered a fresh sense of women's political relevance. At the opening session, Ida Mtwana, ANCWL National President, declared:

"We know that as women we have many problems which hold us back from taking part fully in the struggle (for "freedom") and it is for precisely that purpose that we have come to break down these problems."³

In this connection, the allocation of all the catering responsibilities to male volunteers, thus leaving the women free

1. FSAW: 'Report of the first National Conference of Women' (hereinafter 'Report'), p.1.
2. Ibid., p.16, quoting from 'Our Aims'.
3. FSAW: 'Report', p. 4.

to concentrate on the business of the conference, was a startling lesson in role-reversal for all concerned, both men and women. Newspaper reports on the conference commented on it in approving, if surprised, tones. For Advance, it was "something that will always be remembered about this conference"¹. The COD periodical, Fighting Talk, felt it warranted its own byline - "And the men took their place in the kitchen ..."². It was a provocative sight, expressive of the new consciousness being shaped by the conference. In the speech already quoted, Ida Motwana made the point explicit:

"Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the children. Today, they are marching side by side with men in the road to freedom."³

The Delegates

It is not easy to piece together a comprehensive picture of the women who attended the conference. Information is sketchy. Even the available figures for the final number of delegates present do not agree. The official 'Report on the first National Conference of Women' mentioned "nearly 150 women" in attendance⁴, while an earlier draft of the report referred to 146 delegates, representing 223 500 women⁵. A letter from Alexander to Watts, dated 22/5/54, corrected both figures. She put the final number of delegates at 137, plus "a few representatives from some other ANC branches", whose exact numbers were not known⁶. Less than a quarter of these

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1. Advance, 29/4/54.
 2. Fighting Talk, May 1954.
 3. FSAW: 'Report', p.4.
 4. Ibid., p.1.
 5. Unheaded typescript, p.5, FSAW A I.
 6. FSAW correspondence, 22/5/54, FSAW B II.

women have been positively identified; the rest are conjectural figures. Nevertheless, some general conclusions on the delegates and who they represented can be made on the basis of the available material. The remarks here should be seen as a supplement to the discussion in Chapter Six on the membership of the FSAW, in general.

The 'Women's Charter', adopted at the conference, referred to the gathering in very general terms as "we, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, Africans, Indians, European and Coloured"¹. Certainly a wide cross-section of South African women were present - far wider than that achieved by other contemporary women's organisations - and no group of women were deliberately excluded. However, the conference was by no means representative of all South African women, nor, considering the definite political allegiance of its sponsors to the Congress Alliance and its programme, could this have been expected.

This identification with the Congress Alliance determined the political background from which participants in the conference came. As already indicated, they were drawn, entirely it would seem, from organisations already within the ambit of the Alliance - the ANC, SAIC, COD, SACPO, leftwing trade unions. Other political groups which subscribed in general terms to the aims of "national liberation" for blacks in South Africa, but which did not belong to the Congress Alliance (for instance, the Non-European Unity Movement, based in Cape Town²), were not represented. Nor were any of the already established national women's organisations, e.g. the NCW, NCAW, or any of the white political parties, other than COD, not even the Liberal Party.

How extensive support for the Congress Alliance would have been amongst women in 1954 is extremely difficult to gauge

1. FSAW: 'Report', p.14.

2. On the NEUM, see above, p.66 footnote.

with any precision¹. On what the FSAW's draft report on the conference based its figure of 223 500 women represented at the conference, is not made clear. None of the organisations involved kept accurate membership lists. Certainly the ANC at the end of the Defiance Campaign could accurately describe itself as a mass movement, but what its female membership might have been is not known. The other Congresses would have had a far smaller female membership than the ANC. The SAIC's membership had gone into a decline after the Passive Resistance Campaign in 1946 and the amount of active support it had been able to muster during the Defiance Campaign had been small². SACPO and COD were both tiny organisations with a membership that could be counted in tens rather than hundreds. Perhaps the most accurate reflection of how representative of women the inaugural conference was, would be to describe it as a gathering of prominent individuals speaking for, rather than on behalf of, the masses of women in South Africa. In 1954 a mass base of support for the women's movement had still to be built.

Although the exact distribution of delegates between the various 'race' categories is not known either, the majority were certainly African, with a sprinkling of other black and white women, a reflection of ANC preponderance within the Congress Alliance and, of course, of Africans in a wider society. Even though the number of white women present was probably small, the fact that it was a racially mixed gathering was a dominant feature of the conference for participants and observers alike. In a society where racial segregation, race purity and white 'baasskap' were all key elements in the official apartheid ideology, the mingling of black and

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1. For a more detailed discussion on this question of female membership of, and support for, the Congress Alliance (and thus the FSAW) see below, p.271f.
 2. See R. Johnson: Indians and Apartheid in South Africa for an account of this.

white women at the Trades Hall in April 1954 was a radical departure from prevailing norms and official state policy. The Report on the Conference was aware of the significance of this when it commented, with a note of pride,

"While there are in South Africa many different women's organisations ... there was (previously) no organisation of women that brought the many sections of women together ..."¹.

Its commitment to the political philosophy of multiracialism would remain a major feature of the FSAW's programme.

Although on the available information it is impossible to establish a median age for the delegates, judging from those participants whose ages in 1954 can be calculated, most of the women present were probably in their 30's or 40's, and several would have been even older². This was not, overall, a meeting of young women, a fact which influenced the course of the discussion, the areas of concern focussed upon. One important consequence was that the bulk of the women were married, with children, and thus issues relating to the home and child-care received much attention.

1. FSAW: 'Report', p.1.

2. Ages for the following delegates have been calculated, using a variety of biographical sources:

Ray Alexander	41
Amina Cachalia	24 (approximately)
Helen Joseph	49
Elizabeth Mafeking	36
Florence Matomela	44
Bertha Mkize	64
Lilian Ngoyi	43
Dora Tamana	53
Katie White	45 (approximately)

Educational qualifications of delegates known to have attended, varied considerably. The spectrum ranged from a smattering of university educated women (Helen Joseph, Fatima Meer) through to women who had had very little formal education. Dora Tamana, for instance, had left school in Standard Four, as had Katie White; Lilian Ngoyi had gone as far as Standard Six¹. It seems probable that most of the black women present would not have advanced far into high school, if at all. (In 1955 the total number of African girls in Standards Nine and Ten was only 432²).

As far as employment is concerned, again the material is too scanty to make reliable generalisations. Of the thirty-three women known to have attended the conference, over a third were definitely in employment; this figure could well have been much higher³. Of these women, the majority came from a background of trade union work, either as full-time organisers or as factory workers involved in union affairs⁴. It would be extremely useful to establish what, if any, correlation existed between female employment and political activity in the 1950's. The meagre biographical data available suggests that the proportion of working women at the conference could well have been higher than that of the national average of 23,7% of all women fifteen years and older in 1951⁵. However, while it has been argued that in general, the absorption of women into wage employment played an important part in the growth of political movements amongst them in the 20th century, the FSAW provides many examples of individual women who never had regular employment, but were yet politically active. Such a woman, for instance, was Dora Tamana.

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1. Personal communications.
 2. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Tables E-21, E-22.
 3. For a list of known delegates, see Appendix B.
 4. Hetty McLeod, Hilda Lotz, Freda von Rheede, Mabel Jones, Elizabeth Mafeking, Betty Kearns, Ray Alexander, Martha Ngxesha, Hetty du Preez, Lilian Ngoyi, Hilda Watts, Rahima Moosa.
 5. Union Statistics for 50 Years, Table G-2.

A final important feature of the delegates was that they were all urban women. There were no delegates from the scattered small country towns and villages (not even, as originally anticipated, from Beaufort West and De Aar), nor any from the reserves or 'white' farmlands¹. Fully two-thirds of the delegates came from the Rand (103). Considering the expense and time involved in getting to Johannesburg from other centres, this preponderance was inevitable. It also reflected the political weight the Rand carried in national politics. The next largest delegation came from the Cape Peninsula and area, totalling 19 women. This included a delegate from Worcester and 2 from Paarl. From Durban came 6 women, from East London 4, Queenstown 3, and Kimberley and Cradock 1 delegate each. Strangely, no separate figures were given for Port Elizabeth. Certainly Florence Matomela, at least, was present at the conference². Perhaps the unknown number of representatives from those "few ANC branches" to which Alexander referred in listing the number of delegates, included more women from that city.

The urban identity the FSAW was to keep throughout its years of active work; the countryside generally remained a huge untapped area for it. It is not hard to understand why this was the case in 1954. The FSAW was the product of processes which were most pronounced in the cities and large towns where social and economic changes in the position of women, as well as the growth of the national liberation movement in the 1940's and early 1950's, had been most marked. While profound changes were restructuring the fabric of society in the reserves, and rural women were not completely divorced from the momentum of political events, there were not the

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1. This emerges from a letter from Alexander to Watts in which she gives a geographical breakdown of where the delegates came from. FSAW correspondence, 22/5/54, FSAW B II. The following figures are drawn from this.
 2. A speech she gave from the floor is reported in FSAW: 'Report', p.10.

same opportunities or incentives for them to organise politically. They were more isolated, more rigidly bound by traditional patriarchal restraints than their urban counterparts, the practical problems of establishing and maintaining an organisation were far larger. When the FSAW conference was being organised, there was no existing network of women's organisations in the countryside for its convenors to approach. The towns were the natural focus of sustained political organisation, though, as events in the Zeerust area of the Western Transvaal and Natal during the course of the 1950's were to show, rural women could be mobilised to action over particular issues.

The above represents a brief, and necessarily very impressionistic, summary of the sort of women who assembled in Johannesburg in 1954 to launch the FSAW. What is striking about the conference is the rich variety in experience and background encompassed by the delegates. The different languages spoken alone amounted to five - Zulu, Xhosa, Sesotho, English, Afrikaans¹. Most of the women were drawn from the turbulent world of the black townships. Their outlook was shaped by their lives there as married women with family responsibilities, in a general situation of poverty, insecurity and rightlessness.

The FSAW inaugural conference was not a gathering of an 'elite' among women in South Africa, hoping to improve their own position in society only. Middle class women, black and white, were present, but did not predominate. These women brought educational and organisational skills to the conference which did allow them to exert an influence on its shape and decisions, that was larger than their numbers might suggest; the considerable part played by Alexander and Watts, in particular, has been described already.

1. FSAW: 'Report', p.1.

Nevertheless, unlike that earlier women's movement represented by the suffrage organisation, the WEAU, the overall commitment of the conference was to the broad masses of South African women. In 1954 it would have been premature to describe the fledgling organisation as enjoying a mass support, but its attention was focussed most sharply on the proletarianised women of the townships, from whom the bulk of the conference delegates were drawn.

In the 'Women's Charter' the FSAW attempted to describe the harsh conditions under which most South African women lived.

"As wives and mothers it falls upon us to make small wages stretch a long way. It is we who feel the cries of our children when they are hungry and sick. It is our lot to keep and care for homes that are too small, broken and dirty ...".¹

It was in the speeches made by delegates from the floor, during the course of the conference, that these phrases took on their substance and meaning. Women spoke in simple, graphic terms about the poverty and hardship they suffered:

"In the Cape, the Council had brought passes to women in a crooked way. No husband could bring his wife to town without a pass ... The mothers and children were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food. Mothers had to go to work and leave their children in the care of other children not much older ...".

"The Union Buildings came from the work of our husbands who toil in the mines with their lamps and hammers. The gold is dug by the black hand, but it goes to the white".

And, from a letter from women of the ANC branch at Bluecliff Station, read out at the conference:

"... when it is reaping time for oranges, we work with the men under the same conditions, from six in the morning until six at night,

1. FSAW: 'Report', p.14.

for which we receive only 2/- per head per day."¹

4. THE STRUCTURE ESTABLISHED IN 1954

At the conference only the barest outline of a national organisation was created. Most of the time was spent on speeches and general discussion, rather than administrative details. At times the business of the meeting appeared to get swamped by the party mood that kept bursting through the restraints of the formal proceedings. Writing to Watts after the conference was over, Alexander commented wryly on this. She was dissatisfied because of all the important issues that had not been discussed at the conference. The time was long overdue for "serious discussion and no songs!"².

Much of the administrative groundwork necessary for running an efficient organisation - the constitution, on what basis membership was to be allowed, even the name³ - was not established in April 1954. The finalisation of these matters took many months and, as well as being a source of frustration, diverted energy away from the important tasks of recruiting members and proceeding with a programme of action. It was not until 1956, at the second national conference, when a constitution was finally adopted, that this preliminary process of defining its structure was completed.

What the inaugural conference did achieve was to elect a National Executive Committee (NEC). Ida Mtwana, already national president for the ANCWL, was elected the first national president of the new organisation. She does not appear to have played a dominant role in convening the conference, but she enjoyed considerable prestige, particularly in the Transvaal, as Women's League President and a former ANC

1. FSAW: 'Report', pp. 8, 9, 12.

2. FSAW correspondence, 17/5/54; FSAW B II.

3. The first time the name 'Federation of South African Women' was used in correspondence was in late 1954.

Youth Leaguer. Her election established clearly the leading role the ANC would play in the affairs of the FSAW.

The pivotal position of National Secretary went to Ray Alexander, a recognition of the central part she had played in getting the conference off the ground. At this stage, she was undoubtedly the strongest influence within the new movement. Hetty McLeod of SACPO (at one time secretary of the Women's Food Committee) was elected Treasurer. The remaining officers were four Vice-Presidents, one for each of the four geographical regions into which the organisation was divided - Lilian Ngoyi, Transvaal; Gladys Smith, Cape Western; Florence Matomela, Cape Eastern; and Bertha Mkize, Natal. These women would head the regional committees, still to be elected at regional conferences. In addition to these office-bearers, a further nineteen committee members were elected to complete the executive¹.

The National Executive was comprised of women living in widely dispersed areas. To solve the problem of running the organisation on a day-to-day basis, a Working Committee was established from within the National Executive. This was to

1. The full Committee was as follows:

President:	Ida Mtwana
Vice Presidents:	Gladys Smith Lilian Ngoyi Bertha Mkize Florence Matomela
Secretary:	Ray Alexander
Treasurer:	Hetty McLeod
Committee:	Elizabeth Mafeking, Dora Tamana, Katie White, Freda van Rheede, Annie Silinga, Louisa Mtwana, Cecilia Rosier, Winifred Siqwana, K. Egelhof (Cape Town); Hilda Watts, Hetty du Preez, Albertina Sisulu, Helen Joseph (Rand); Frances Beard, Miss Njonwe, Chrissie Jasson (Port Elizabeth); Fatima Meer (Durban), Miss M.F. Thompson (Kimberley).

From: FSAW correspondence, 12/5/54, FSAW B II.

consist of all members living in the immediate vicinity of the Head Office, which in 1954 was located in Cape Town (presumably because this was Alexander's home). The Cape Western area thus received a larger quota of committee members to form the Working Committee. In addition to Smith, Alexander and McLeod, a further eight of the Committee members came from Cape Town and vicinity. The remainder were distributed between the main centres as follows: the Rand, 4; Port Elizabeth, 3; and Durban and Kimberley, one committee member each.

The newly elected National Executive included several women who were already well known in Congress circles - Ida Mtwana, Ray Alexander, Bertha Mkize, Hilda Watts, Florence Matomela, Hetty McLeod. In this way, a certain amount of continuity with the work that had already been done amongst women within the national liberation movement appeared to be promised. There were also several more recent recruits, whose rise to prominence within the Congress Alliance would be rapid after 1954. Here, the two most significant women were Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph who, after 1956, would take over as National President and Secretary respectively.

The 'Women's Charter'

The other major achievement of the conference was the adoption of the 'Women's Charter' and the aims of the new organisation. The charter was a 2½ page document which set out to describe the position of women in South Africa, as the sponsors of the FSAW saw it. It formed a manifesto of the ideas that had gone into the calling of the inaugural conference. As such, it is an important landmark in the development of a distinct political consciousness amongst women within South Africa.

The 'Charter' began by affirming emphatically the overriding community of interests women shared with men.

"We women do not form a society separate from men. There is only one society and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress."¹

At the same time, however, it recognised clearly that women were discriminated against on the basis of their sex and committed the FSAW to working for the removal of all "the laws and practices that discriminate against women". Throughout the 'Charter', as in the invitation that had preceded the inaugural conference, the dual nature of women's struggle for equality was stressed.

"As members of the National Liberation movements and Trade Unions ... we march forward with our men in the struggle for liberation and the defence of the working people ... As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination."

The 'Women's Charter' was quite explicit on the need for change in the position of women within society. It dealt gently with the "ancient and revered traditions" by which the continued subordination of African women, in particular, was justified, conceding that "no doubt" these had once served "purposes of great value". Nevertheless, it declared, these times were past.

"The tribal and township society to which they belonged has been destroyed as a result of the loss of tribal lands, migration of men away from their tribal home, the growth of towns and industries and the rise of a great body of wage-earners on the farms and in the urban areas ..."

1. 'Women's Charter' in FSAW: 'Report', p.14. All other quotations in this section refer to the 'Charter' unless otherwise specified.

It went on to add that women had shared in these developments - large numbers of women were in fact the sole bread-winners for their families. Despite these developments, the law "has lagged behind ... it no longer corresponds to the actual social and economic position of women".

At the same time, the 'Charter' was emphatic that attitudes towards women in the national liberation movement had also not kept up with the changes in their position. In its view, many of these attitudes mirrored the very prejudices that women had to combat in the wider society. Thus a "large section of our menfolk" were held responsible for helping to perpetuate women's subordinate position by their refusal to "concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves". In addition, it also recognised that many women themselves "continue to be bound by traditional practices and conventions, and fail to realise that these have become obsolete and a brake on progress". (Hence, no doubt, the extreme tact with which the 'Charter' discussed the "revered traditions" of tribal society.)

In its conclusion, the 'Charter' asserted that an "intimate relationship" existed between women's inferior status and the inferior status assigned to people by "discriminatory laws and colour prejudices". What exactly the nature of this relationship was, it did not develop; nevertheless, it made it clear that the struggle to emancipate women from discriminatory laws and conventions should be an intrinsic part of any general liberatory struggle.

"... freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are in bondage".

Since patriarchal ideology was still so deeply-rooted and largely unquestioned amongst many Congress supporters, contained within this standpoint lay the seeds of potential conflict between the new women's movement and the male-dominated Congress Alliance.

The 'Women's Charter' represented a fairly sophisticated viewpoint on the position of women; in it many traces of the radical ideas and language of the ex-CPSA can be seen. In its commitment to the emancipation of women from their "bondage" as women, it was probably in advance of the thinking of many delegates to the inaugural conference. Amongst these women a wide and not always strictly consistent cross-section of views on women's position prevailed.

The women who came together in April 1954 shared a broad political allegiance to the Congress Alliance and its basic political assumptions. They were committed to the liberation of the black majority in South Africa from white minority rule, by a process of extra-Parliamentary but peaceful change. Individual women may well have differed on their long-term political objectives - for instance, whether a socialist future was envisaged or not. In 1954, however, faced with the immediate and daunting task of the national struggle, this was not an issue.

Along with this fundamental commitment went a general recognition that women, as a distinct group, needed to make a larger contribution to the national struggle. Again, individual views on what that contribution should be and how best it could be realised, probably varied quite considerably from woman to woman. Certainly there was a shared impatience with practices which kept women out of politics and tied them exclusively to the home. This extended to criticism of many of the men in the Congress Alliance who were blamed for upholding the status quo in this regard. Lilian Ngoyi was applauded by the conference when she said that had it not been for "the husbands, who kept back many of the women", there would have been many more delegates present - "the husbands talked of democracy but did not practice it". Yet at the same time, most delegates accepted without question that women's primary identification would be with the home and issues related to that. They did not come into fundamental conflict with established ideas on the role of women

within the family, as wife and mother. The theme of fighting for their children's right and future was a major one that ran throughout the conference proceedings; it would dominate in the subsequent history of the FSAW as well. In her opening speech, Ray Alexander referred to "the right of our children to be brought up in decent homes, schools and with opportunities for a full life" as one of the issues "which mean so much to women"¹. These sentiments were echoed by Ida Mtwana, Hilda Watts and numerous speakers from the floor, as well as being taken up in the 'Women's Charter'².

Although there was a strong streak of conservatism in their thinking about institutions like the family and marriage, delegates to the conference nevertheless made it clear that they did not intend to accept a passive and subordinate role within the Congress Alliance. They did not view the new organisation as a mere auxiliary to the existing male-dominated structure of the Alliance. The scope of women's political work within the national liberation movement needed to be expanded, partly to allow them to concentrate more vigorously on domestic matters such as child-care, rising food costs, the family. The new women's organisation should not be concerned simply with mobilising women to work for the existing programme of the Congress Alliance. The content of that programme itself needed to be broadened to pay more attention to these important areas of concern.

In addition to the 'Women's Charter', the conference adopted eight more specific aims for the new organisation. These were set out as follows:

- "(1) The right to vote and to be elected to all state bodies, without restriction or discrimination (i.e. universal suffrage);

1. FSAW: 'Report of the first National Conference', p.2.

2. See, for instance, the quotation on p.190 above.

- (2) The right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work;
- (3) Equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights;
- (4) For the development of every child through free compulsory education for all; for the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, creches and nursery schools, in countryside and towns; through proper homes for all, and through the provision of water, light, transport, sanitation and the amenities of modern civilisation;
- (5) For the removal of all laws that restrict free movement, that prevent or hinder the right of free association, and activity in democratic organisations, and the right to participate in the work of these organisations;
- (6) To build and strengthen women's sections in the National Liberatory Movements, the organisation of women in the trade unions, and through the people's varied organisations;
- (7) To co-operate with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa and throughout the world;
- (8) To strive for permanent peace throughout the world."¹

This was a comprehensive and ambitious programme, far more sweeping in its proposals than any put forward by other contemporary women's organisations. It could best be described as a liberal, democratic programme, although traces of Communist Party ideology were clearly present in some of the terminology and objectives. The concept of equal rights and opportunities - for men and women, black and white - was dominant. The FSAW was heir to a long

1. 'Our Aims' in FSAW: 'Report', p.16.

tradition of political thinking that still sought inclusion in the existing political and economic institutions of society, even though by 1954 faith in the ability of these institutions to accommodate black aspirations was beginning to waver. In thinking about women, the FSAW had adopted the tone and terms of the national liberation movement in whose shadow it had taken shape.

In April 1954, the direction the FSAW would take in translating its aims into action was not clearly defined. No strategy for achieving these aims was spelled out, other than a vague reference to a "nation-wide programme of education" in the 'Women's Charter'. At the inaugural conference women were beginning to articulate their experiences - for many, it was their first opportunity for reflecting critically upon them. Despite the polished and confident phrases of the 'Charter', they were still groping for a way of expressing these ideas in practice.

In addition, as the following chapter will make clear, the FSAW was established at a time when the extra-Parliamentary limits in which political opposition to the state could manoeuvre, were being drastically curtailed. The conference had sketched a rough outline of an organisation and its outlook. Much of its identity and the details of its programme would be shaped by the pressure of these events, too.

THE FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN,

1954 - 1963

This chapter will be looking at the history of the FSAW in the years after 1954. However, before looking at the FSAW itself, developments within the national liberation movement at this time need to be briefly outlined, since it was in this context that the FSAW was to function.

The FSAW was formed less than two years after the Defiance Campaign had foundered to a halt, in December 1952. At that stage the national liberation movement still appeared in a relatively strong position vis-a-vis the government¹. The ANC membership had increased to an estimated 100 000; the establishment of the Congress Alliance, in 1952/53, held out the possibility of a unified and strengthened national liberation movement, operating on a larger scale than before. In addition, it took the Nationalist government a few years to consolidate its position after the elections of 1948. The substantial mining and industrial sectors of the economy still had to be convinced that the government's apartheid policies were practicable and not till 1953 did the National Party gain an absolute majority of the seats in Parliament. One indication of the relative restraint with which the government felt obliged to deal with the national liberation movement at this time, lay in the extreme caution with which it approached the inflammatory question of passes for women in 1950 and again in 1952.

1. For a discussion on relations between an "offensive" black opposition and "defensive" state during the late 1940's and the changes this had undergone by the mid-1950's, see D. Lewis: 'African Trade Unions and the South African State', 1947-1953.

In the short space of time that separated the ending of the Defiance Campaign and the founding of the FSAW, however, the initiative came to be grasped more and more firmly by the government. By the mid-1950's the state was, to borrow a phrase from D. Lewis, on the "offensive"¹, while the Congress Alliance was being thrust increasingly into a defensive position itself. The implications for the new women's organisation, founded in such optimism in April 1954, were serious.

During the course of the 1950's, power was being steadily concentrated in the hands of the state and used increasingly effectively against the national liberation movement. Beginning with the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, augmented by the Criminal Laws Amendment Act and Public Safety Act, both of 1953, the government relentlessly extended the range of coercive powers already at its disposal to use against any serious resistance to its apartheid policies. At the same time, it began on a far-reaching process of constitutional restructuring - the Bantu Authorities Act in 1951, the Separate Representation of Voters Act, finally passed in 1956. These Acts were designed to entrench its own position as a white minority government and deflect black political aspirations into apartheid institutions.

The Congress Alliance, in its turn, failed to generate an effective alternative strategy with which to meet the challenge of an increasingly totalitarian state. For a long time it continued to rely on its earlier tactics of mass, non-violent demonstrations, rallies and moral appeals to the conscience of its opponents, even while the scope for such political activities was being ever more drastically curtailed. In addition, and partly as a result of the pressures to which it was being subjected, the Alliance was weakened by internal differences. These centred around the emergence of an 'Africanist' faction within the Transvaal ANC, hostile to

1. D. Lewis, op.cit.

the multi-racial composition of the Congress Alliance and vociferously critical of the ANC's performance.

By the middle of 1958 the ANC was in a seriously weakened position. Already it had been banned in several districts of the African 'reserves' and the possibility that it would be banned outright was being discussed in Congress circles. Furthermore, since December 1956, the top leadership of the Congress Alliance had been effectively restricted in their political work by their arrest and subsequent protracted prosecution in the mammoth Treason Trial¹. In April 1958 a proposed nation-wide stay-away from work, timed to coincide with the Parliamentary elections, was a disastrous failure for the Congress Alliance. At the end of the year the Africanists finally split from the ANC to set up the rival Pan-African Congress (PAC).

After the abortive stay-at-home of April 1958, political tension in the country steadily built up to a crisis point. In 1959 the ANC called for a gradual escalation in its on-going anti-pass campaign, to culminate in massive demonstrations across the country on the 31st March 1960. In anticipating this event by ten days, the PAC triggered off the looming government crackdown on the national liberation movement. On March 21st, PAC anti-pass demonstrators outside the Sharpeville police-station near Vereeniging were fired upon by the police - sixty-nine Africans were killed. The Sharpeville shootings were an epoch-making event. As well as acquiring a profound symbolic significance, they marked a turning-point in this history of the national liberation

1. The first arrests (156 people) were made in December 1956. After a year-long preparatory examination, 91 people were brought to trial, which began in August 1958. Subsequently the state withdrew its indictment, and a new indictment, against 30 of the accused, was put forward. Included in these thirty were two women, Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi, National Secretary and President of the FSAW respectively. This phase of the trial began in November 1960. Finally in March 1961 they were acquitted and charges against the remaining 61 withdrawn. (Synopsis taken from M. Horrell: Action, Reaction and Counteraction)

movement. In the aftermath of Sharpeville, the government moved quickly to stamp out black opposition groups. A State of Emergency was declared and hundreds of political leaders throughout the country rounded up and detained. This was followed, in April 1960, by the banning of the ANC and PAC as lawful political organisations. Their activities were thus driven underground: thereafter the national liberation movement made the momentous decision to turn to violent methods of resistance. The first act of sabotage by the banned ANC followed in December 1961.

The history of the FSAW, an organisation formed within the shadow of the Congress Alliance, and operating largely within its framework, was dominated by these developments. It was formed at a time when the limits in which extra-parliamentary opposition to the government could operate, were being drastically reduced. Its major campaign, that against passes for women, proved the most sustained, militant and extensive political campaign of any mounted by the Congress Alliance during the 1950's, but by the end of the decade it, too, had been contained. After 1960, and the banning of the ANC and ANCWL, it found it impossible to sustain itself as a viable political organisation. By the mid-1960's it had more or less ceased to exist.

In the following pages the major developments in the growth and decline of the FSAW between 1954 and approximately 1963 will be sketched. The period will be dealt with in three sections. The first will look at the FSAW in its early years, 1954 and 1955, when it was still getting established. The second will deal with its peak period between 1956 and 1959. Here the major focus will be on the anti-pass campaign which dominated that period and, indeed, the whole history of the FSAW. The last section will deal with the period of decline from 1960. Using this historical background as a basis, the following chapters will then consider the FSAW as an organisation in greater detail - membership, strategy, relations with the Congress Alliance, etc. In the final

chapter, an assessment of the FSAW as a political organisation amongst women in South Africa, will be made.

1. 1954 - 1955

The FSAW's inaugural conference was considered a great success by those who participated in it. At its conclusion enthusiasm and optimism for the new organisation (as yet without a name), were high. The task that had been set, that of organising "the most oppressed, suffering and down-trodden of our people - the women of South Africa"¹, was an immense one. Apart from the growing shadow of police surveillance and harassment by the authorities that was hovering over the Congress Alliance, there were a number of problems facing the women's movement specifically. The general level of political organisation amongst women was pitifully low. In the face of ignorance, indifference and even actual hostility, this had to be built up virtually from scratch. At the April conference in Johannesburg a bare skeleton of an organisation had been created. Communications between the wide-flung regions represented at the inaugural conference was a problem and finances were non-existent. As a 1956 report by the FSAW was to point out, its programme was directed to the lowest income group in the country, that of black women².

Facing the FSAW in April 1954 were thus a number of urgent administrative problems. Its first priority was to build a solid organisational base: members had to be recruited, a constitution agreed upon, relations with the rest of the

1. FSAW: Strijdom, you have struck a rock, p.1.

2. 'Report of the Transvaal region of the Federation of South African Women to the Bureau of the Women's International Democratic Federation' (hereinafter 'Report to the WIDF'), FSAW E.

Congress Alliance clarified and a start made in developing its administrative machinery. In the next year or two much attention and energy was spent on these matters. It took time for the new organisation to get off the ground, a source of frustration and exasperation to its promoters. As late as February 1956, one woman was complaining: "I just feel that it is high time to put our house in order. We have a following and if we will neglect it much longer it will dwindle away"¹.

Considerable difficulties were experienced in this early period in establishing an effective National Executive Committee (NEC). The FSAW had barely been launched when it was dealt a severe blow. Within a few months of its inauguration, both Ray Alexander, National Secretary, and Hetty McLeod, National Treasurer, were banned - in June 1954² - and obliged to sever all legal ties with the organisation. They were the first in a long list of FSAW leaders thus restricted. Their bannings served as a forceful reminder that the FSAW could not expect to remain unaffected by the government's drive against the Congress Alliance, a drive which by that time was picking up momentum.

The forced removal of Alexander from the key position of National Secretary, so soon after the FSAW had been started, was a great loss to the NEC, based in Cape Town. Her role in establishing the FSAW had, as we have seen, been a central one and her organisational experience, energy and wide-ranging political contacts were sorely needed. Although she could retain informal links with the committee, her going left a vacuum which proved difficult to fill in Cape Town.

Part of the reason for this lay in the extremely precarious position of African women - the backbone of the FSAW - in

1. FSAW correspondence, 18/2/56, FSAW B II.

2. FSAW circular No. 6, FSAW A 2.

Cape Town. The African population in Cape Town was a relatively small one, with women forming some 40% of its total in 1951¹. From the mid-1950's the position of African women in the Western Cape became particularly insecure when the government announced that henceforth this area was to be seen as a "Coloured preferential" area. Muriel Horrell's handbook, Legislation and Race Relations, describes the effects of this, thus:

"The Government planned, as a first stage, to remove foreign Africans, to 'freeze' the existing position as regards families, to send back to the reserves all women and children who did not qualify to remain, and to allow only the controlled entry of migratory workers."²

As a result, influx control measures were vigorously enforced and pass raids and arrests in the Cape Town area stepped up. Women were particularly vulnerable to being endorsed out in view of their economically peripheral position in the labour market. The authorities also made use of this opportunity to harrass women who were politically prominent

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1. Calculated from figures in the 1951 Census (UG 42-55). This set the official figures for greater Cape Town's African population at 32 842 males and 16 951 females. In 1946 the Fagan Commission supplied the following figures for the African populations of the principal urban centres from which the relatively small African population in Cape Town can be judged:

	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>
Cape Town	24 181	11 035
Johannesburg	245 013	139 615
Pretoria	62 825	41 316
Port Elizabeth	23 728	23 328
Durban	82 549	30 543
Bloemfontein	20 441	22 484
Kimberley	13 888	11 086

from: Report of the Native Laws Commission, p.10.

2. M. Horrell: Legislation and Race Relations, p.29.

within their community and one of the general effects was to inhibit the emergence of a solid and sizeable core of leaders in the Cape Town area¹.

As a temporary measure, until the next conference could elect a new executive, Dora Tamana of the ANCWL in Cape Town took over the position of acting Secretary and Cecilia Rosier, a member of COD, that of acting Treasurer. However, for several months of 1955, Tamana was out of the country on an overseas tour², while Rosier's work was hampered by ill-health. Then in March 1955, the NEC was further disrupted when Ida Mtwana resigned her position as National President. The reasons for this are obscure. Personality clashes seem to have played a part although, according to one informant, the reason lay in her being president of both the ANCWL and the FSAW - some members of the ANC felt the two positions should not overlap³. In her place, Gladys Smith, of the Cape Housewives' League and another founding member of the FSAW, took over as acting President. Not long after this, in October 1955, Dora Tamana, acting Secretary, was herself banned and for the next ten months the double responsibility of President and Secretary was assumed by Smith.

This situation proved extremely unsatisfactory. A few weeks after Alexander's banning the position in the FSAW was

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1. On harrassment, see New Age, 24/3/55, 21/8/55, 1/3/56, 7/6/56. In late 1955, Annie Silinga, ANCWL and FSAW activist, was convicted of illegal residence in Cape Town, although she claimed she had been resident there since 1937. She was deported to the Transkei under police escort in February 1956, but returned to fight, ultimately successfully, all subsequent attempts to evict her.
 2. Dora Tamana and Lilian Ngoyi were invited by the WIDF to attend an International Congress in Lausanne in mid-1955. Despite considerable difficulties, they managed to attend the conference, travelling without passports. Both women were subsequently invited by other delegates to the conference, to go on a tour which took them, inter alia, to Germany, China, the USSR and England.
 3. Interview with V. Mngomo. However, it should be noted that Ngoyi was able to hold both offices after 1956.

described as "serious"¹, and in May 1955, Alexander expressed her private misgivings about the NEC in an unaddressed letter to a Transvaal member of the FSAW: "Am very unhappy about the NEC ... they do not show enough responsibility"². At that stage she was already urging the transfer of the Head Office to Johannesburg as a remedy. One effect of the instability within the NEC was to hinder the establishment of a strong, centralised identity and control within the FSAW. In a report made to the WIDEF in early 1956, the Transvaal region of the FSAW commented that it had become "to some extent an autonomous body, acting frequently on its own initiative in response to prevailing national and regional situations and pressures", although it did maintain links "as closely as possible under the circumstances" with the Head Office in Cape Town³.

By mid-1955 it had become clear that Cape Town was not an adequate venue for the Head Office and the idea of its shift to Johannesburg, the Congress heartland and political storm-centre of the country, began to gain support. This, however, was not achieved till the second National Conference in August 1956. There, a new National Executive was elected to replace the caretaker one. Under the effective partnership of Lilian Ngoyi, President, and Helen Joseph, Secretary, a fresh start could be made to re-establish the NEC on a sound footing.

A further major stumbling block for the FSAW in this early period arose over the question of how its membership was to be constituted. Two alternatives were put forward - to seek its own mass, individual membership, or to base itself on affiliated organisations whose own members would thereby, indirectly, become FSAW members. At the root of the debate

1. FSAW correspondence, 15/10/54, FSAW B II.

2. Ibid., 12/5/55.

3. 'Report to the WIDEF', p.1, FSAW E.

between these proposals lay a matter of central concern, the relationship between the FSAW and ANC.

At the inaugural conference this question was not resolved although a draft constitution, incorporating the principle of an individual membership, appears to have been circulated¹. This draft constitution was probably the work of Alexander. Certainly she was the leading spokeswoman for the group, based on the NEC in Cape Town, who were anxious to establish the FSAW as an organisation open to "all women who subscribe to these aims"². In September 1954 Alexander set out their reasons fully. Their biggest concern was that, if the FSAW was to be based on affiliated groups only, it would exclude many women who were not members of existing organisations such as the ANCWL, or for whom no such organisations existed. (Here Alexander referred to Natal where many Indian women were not members of the Indian Congress, and to 'Coloured' women who were without a separate organisation of their own which could affiliate to the FSAW.) A further consideration - and one which her own banning shortly afterwards highlighted - was that individuals banned from affiliated organisations would be thereby banned from the FSAW as well³.

1. A statement issued by the FSAW NEC in 1956, 'Statement for the Information of Congress of Democrat Members', FSAW A 7, refers to this. Two 'Draft Constitutions', both undated, have been found, one outlining an individual membership (Unisa Documentation Centre of African Studies, Accession No. 105 (20. 18)), the other a membership based on affiliated organisations (FSAW A 7).

It seems likely, in view of the subsequent debate, that the individual membership draft was the earlier of the two and hence the one to have been circulated at the inaugural conference. Subsequently, the second 'Draft Constitution' became the object of a disagreement between the FSAW and COD. See below, p. 321. (I am indebted to Debby Gaitskell for supplying me with a copy of the first 'Draft'.)

2. 'Draft Constitution', Unisa Documentation Centre of African Studies, Accession No. 105, (20. 18).
3. FSAW correspondence, 2/9/54, Ray Alexander to Ida Mtwana, FSAW B II.

Opposition to this standpoint came chiefly from the Transvaal ANCWL, acting, it would seem, on the instructions of the Provincial ANC¹. It was voiced by the National President of both the Women's League and the FSAW, Ida Mtwana. Their main fear was that if the FSAW was constituted on the basis of an individual membership, it would compete against the ANCWL to the detriment of the latter. In this dispute some of the ambivalence the ANC felt towards the FSAW was clearly expressed. While supporting the organisation and welcoming the entry of women into the national liberation movement, it was anxious to retain control over their activities - a control that could be effectively exercised over the Women's League but less so over an independent FSAW. On this issue the ANC was adamant and the individual membership group, recognising the central place of the ANCWL in the FSAW, yielded reluctantly towards the end of 1954. Writing to the Transvaal region of the Federation in November, Dora Tamana, by then acting Secretary for the banned Alexander, set out their reasons for this:

"We believe that this opposition to individual membership is due to a fear that if our organisation becomes a mass organisation, it will draw women away from the ANC and perhaps lead to divided loyalties. We do not think there is any justification for this fear, but we might not be able to dispel it easily or quickly. It is only through our work that we shall be able to prove that we have no wish to compete with other organisations. ... We have therefore decided to make this special concession and exception for the Transvaal ..."².

Even so, the question was not fully resolved. The NEC in Cape Town raised the issue again a number of times and was

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1. This is the inference to be drawn from the remarks by Dora Tamana, quoted below, which several informants' accounts of relations between the FSAW and ANC (Tvl) support.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 6/11/54, FSAW B II.

clearly unhappy at the decision. It was not till the adoption of the FSAW constitution at its second National Conference, in August 1956, that the affiliated membership provision was formally accepted:

"The Federation shall be open to organisations or groups of females above the age of 18 years".¹

In subsequent years the FSAW would use this clause several times to allay fears within the ANC about its intentions as an organisation². On these occasions it appeared to argue that the affiliation-only measure had been adopted by design, to prevent competition with other organisations. Yet in 1954/55 it had not been accepted without vigorous internal opposition and debate.

In this issue the superior weight of the ANC had prevailed - its insistence on its seniority and the maintenance of its African identity within the Congress Alliance had come clearly to the fore. On the ideological level, the membership decision reflected the dominance of a multi-racial, as opposed to non-racial philosophy, within the Alliance³. Though the constitution did not exclude non-racial organisations from affiliating to the FSAW, in practice it was the ethnically based bodies of the Congress Alliance which formed the basis of its membership. The FSAW was, therefore, stamped with that multi-racialism which the PAC breakaway-group within

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1. This is taken from the second 'Draft Constitution' found among the FSAW papers (FSAW A 7) and the one apparently adopted in Johannesburg in August 1956.
 2. Thus Marcelle Goldberg, Transvaal President of the FSAW in 1959: "I would like to remind you that the Federation ... is not an organisation set up in opposition to those already existing organisations ... whilst the ANC Women's League struggles specifically for the rights of African women, the Federation by its very nature and composition ... strives to bring all women together ...". From 'President's Report to the Provincial Conference of the Tvl. FSAW', 27/1/59, FSAW A 13.
 3. In a 'multi-racial' structure, ethnic identity along colour lines is still maintained, although mutual co-operation and contact across these lines is encouraged. In a non-racial structure colour, 'race', ethnicity, etc., play no part in determining membership.

the ANC would later describe as another form of apartheid. On the available material, it does not appear that the ideological debate between multi- or non-racialism was at issue in the FSAW in 1954/55. The major concern of the supporters of an individual membership was to ensure that the FSAW did not lose out on potential members.

In later years, the form of the FSAW membership took on a further significance. When the ANCWL was banned in 1960, the FSAW was suddenly deprived of the bulk of its membership and attempts to redirect Women's League members into alternative societies, which could then affiliate to the FSAW, were not successful. In 1954, however, this threat was not a consideration. In the face of ANC insistence there was little alternative for the individual membership group but to concede. As the FSAW later pointed out:

"The African women as the overwhelmingly largest racial group must always form the main basis of a multi-racial women's organisation".

Furthermore -

"Any women's organisation that stands outside this (the national liberation) struggle must stand apart from the mass of women."¹

Even once the membership question had been settled, the actual affiliation of organisations to the FSAW proceeded very slowly. The first of the Congresses to affiliate, COD, did so only in June 1955², more than a year after the inaugural conference. By the following June none of the other Congresses had followed suit and the FSAW was obliged

1. 'Report to the WIDE', p.1, FSAW E.

2. 'Statement for the Information of COD Members', p.1, FSAW A 7.

to send out a circular, urging them to attend to this matter and reminding them of an earlier request for affiliation that had been sent out towards the end of 1955¹. Later that year the Food and Canning Workers Union complied, but it was not till 1957 that the FSAW could report that all the Congress groups had finally paid their affiliation fees of £1.1s².

Within the Congress Alliance it does not seem that there was overt opposition to the FSAW. Rather, member groups were either too poorly organised to deal with the administrative detail of their formal affiliation promptly, or else, as suggested earlier by Advance's treatment of the FSAW's inaugural conference, did not see the new women's organisation as a particular priority. Like the ANC itself, the FSAW experienced difficulty in turning general sentiments of support into formal membership. (This, of course, was especially important from the point of view of finances - membership dues.)

However, this did not prevent it from acting on the assumption of Congress membership in these early years. Even though the members of the Congress Alliance were extremely slack about formal affiliation, they recognised the FSAW as a unit within the Alliance from the beginning and included it within their activities. Throughout these early years the FSAW held joint meetings with the ANCWL Executive and was invited to send delegates and fraternal greetings to Congress conferences. It was included within the consultations of the National Consultative Committee (NCC) of the Congress

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1. 'Statement for the Information of COD Members', p.1, FSAW A 7.
 2. See 'The Work of the Federation of South African Women', pamphlet, April 1957, FSAW E.

Alliance¹ and invited to participate in the convening of the Congress of the People in June 1955². Its own demonstrations and campaigns were seen as part and parcel of the national liberation struggle by the Alliance.

Outside of the Congress Alliance, FSAW attempts to broaden its membership, by drawing in other women's organisations, failed to elicit any positive response during this period. Its failure with white women's organisations, such as the Black Sash³ and the NCW, the FSAW ascribed to "colour prejudice" on their part⁴. Though racism might well have been a factor, probably more at stake was the FSAW's association with the national liberation movement and its commitment to the overthrow of white minority rule. Despite these early rebuffs, the FSAW did not abandon the attempt to broaden its support amongst white women. This was in keeping with its goal of an open, multi-racial organisation embracing all South African women.

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1. The NCC was the highest policy-making body within the Congress Alliance, on which all the members of the Alliance were represented. The FSAW itself was not officially represented on it because it was felt that this would duplicate its already existing representation via its affiliated organisations. However, Helen Joseph was a member of the NCC, representing COD, and in practice the FSAW did liase with the Committee.
 2. See below, p.217.
 3. The Black Sash was formed amongst white women in 1955 as 'The Women's Defence of the Constitution League', in opposition to government tampering with the South African Constitution in its manoeuvres to get the Separate Representation of Voters Act passed. It acquired the name 'Black Sash' from a sash worn to mourn the death of the Constitution. See C. Michelman: The Black Sash of South Africa.
 4. 'Report to the WIDF', p.2.

The other important task facing the FSAW in this early stage was to establish regional committees and a local following. During 1954-55, the establishment of committees in those regions which had been represented at the inaugural conference proceeded slowly. At first only the Cape Town and Johannesburg regions seem to have been at all active. There the emphasis initially was on recruiting women members for the different Congresses and popularising the FSAW as an organisation amongst them - "hard work, but the results are excellent in many ways", commented the Cape Town region encouragingly in March 1955¹. A year after the inaugural conference, the NEC was complaining that the Eastern Cape and Durban regions seemed to be doing nothing². In Kimberley and Bloemfontein (and the Orange Free State in general), separate FSAW committees were never established. In these areas where the only active Congress organisation was the ANC, there was no basis for a separate FSAW committee: all work was carried out for it by the local ANCWL.

From the beginning, the FSAW recognised that the most effective way of building up support was to take up local issues that were affecting women. In 1954 it chose to make the question of rising rents in local Council housing its chief campaign. Both the Cape Town and Johannesburg regions held Rentals Conferences during November and the NEC urged other regions to make this a national campaign.

"In this work we can establish a united campaign with other women's organisations, as the women feel bitter about these rent increases."³

The rentals campaign does not appear to have been a marked success, perhaps because the FSAW was still finding its feet

1. FSAW correspondence, 24/3/55, FSAW B II.

2. Ibid.

3. NEC circular, 21/9/54, FSAW A 2.

and it was not an issue that was taken up by the Congress Alliance in general. More important for the FSAW at this stage were three other general campaigns, against Bantu Education, the Group Areas Act and the proposed Western Areas Removal scheme in Johannesburg. These were all emotive issues with a particular appeal to women, since they related directly to their children and their homes.

In 1955 opposition to Bantu Education and the removal of African residents from the Johannesburg township of Sophiatown (under the removal scheme) dominated the ANC programme of action¹. However, on both occasions the ANC failed to produce a strategy that could harness the strong popular discontent into a coherent and effective method of resisting the two measures. It organised a schools boycott movement and attempted, with the support of the Alliance, including the FSAW, to devise an alternative educational movement in the form of 'Cultural Clubs' for the African children thus withdrawn from Bantu Education schools. In the face of severe intimidation and harrassment by the police and authorities, however, this movement could not be sustained for any length of time.

The Western Areas Removal scheme, finally begun in February 1955, appeared in the short-term, an even more explosive issue. Sophiatown was an ANC stronghold and opposition to the move by its residents was deep and intensely felt. On the eve of the move, popular speculation as to the resistance it would provoke ran wild. To deal with this, the authorities produced an enormous showing of force that completely overpowered any attempts at challenging the removals. The resistance was smothered. For the ANC it was a humiliating and demoralising defeat.

1. On these campaigns see general histories, e.g. Roux: Time Longer than Rope; Benson: The Struggle for a Birthright; Kuper: 'African Nationalism' in the Oxford History of South Africa, Vol. II.

Despite the defeat of these campaigns, the issues with which they were concerned undoubtedly contributed to a growth in political militancy amongst black women. FSAW women felt very strongly about them. In a memorable phrase, Lilian Ngoyi, at that time president of the FSAW in the Transvaal, once likened mothers under the Bantu Education Act to hens laying eggs that were then taken away from them. In March 1955, the magazine Drum commented on one effect of the Sophiatown evictions:

"African women too are appearing more and more at Congress meetings, particularly in Sophiatown where the present move to Meadowlands has aroused great interest ..."¹.

By impinging directly on black women in their homes, legislation like the Bantu Education Act and the Group Areas Act forced them to take stock of the wider political situation in which their daily lives were located. Undoubtedly the FSAW benefitted from this development.

By the middle of 1955 activity within the FSAW was picking up. In May a Cape Town correspondent was writing to the Transvaal region: "Am glad to hear that your end is livening up, so is our end too"². By then the FSAW had established committees in the four main centres of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban. The convening of the Congress of the People in June of that year supplied the FSAW with a further opportunity of popularising itself amongst black women. It also established the women's movement more firmly within the Congress Alliance.

The Congress of the People, June 1955

In August 1954 the FSAW was approached to assist with the organisation of the Congress of the People. This Congress

1. Drum, March, 1955: 'New Faces in Congress', p.24.

2. FSAW correspondence, 26/4/55, FSAW B II.

was envisaged as a kind of popular National Convention, a mass political rally, at which the manifesto of the national liberation movement - the 'Freedom Charter' - would be adopted. The FSAW responded enthusiastically:

"It is our responsibility to gather the women of South Africa to acquaint them with our aims, to acquaint them with the Congress of the People so that they, too, the women, can play their part in the struggle for freedom."¹

Although concern was expressed that the FSAW's role should not be just that of "bottle-washers"², the Federation agreed to assist with the accommodation of delegates, on the grounds that this would provide a "unique opportunity" for it to advertise itself to women in the Johannesburg area, since it would involve meeting and organising with women in all the local townships. According to a report made by the Transvaal FSAW afterwards, "this work brought the Federation to large numbers of African women and won for it the high status which it did not previously possess"³.

In mobilising women for the Congress, the FSAW urged its branches to hold house meetings and local conferences at which the idea could be popularised, women's delegates elected and the demands of women for incorporation within the proposed 'Freedom Charter' formulated. In Johannesburg such a meeting took place on the 29th May in the Trades Hall. At this

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1. FSAW circular letter No. 3, 25/8/54, FSAW B II.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 1/4/55, FSAW B II.
 3. 'Report to the WIDF', p.2, FSAW E. Nevertheless it was also a sign of what the Congress Alliance as a whole viewed as appropriately 'women's work'. Subsequently at all major Congress conferences - the National Workers' Conference in 1958, the Anti-Pass Conference in 1959 - the FSAW, with the ANCWL, took responsibility for the accommodation of delegates.

meeting, attended by over 200 women, a list of women's demands in the form of a pamphlet, 'What Women Demand', was circulated and discussed under the chairmanship of Josie Palmer, by then Transvaal president of the FSAW.

'What Women Demand' is a revealing document. It can be regarded as a more detailed exposition of the ideas contained in the 'Women's Charter' and aims of the FSAW, adopted at the inaugural conference. This document focussed mainly on issues related to health care, education, housing, social services and food, discussing its demands concerning these in some detail. For instance, the paragraph dealing with housing conditions specified controlled rents; indoor sanitation; water supply; street and domestic lighting; adequate roads; storm water drainage; "the right to live where we choose"; the right to ownership of property; provision of parks, recreation facilities, public conveniences and adequate public transport¹. That the women should need to list so many basic amenities provided a very clear picture of the grossly inadequate living conditions most of them had to deal with in the townships.

A further paragraph took up the question of a fair distribution of land which was linked to "improved farming methods and "sufficient food for all people". Related to this was a demand for improving conditions in the reserves by abolishing migrant labour "which destroys our family life", a redistribution of land and the provision of medical, educational and shopping facilities². The emancipation of women was not neglected. In the second last paragraph a strong demand was made for full equality for women with men in all spheres,

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1. FSAW: 'What Women Demand', FSAW II A. See Appendix C for a copy of the pamphlet.
 2. Subsequently the FSAW was criticised for thereby tacitly accepting the "racial basis of land allocation" in South Africa, a criticism which it accepted as justified. See FSAW Letter to the Editor, New Age, 9/7/55, FSAW II A.

political, legal, economic and marital. In conclusion the document asserted "We demand ... that there shall be PEACE AND FREEDOM FOR OUR CHILDREN".

At the meeting the most provocative demand appeared to be that for Birth Control clinics. This sparked off a lively discussion which touched upon many fundamental issues relating to the position of women in the family. The response from the floor was mixed. Attitudes ranged from approval - "Once you have children every day it is ruining your life", "We should instruct children in this. All the children we have today are children from school children and ... from our daughters" - to fear of disrupting established patterns of sexual relationships - "We cannot do it if our husbands want children"¹.

In discussing such a topic at a public meeting the FSAW was breaking new ground. Although the sponsors of the conference supported the call for birth control, Josie Palmer in the chair was anxious to avoid any impression that they were forcing "this very delicate matter" upon anybody: "those who accept it, OK! Those who feel it is against their conscience, very well"². The controversy was not confined to the women's meeting either. One informant recalls how its inclusion within the list of women's demands for the 'Freedom Charter' was met with derision by some of the men in the Congress Alliance. They could not see the question of family planning as a serious political issue³. In the event, this demand was not articulated clearly within the final version of the 'Charter'. The closest that it was approached was in the clause dealing with "houses, security and comfort", in

1. 'Women's Meeting: Held in the Trades Hall, 30 Kerk Street, Johannesburg, on the 29th May, 1955', pp.2, 4. Treason Trial exhibit, G771. This document is a police transcript of the proceedings at the meeting.

2. Ibid., p.5.

3. Personal communication from V. Mngomo.

which free medical treatment "with special care for mothers and young children" was called for¹.

At the actual Congress of the People the participation of women was limited. Approximately one quarter of the delegates were women (721 out of a total of 2 848)². Very few speeches from the floor were made by women and the only female speaker on the platform was Helen Joseph, Transvaal Secretary for the FSAW and a member of the National Executive for COD. To her was given the task of proposing the clause on "Houses, Security and Comfort"³. This was clearly regarded as pre-eminently a woman's concern, a view that the FSAW's own formulation of 'What Women Demand' had endorsed.

The 'Freedom Charter' itself was a document for liberal, democratic reform. It stated in general terms the principle of equal rights for all, without discrimination on the grounds of "colour, race, sex or belief"⁴. For most of those assembled at Kliptown, the dominant contradiction in South African society was seen in racial terms and it was with the resolution of this that the Charter was mainly concerned: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white"⁵. The position of women in society did not receive particular attention while, as already pointed out, some of the specific demands that women had put forward were not taken up by the

1. 'Freedom Charter', FSAW II A 12.
2. Extract from 'Report of Credentials Committee, Congress of the People', FSAW II A 13.
3. 'Agenda for the Congress of the People', FSAW II A 8.
4. 'Freedom Charter', FSAW II A 12.
5. Ibid.

organisers of the Congress. Nevertheless, the existence of the FSAW had ensured that women had not been totally excluded or overlooked. Their participation at the Congress, though limited, had not been insignificant and in the organisation of the event, they had been singled out as a necessary and important area for preliminary work.

By the second half of 1955 the Federation was asserting itself with far more confidence, particularly in the Johannesburg region. As an organisation it was still limited to the Congress groups in the four centres already mentioned, but the involvement of women within them, in the ANC in particular, was on the upswing. The various acts of legislation that were encouraging women to turn their attention to political questions - the Bantu Education Act, the Group Areas Act - have been mentioned already. Then, in September 1955, the potent issue of passes for women burst to the fore again, with the announcement that the government would start to issue reference books to women from January 1956. Immediately the FSAW and the ANCWL began organising in preparation for a campaign of resistance. More than any other issue, the anti-pass campaign stirred an enormous response amongst black women and provided the FSAW with a focus for action and an identity.

Signs of the increased tempo of activity within the FSAW manifested themselves in October 1955. At a Transvaal report-back meeting on the Congress of the People, held in August 1955, the women resolved to organise a mass deputation of women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest about several contentious issues - Bantu Education, the erosion of civil liberties, site and service schemes, passes for African women, and the reclassification as African of many 'Coloured' people under the Population Registration Act¹. The resolution emanated from the floor; the idea had been suggested by another rally, of white women, that the Black

1. FSAW leaflet, FSAW C 1.2.

Sash had organised outside the Union Buildings earlier that year. That rally (to demonstrate opposition to the government's treatment of the Constitution in order to get the Separate Representation of Voters Act through Parliament) had been confined to white women only. The FSAW, by contrast, asserted that its rally would be open to all women¹.

At that stage, to many of those in leadership positions, both within the FSAW and the ANC, the task of organising such a demonstration appeared a formidable one. There were fears that the women were being overly ambitious. Helen Joseph, for instance, has described her apprehension at the magnitude of the undertaking². Previously, similar demonstrations organised by the FSAW and ANCWL had been to Native Commissioners' offices or local municipal authorities. What was being proposed here was a confrontation with the central government itself.

The leaders need not have feared. The demonstration which took place on October 27th 1955 proved a resounding success, a landmark in the emergence of the FSAW to national prominence. In the face of enormous organisational obstacles, police intimidation and harrassment - including the banning of Josie Palmer a week before the demonstration was due³ - the FSAW

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1. Evidence of Helen Joseph, Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, pp.14165-66.
 2. Personal communication.
 3. In a letter to the Pretoria News, 28/10355, Helen Joseph spelled these out: Natalspruit women were refused a license to hire public transport and obliged to walk the eight miles to Germiston before proceeding to Pretoria; Alexandra women travelling on public transport were delayed by police; many women trying to buy railway tickets to Pretoria were refused by the ticket officials; private cars travelling to Pretoria were stopped and the occupants questioned by police; the Railways refused to supply extra coaches while bus companies refused to supply extra buses and transport the women from Pretoria Station to the Union Buildings, a distance of some miles. (FSAW correspondence, FSAW C 1.2). In addition, the Town Clerk of Pretoria refused permission for the FSAW to hold a public meeting outside the Union Buildings or organise a procession on the grounds that it would create a public disturbance and provoke "feelings of hostility between different races". See correspondence between the Transvaal Regional Secretary of the FSAW and Town Clerk, Pretoria City Council, October 1955, FSAW C I 2.

managed to assemble a crowd of between one and two thousand women in the grounds of the Union Buildings¹. Attempts to secure interviews with some of the Cabinet Ministers had all been refused so, in lieu of them, the women left hundreds of signed, individual protest papers outside their offices.

The impact of the meeting was considerable. There was something very unusual and provocative in the sight of this large, multi-racial gathering of women with a political purpose. Newspapers around the country gave it quite extensive coverage. For many of their readers, it was the first time they had been exposed to the existence of the FSAW as a serious political organisation. The fact that it was a multiracial (though predominantly black) gathering was singled out for comment. Many whites found it impossible to conceive of such a demonstration except as the result of incitement by 'Europeans'. Thus, Die Vaderland, a pro-government daily in Pretoria, focussed in its report on the presence of white women amongst the black crowd, presenting them as the co-ordinators and planners². Prime Minister Strydom described the demonstration to a women's branch of the Nasionale Jeugbond as "scandalous because it was incited by Europeans"³.

Within the Congress Alliance, at that stage experiencing a slump in the wake of the Congress of the People, the demonstration focussed attention on the women, their drive and ability, and enhanced the prestige of their organisations. One fairly direct result came in December of that year when the National Conference of the ANC elected Lilian Ngoyi, one

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1. FSAW leaflet, FSAW C I 2.
 2. Die Vaderland, 28/10/55 - 'Blanke vroue' "... was doenig met die reëlings", "veral bedrywig om toe te sien dat alles stil en vlot verloop".
 3. This is mentioned in a letter from L. Ngoyi to the Rand Daily Mail, 2/11/55 which dismisses the allegations as "absolutely unfounded", FSAW C I 2.

of the Pretoria leaders, to its National Executive - the first time a woman had been elevated to such a position.

For the FSAW, the demonstration was something of a breakthrough and a major morale-booster. It also singled out its multiracial character as having special significance - it was "of historical importance for it is the first time that women of all races have joined together in such a protest"¹. The success of the demonstration established the FSAW's credentials as a serious political organisation. In congratulating the Transvaal region on its achievement, the Cape Town branch commented that "the 27th affair will make many organisations who in the past ignored our letter to reconsider their attitude"². By late 1955, with this achievement behind it, the FSAW and ANCWL were both in a buoyant mood and preparing to tackle the anti-pass campaign with vigour. At a Women's League conference in November, Lilian Ngoyi declared confidently:

"We have decided to join battle with Verwoerd on this issue and we say without the slightest hesitation that we shall defeat the government."³

2. 1956 - 1960

On this note of militant optimism the second phase in the history of the FSAW opened. From 1956 the issue that dominated all others was passes for African women. For the next four to five years most of the FSAW's energies were directed into the campaign against them. The demands of this campaign were such that there was little time for sustained activity in other spheres and inevitably many of the FSAW's more general

1. FSAW leaflet, FSAW C I 2.

2. FSAW correspondence, 17/11/55, FSAW B II.

3. New Age, 24/11/55.

aims for improving the position of women in South Africa were neglected. Nevertheless, as the FSAW realised, this was the major issue confronting the majority of South African women and, as such, took precedence.

Within the Congress Alliance passes were identified as a key structure in the political economy of the apartheid state. "There is nothing in the country that makes an African a prisoner ... more than the operation of pass laws", declared a memorandum drawn up by the National Consultative Committee (NCC) of the Alliance in October 1956¹. The FSAW shared this perspective. In organising against passes it was acting on the belief that not till the apartheid state had been dismantled could women begin to emancipate themselves. However, while passes were of major concern to African women, the fight against them was not a sectarian one; it was a struggle that embraced the whole liberation movement.

"The struggle against the pass laws is not a matter for African women alone; it is not a matter for the African people alone. It is part and parcel of the struggle for liberation."²

The announcement in September 1955, that passes were soon to be issued to women, precipitated a flurry of activity that greatly stimulated the FSAW. The pages of New Age in late 1955, early 1956 were filled with news reports, letters and editorial comment on the gathering anti-pass campaign. In January 1956 Drum carried an article entitled 'Will our Women Carry Passes?', a question it described as the "very big" one of the New Year³. The following month it described the impact

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1. NCC: 'Memorandum on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.1, FSAW II B.
 2. From an article by Helen Joseph in Fighting Talk, Jan. 1956, quoted in evidence heard during the Treason Trial. Treason Trial Record, Vol. 67, p.14234.
 3. Drum, Jan. 1956: 'Will our Women Carry Passes', p.17.

of the passes announcement on women thus:

"On the political plane too women have come to the fore ... For the laws of this country have now started pots and pans rattling in the kitchen and a number of things are on the boil. Passes for the women, for instance, and the schooling of their children under Bantu Education are on their minds."¹

Once again, as in earlier anti-pass campaigns, the threat the pass laws posed to the home was the dominant concern.

"The Pass Laws means the death of our children. The oppression of the Pass Laws is going to bring destruction to our homes ..."².

Women's meetings across the country drew enormous crowds. In Bloemfontein, in November, an anti-pass meeting was attended by some 600 people. New Age described it as the largest meeting ever held there³. Elsewhere in the Orange Free State there was a spate of meetings organised by the ANC. Meetings were spirited, optimism high. According to a report on a gathering in Bethlehem:

"This Sunday seemed as if it was the Day of Freedom. Everybody was shouting Afrika Mayibuye."⁴

An anti-pass meeting in Port Elizabeth in January 1956, addressed by Ngoyi, drew a huge crowd estimated at some 6000 men and women⁵. In Johannesburg a series of meetings culminated

1. Drum, Feb. 1956: 'The All-in Congress', p.20.
2. From a speech made by a delegate, Alice Kunene, at a conference on the East Rand, March 1957, from a verbatim report, FSAW A 9.
3. New Age, 24/11/55.
4. Letter from M. Rantekane, Bethlehem ANC Youth League, New Age, 26/1/56.
5. New Age, 19/1/56.

in a FSAW meeting to commemorate International Women's Day in early March. About 1000 women were expected, but the final attendance was closer to 2000 women¹. The meeting was considered an enormous success by the FSAW. Here, too, passes formed the major topic of discussion. A pamphlet put out by the FSAW to advertise the meeting proclaimed:

"Women do NOT want Pass Laws! We are not prepared to submit to the humiliations and sufferings that Pass Laws bring."²

In Durban, East London, Cape Town and Germiston there were similar, if smaller, protests and meetings in anticipation of the issuing of passes as well.

The mood amongst women at these meetings was militant. In 1955 Annie Silinga of the ANCWL in Cape Town had declared that "intimidation does not frighten us and we women are prepared to fight these passes until victory is ours".³ By contrast, the ANC leadership was more restrained. It was taking seriously a warning issued by the Native Affairs Department that "the government will take the necessary steps" against any organisation that tried to launch a campaign against the issuing of passes to women⁴. Passes dominated proceedings at the annual ANC conference held in December 1955. There the ANC postponed making any decisions on the line of action to be pursued until an Action Committee could report to a special National Conference scheduled for Easter 1956. This earned the ANC leadership the vociferous condemnation

1. FSAW correspondence, 5/4/56, FSAW (Tvl) to Indian Youth Congress, FSAW A 5.
2. 'Transvaal Women's Day' pamphlet, March 1956, FSAW A 5.
3. New Age, 27/1/55.
4. Quoted in New Age, 6/1/56.

of the Africanists, who emerged as a definite faction within the ANC at this 1955 conference. According to Drum "hot-heads" were urging that resistance to passes should take the form of destroying them, "but the official ANC line is to work out a careful campaign"¹.

This approach communicated itself to some FSAW leaders. In early 1956 a letter from the NEC in Cape Town urged caution in the Transvaal:

"Re passes for African women - note I was careful about it not only from the repercussions point of view, but also what it will entail to the African women. We must have greater discussion and appraise the situation carefully."²

From the beginning, however, the women's opposition to passes kept spilling over the limits laid down by the ANC. The first area to be issued with reference books was Winburg in the Orange Free State - the same town where, some forty years before, women had demonstrated so strenuously against passes. Here the so-called 'Reference Book Units' started issuing books to women from the middle of March 1956. Initially they met with no resistance and by the 22nd March 1 429 African women had taken out passes³. Developments then took an unexpected turn. On 8th April a women's meeting was held in the township, attended by some senior ANC officials from the Transvaal (including Lilian Ngoyi). At this meeting the assembled women denounced the attempts to impose reference books upon them⁴. Their newly issued

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1. Drum, Jan. 1956: 'Will our Women Carry Passes?', p.19.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 18/2/56, FSAW B II.
 3. New Age, 22/3/56.
 4. This account is pieced together from reports in New Age, in April 1956; Drum, May 1956, 'Winburg: Target for Women's Passes', (May 1956); Police report on the meeting of Winburg women headed 'Sondag 8/4/56', Treason Trial exhibit G 900; interview with L. Ngoyi.

books were then collected together and the following day these were taken and burnt outside the Magistrate's office.

Opposition to passes had burst into open defiance.

The decision to burn the passes appears to have been a spontaneous one, emanating from the Winburg women themselves. The ANC instructions to its representatives had in fact been to avoid any "rash action"¹. Once in Winburg, however, they had found the mood amongst the women so strong that they had decided to go along with it. Nevertheless, the ANC had clearly played a part in bringing the women of Winburg to the point of defiance. One of the Winburg leaders had attended the special anti-pass National Conference that had been held by the ANC in Johannesburg the previous week. There, she subsequently confessed at the women's meeting in Winburg, she had felt ashamed because they had already taken out passes so meekly - "Ek het ... eintlik skaam toe hulle my sê julle Winburg vrouens het die stam doodgemaak oor julle die paste gevat het"². The presence at their meeting of leading ANC executive members and especially ANCWL President, Lilian Ngoyi, must also have encouraged the women of Winburg to demonstrate emphatically their rejection of their reference books.

The impact of these pass-burnings was considerable. For the Congress Alliance it came as a great morale-booster after the gloom spread by the apparent ease with which the first reference books had been issued, even though the Winburg women had overstepped ANC instructions. The authorities took the defiance very seriously. Numerous arrests followed in Winburg and in several cases bail was refused to the women charged with "common theft"³. In May 1956 New Age carried a report that women were being refused their monthly old-age pension cheques unless they could produce their reference books - the first reported use of a pressure tactic

1. Interview with L. Ngoyi.

2. Typescript police report on a women's meeting in Winburg location, 8/4/56, headed 'Sondag 8/4/56; Treason Trial exhibit G 900.

3. New Age, 19/4/56.

that would be widely used by the authorities in other areas later¹. After Winburg the reference book units proceeded very cautiously. The strategy until well into 1958 was to avoid the large urban centres where the ANC was most strongly entrenched. By September 1956 37 small country towns had been visited and some 23 000 passes issued to women².

The pass-burnings at Winburg were the start, in a huge wave of protests that swept the country from 1956. In the first seven months of that year alone, the FSAW estimated, approximately 50 000 women took part in 38 demonstrations against the pass laws, in 30 different centres³. These included Klerksdorp (400 women), Brakpan (2 000 women), Bethlehem (400 women), Johannesburg, Pretoria, Evaton, Ermelo, Port Elizabeth, Kimberley, Durban, Uitenhage⁴. Mostly, in the smaller towns, these were organised by the local ANC or ANCWL with the FSAW active in the major towns⁵. The format of these protests was generally the same, either mass meetings at which resolutions condemning and rejecting passes were adopted or mass deputations to the authorities, generally the local Native Commissioner. The emphasis was on peaceful demonstrations of opposition and in this early period they met with little counterforce.

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1. New Age, 17/5/56.
 2. South African Institute of Race Relations: Survey of Race Relations, 1955-56, p.82.
 3. From evidence submitted by Liebenberg (for the State) in the Treason Trial, Treason Trial Record, Vol. 70, p.14818.
 4. From untitled typescript on resistance to passes in 1955-56, FSAW C I 1.
 5. In Uitenhage, police attempts to stop a women's meeting on the grounds that it was being conducted by the ANC, then banned in the Eastern Cape, were thwarted by the women asserting that theirs was a FSAW meeting, not an ANCWL one.

The extent of resistance and scale of support amongst women generated considerable optimism within the FSAW. Inspired by this, as well as the memory of the successful demonstration to Pretoria in October 1955, the FSAW launched upon an even more ambitious undertaking: to assemble another mass gathering of women outside Prime Minister Strydom's offices in the Union Buildings, Pretoria, to demonstrate against the pass laws for women. This, however, would include not only women from the Rand as in 1955 - this was planned as a nation-wide campaign, drawing on women from all over the country and as many different organisations as possible.

'Women's Day', August 9th 1956.

The proposal to go once again to Pretoria first surfaced at the Transvaal region's meeting to commemorate International Women's Day in March 1956¹. By the middle of the year, planning of this meeting was well under way. In June/July the NCC of the Congress Alliance sponsored four Congress leaders on a tour of the major urban centres to co-ordinate Congress activities and regenerate contact between the regions. Along with Robert Resha (ANC) and Norman Levy (COD) went Helen Joseph and Bertha Mashaba, two leaders of the FSAW in the Transvaal. They used this opportunity to consult with other women in the various centres they visited and to make arrangements to send delegates to the mass gathering². In addition, it was agreed to stage the second National Conference of the FSAW immediately after the Pretoria demonstration, to make the long trip to the Rand as worthwhile as possible for the women. In July a letter was sent off to Strydom requesting an interview. This was refused bluntly

1. New Age, 15/3/56.

2. 'Report on a tour of the Major Centres of the Union, submitted to the National Consultative Committee, for discussion', FSAW II B.

but the FSAW went ahead with its plans anyway¹.

The gathering of women at the Union Buildings on the 9th August 1956 was an unprecedented success. The FSAW more than reached its goal - vast numbers of women, estimated variously at between six and twenty thousand, managed to make their way to Pretoria and the Union Buildings². Though, as was to be expected, the Reef areas were best represented, substantial numbers of women came from as far afield as Cape Town, Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth. The assembly achieved extensive front-page coverage on all newspapers across the country. The Cape Times described it as one of the largest crowds ever to assemble at the Union Buildings - "and probably the largest mass gathering of women in the country's history"³.

As sheer spectacle, it was an impressive and moving sight. The huge crowd of women filled the amphitheatre before the Union Buildings and overflowed down the steps. Many of the African women wore traditional dress, others wore the Congress colours (green, black and gold). Indian women were clothed in white saris. Many women had babies on their backs; some domestic workers brought their employers' children along with them. (This was an aspect of the demonstration that dominated Die Vaderland's coverage of the event⁴.) After the masses of individual, signed protest forms had been left outside the Prime Minister's empty office by the four leaders

1. Cape Times, 9/8/56.

2. The figure varied according to one's degree of sympathy for the demonstrators. Die Vaderland, 10/8/56, said estimates varied between 6000 and 10 000. The Cape Times, 9/8/56, put the number at 10 000, the FSAW at 20 000. See, e.g., untitled typescript of article on the anti-pass demonstrations, FSAW C I 1.

3. Cape Times, 10/8/56.

4. Die Vaderland, 10/8/56, carried two photographs of black nannies with small white children on its front page, with the caption "Weet hul ouers waar hulle is?".

(Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Sophie Williams) the crowd stood in perfect silence for half an hour before breaking into the ANC anthem 'Nkosi sikeleli Afrika'¹. For many who participated in the demonstration, it formed the emotional highpoint of their political careers, a yardstick by which all other meetings of that nature would be measured². In a booklet printed shortly afterwards, the FSAW described it in glowing terms as a "monumental achievement"³, while a protest song composed in honour of the occasion asserted:

"Strijdom, you have tampered with the women,
You have struck a rock."⁴

The significance of the protest lay deeper than mere spectacle. For most observers, whether sympathetic or hostile, the fact that it was women who had organised and carried out so impressive a demonstration challenged stereotyped assumptions about women's lack of political initiative and capabilities. For the white press there was something remarkable about the sight of "blanket-clad Native women" confronting the central government⁵. Once again, as in 1955, Die Vaderland could only conceive of these women as acting under the leadership of white women⁶. For the upholders of the ideology of white

1. During the Treason Trial it emerged that the security police removed all these documents before Strijdom had even looked at them. Drum, Sept. 1957, 'Treason: End of Round One', p.25.
2. For instance, Amina Cachalia has described it as "marvellous", the greatest demonstration of the FSAW and the Congress Alliance generally. Interview.
3. FSAW: 'Strijdom ... You have struck a rock', p.1.
4. From untitled typescript of article on the anti-pass campaign, FSAW C I 1.
5. Cape Times, 10/8/56.
6. Die Vaderland, 10/8/56, also carried a photograph of some white women talking to some black women and a caption underneath that read: "Hier word gehelp dat die nie-blanke vroue die vorms ... kan onderteken".

supremacy, the fact that it was a mixed gathering of white and black women was particularly unsettling.

With the Pretoria gathering the FSAW demonstrated to itself, the Congress Alliance and the authorities, that it was capable of staging a demonstration of major proportions. Henceforth it could reasonably claim to be treated seriously as a political organisation. Undoubtedly its success enhanced the prestige of the FSAW within the Congress Alliance. The decision to commemorate August 9th as an annual Congress event, 'Women's Day', testified to that¹. At the same time, this very success also heightened some of the ambivalent feelings already present within the Congress Alliance towards the women's movement. The growing confidence and assertiveness of the FSAW within the Alliance did not pass without challenge.

For many Congress men, particularly, it seems, in the Transvaal ANC, the women's achievement conflicted with deeply-rooted views on the junior position women should occupy in society at large and within the national liberation movement in particular. Indeed, for many African men their chief reason for opposing passes for women was that the government was thereby usurping their own authority. "The government cannot give your women pass if you do not want to, because the woman she is under the control of a man", asserted one male speaker at an ANC anti-pass meeting².

Higher up in the hierarchy such sentiments would not have been expressed so baldly, but there, too, there were signs of unease at the growing independence of the women's organisations. Though generous in its praises of the women's achievement at Pretoria, the Transvaal Consultative Committee

1. FSAW correspondence with ANC, 15/7/59, refers to this decision. FSAW A 14.

2. 'Copy of notes taken by N/D/Const. John Patose at meeting of ANCWL: Sophiatown: 12/8/56', p.3, 'Treason Trial exhibit G 854.

(TCC) of the Congress Alliance was anxious to assert its ultimate authority in the planning of the anti-pass campaign and accordingly requested the FSAW to submit a written report on the Pretoria demonstration to it. This the FSAW rejected - "no further purpose can be served by the preparation of a written report" - though it reassured them that it would continue to maintain their valuable liason"¹. Further signs of tension were brought to the surface in September 1956 with the publication of an article in the ANC bulletin, Sechaba, entitled 'Don't stifle the work of the Women's Federation"². This reaffirmed the valuable and necessary work being done by the FSAW and ANCWL and pleaded for a greater tolerance and respect for their initiative within the ANC.

The August 1956 demonstration showed clearly the depth of black women's opposition to passes. In getting to Pretoria participants had had to overcome enormous obstacles. For most, the cost of travelling to Pretoria alone was prohibitive and involved much sacrifice. When ANCWL members in Port Elizabeth were asked by Helen Joseph how they intended to pay for their train fares to Pretoria, they replied: "We'll sell our furniture"³. Apart from the money, it was very difficult for women to leave their families. Many had young children and alternative child-care facilities in the townships were more or less non-existent. And, once again, as in 1955, the authorities had made it as difficult as possible for the women to reach Pretoria - the public transport bodies refused to assist and police harrassment of participants was intense.

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1. FSAW correspondence with TCC, August 1956, FSAW C I 4.
 2. 'Don't stifle the work of the Women's Federation', reprinted as pamphlet from Sechaba, Bulletin of the ANC, Sept. 1956, FSAW E. See Chapter Seven for a fuller discussion on relations between the FSAW and ANC.
 3. Personal communication.

The Pretoria demonstration provided the FSAW with a large injection of energy. The second National Conference, held immediately afterwards in Johannesburg and attended by some 500 delegates¹, was a resounding success. Here much of the organisational work of the past two years was consolidated and the Federation put on a firmer footing. The Conference adopted a constitution, finally, though not without opposition from some members (mainly COD) who felt the affiliated organisations ought to ratify the constitution themselves, first². A new and vigorous National Executive, under Ngoyi and Joseph, was elected to replace the caretaker one and the decision to move the Head Office to Johannesburg endorsed. The Pretoria demonstration had already clearly demonstrated the ascendancy of the Transvaal region within the FSAW; by setting up its Head Office in Johannesburg this was formally confirmed.

Thus by late 1956 the FSAW appeared to have weathered its initial difficulties. In a buoyant mood, the conference adopted an ambitious programme for 1957. It was agreed to focus on two issues - passes for women and the Group Areas Act. (By taking up this latter issue, which affected Indian and 'Coloured' women most severely, the FSAW was making a real effort to make itself relevant to as broad a section of women as possible.) The plan of action called for a mass signature drive - half a million anti-pass 'pledges' and 100 000 signatures for a petition against the Group Areas Act. This was seen to serve a double purpose. On the one hand, it would bring the FSAW into contact with women in a wide-reaching educational campaign; on the other, it would expose clearly the depth of their opposition to these measures. In the FSAW there was little doubt about the strength of the mood of resistance amongst women.

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1. FSAW correspondence, FSAW (Tvl) to ANCWL (Tvl), 5/4/57, FSAW C I 5.
 2. This is described in Chapter Seven below.

"Women are not afraid of suffering for the sake of their children and their homes. Women have an answer to the threats to their families and their future. Women will not face a future imprisoned in the pass laws. Women will fight for the right to live and more freely as human beings."¹

In the euphoria of August 1956 it seemed as if these sentiments would indeed carry the day. Yet already the more severe countermeasures the police were adopting against pass protests were sounding a warning. In late 1956 the first major violent clash over passes for women took place. In Lichtenburg, in November, a large crowd of about 1 000 women and some men who were protesting the arrival of the reference book units, were baton-charged by the police. The crowd resorted to stoning, the police opened fire and two Africans were shot dead. Six police and two other Africans were wounded in the confrontation².

Anti-Pass Protests in 1957

Throughout 1957 and into 1958 the women's anti-pass campaign continued to generate an enormous response. A full survey of all the demonstrations with which the FSAW was associated, or which it supported, would be impossible to conduct in the space available - they chequered the period with such frequency. A FSAW fact-sheet listing the women's demonstrations for 1957 and 1958 ran to seven closely typed pages³. This kind of occasional mass demonstrations of popular resistance at a local level proved able to rally considerable support. The more long-term campaign to collect individual signatures, in the drive for a million anti-pass

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1. FSAW: 'Women in Chains', p.12.
 2. C. Hooper: Brief Authority, p.143.
 3. 'Resistance of women to Passes during 1957', FSAW C I 5 and 'Resistance of women to Passes during 1958', FSAW C I 6.

pledges proved much less successful. Both this campaign and the similar Group Areas campaign fell far short of their mark: a reflection on the organisational weaknesses of the FSAW at the grassroots level. Too few women came forward to take responsibility for collecting signatures in their areas¹.

'Women's Day' in August 1957 was celebrated on a nation-wide scale, with large meetings and deputations to Native Commissioners' offices. The Port Elizabeth gathering was described as a "huge success" while the Johannesburg meeting drew over 2 000 women². In Cape Town, the following month, the FSAW managed to achieve something of a breakthrough by drawing liberal white women's organisations into its campaign. At a large multiracial gathering of women on the Grand Parade, a broad 'Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women' was set up, representing, in addition to the FSAW and ANCWL, the Black Sash, NCW and Anglican Mothers' Union³. This continued to function as a loose co-ordinating body for several years, encouraging FSAW hopes for building a united, progressive women's movement that would enjoy substantial white support. Only in Cape Town, however, where there was a long tradition of co-operation between various women's organisations, did it make any significant progress towards this end.

During 1957 the anti-pass campaign took a new turn when, for the first time, rural women, living in the Zeerust area of the Western Transvaal, became involved in resistance to reference books. The FSAW was not directly involved in

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1. See an undated letter from 'Helen' to 'Rose' complaining about the "ridiculous figure" for pledges received on the Rand, in which she asserts "... the target is possible if the women organise correctly". FSAW C I 1.
 2. Telegrams to Joseph, Ngoyi, on 9/8/57, FSAW C I 5.
 3. Drum, Oct. 1957: 'Multi-Race Protest'.

in these disturbances itself, but in the history of the women's anti-pass campaign they are significant. They showed that rural women, too, could be roused to political action and hinted at the enormous pressures squeezing women in the reserves to this point of defiance. The Zeerust disturbances, which dragged on for many months, also marked a new escalation in violence in the conduct of the campaign, on the part of both protesters and authorities.

The causes of the Zeerust anti-pass disturbances are complex. It is another area deserving a study of its own. Here opposition to passes for women fused with opposition to another inflammatory issue, the implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951¹.

Resistance to passes amongst the Bafurutse began passively. Many women simply failed to appear on the proclaimed date to be issued with reference books. When the Department of Native Affairs summarily deposed one of the chiefs who was opposed to passes for women, opposition burst into more active forms of resistance - pass burnings, popular action against members of the tribe alleged to be police informers, boycotts of government institutions. From the middle of April the authorities launched a counterattack designed to wipe out any form of resistance. A special Police Unit was established, with wide powers of arrest and search, to patrol the area. Although a ban on people either entering or leaving the Reserve effectively suppressed details about what was going on in the Zeerust area from reaching a wider public, such stories as did leak out indicated that opposition

1. On the Zeerust disturbances see Fairbairn: 'Zeerust: a profile of resistance'; Hooper: Brief Authority; Drum, April, May 1958.

was being put down with a maximum use of force and intimidation¹.

The Zeerust anti-pass disturbances of 1957 were largely a grassroots reaction to intolerable local conditions on the part of the inhabitants of the tribe. For most participants, male and female, opposition to women carrying passes was bound up with a conservative defence of traditional institutions such as chieftainship, the patriarchal family and established sex roles. Charles Hooper, an Anglican priest working in the district at the time, described the prevailing attitudes thus:

"As the women were concerned with the effect of pass-carrying on their roles as mothers, so now were the men concerned with the effect of this book on their relationships with their wives."²

Male migrant workers were disturbed by reports that pro-government chiefs were trying to persuade their wives to

1. Apart from arrests and alleged police brutality, coercive measures included the closing down of the local school and Post Office, refusal of old age and widow's pensions to pensioners not possessing reference books, withdrawal of the bus service. See Fairbairn, op.cit. A Bafurutse song of the time ran as follows:

"Behold us joyful
The women of Africa
In the presence of our baas;
The great one
Who conquers Lefurutse
With his knobkierie
And his assegaai
And his gun".

2. Hooper, op.cit., p.181.

take out reference books in their absence - "How could a woman take a book without her husband's consent?"¹.

Yet, as was true of protests in the urban areas as well, the effects of the anti-pass protests in Zeerust on the women involved were often politicising and radicalising. In organising to resist passes, women were learning political skills and being forced to discard traditional attitudes and patterns of behaviour that did not suit the harsh new conditions with which they were struggling. The lawyer in charge of the tribespeople's defence in the numerous prosecutions that accompanied the disturbances was a woman from Johannesburg, Shulamith Muller. When Hooper commented on the fact that a woman should be defending them, the local women reproved him. "The women of Africa are on the march", said one². One woman summed up the politicising effect of their experiences in jail thus:

"That jail is a good school. . . When we went in we knew nothing. Now we have been able to talk all day to our people from Johannesburg and to the women of other villages. We got organised in jail. We agree about these books. We know now what they are for and we agree to refuse them. The jail has given us a better education than these Bantu Education schools."³

Although the FSAW was not directly implicated in the anti-pass resistance in Zeerust, it was not completely divorced from these events either. The role of the ANC was exaggerated, both by officials anxious to blame the unrest on outside "agitators" and the ANC itself, anxious to boost its sagging performance. However, it did undoubtedly have some links with the area. Many of the male migrant workers from the area were members of the ANC on the Reef. Through them

1. Hooper, op.cit., p.181.

2. Ibid., p.234.

3. Ibid., p.128.

news of earlier anti-pass activity on the Rand and elsewhere would have been relayed back to the people living at home, providing an inspiration as well as a potential model for behaviour. Once the unrest had started the ANC made attempts to increase contact with the area. According to Lillian Ngoyi, she visited the area secretly during the unrest and addressed a meeting of local women¹. The FSAW's own direct contribution was confined to financial assistance towards bail funds and legal defence for the scores of people rounded up and arrested during the disturbances. The attorney in charge, Shulamith Muller, appears to have been a member of COD and thus affiliated to the FSAW.

For the FSAW and the anti-pass campaign generally, the events in the Zeerust district during the course of 1957 signalled that the government was determined to impose passes on women at all costs. Despite the impressive scale and inspirational value of the anti-pass demonstrations of 1956/57 they had not stopped the drive to issue passes to women. The FSAW had proved it could rally significant numbers of women to it on specific occasions; it had not proved that its tactics were capable of deflecting government policy in the long-term. Mere demonstrations of popular feeling were not proving enough. The government was in no way responsible to the disenfranchised black majority and with the might of an impressive police force and army behind it, an ever-increasing range of coercive legislation and the overwhelming support of the white electorate, it could afford to ignore popular discontent or, as in the case of Zeerust, move ruthlessly to contain it.

During this time the glow of optimism generated by the Pretoria demonstration in August 1956 began to fade. The 1950's had seen a steady consolidation of power in the hands of the government and by 1957 it was moving with mounting confidence against the national liberation movement. The Congress

1. Interview.

Alliance was fighting with its back to the wall. The cover for the COD periodical, Fighting Talk, in May 1957, succinctly captured the insecurity and sense of siege beginning to prevail in Congress circles. It read: "Will Congress be banned?"¹.

As women emerged as a stronger force in the national liberation movement, the repressive machinery of the state was increasingly turned against them. Surveillance of women's meetings was stepped up so that security became a much more urgent consideration at meetings². At the same time, women leaders were being harried more and more. Influx control measures were used against African women who took the lead in organising local protests, by the municipal authorities³. In December 1956 many of the FSAW and ANCWL's leading figures were rounded up when 156 front-rank members of the Congress Alliance were detained, preparatory to the opening of the Treason Trial. Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph, recently elected to lead the FSAW, were among the final batch of 30 accused. For four and a half years this trial dragged on, effectively crippling the political work of the accused and draining enormous amounts of money and energy inside the national liberation movement into their defence. In 1957 Helen Joseph, secretary of the FSAW at both the national and Transvaal regional level, was banned and confined to the district of Johannesburg⁴. Although she did not have to sever ties with the FSAW, her mobility and efficiency as secretary were thereby curtailed.

1. Fighting Talk, May 1957.

2. At times the Security Branch were quite open about their activities. Thus, in January 1959, at the Provincial Conference of the FSAW (Tvl) they "push their way in, armed with warrants to remain at the conference, while uniformed police remain outside in a car for the whole day". From 'Operation Umbrella! An "outside" impression of a great conference', anonymous article, FSAW A 13.

3. See above, p.207, footnote 1.

4. FSAW Press Statement, 26/4/57, FSAW B II. The only exception to her restriction order was the permission to travel to Pretoria daily for the Treason Trial hearings.

By this time, too, the rifts within the Congress Alliance had become serious. The Africanists had emerged as a definite faction within the ANC at its conference in December 1955. They were highly critical of what they saw as the ineffectual leadership and overcautious strategy of the ANC. Their major criticism, however, was directed at the constitution of the Congress Alliance itself. They held that by sharing decision-making in it, on an equal basis with the other Congress groups, the ANC had effectively renounced its vanguard position as leader of the African majority in the national liberation movement. They also viewed the multi-racial composition of the Alliance with suspicion. This, they argued, legitimised apartheid because of the entrenched ethnicity of each of the constituent organisations. This was accompanied by a strong streak of anti-white feeling amongst the Africanists. They were particularly hostile to the white Congress of Democrats which they regarded as a communist dominated body, with an influence on the Congress Alliance out of all proportion to its tiny membership. Although the FSAW did not suffer from the same cleavage within its ranks - to a surprising extent the ANC/PAC split seems to have passed it by - it was nevertheless too dependent on the Congress Alliance not to feel the ill effects.

The women's campaign against passes could not prove successful on its own, as the FSAW realized very well. What was needed was for it to link up with a general campaign involving the men as well. FSAW attempts to achieve this were, however, largely unsuccessful. In June 1957 the FSAW proposed to the TCC that the Congress Alliance should organise a further mass demonstration outside the Union Buildings, one that would involve both men and women in a common demonstration of opposition to passes. The TCC accepted the proposal but thereafter nothing more was heard about it. Some eighteen months later the FSAW was still complaining that men had not made an "active entry" into the anti-pass

campaign¹.

1958: The Last Phase of the Anti-Pass Campaign

1958 was a sombre year for the Congress Alliance. The pressures against it were mounting; the failure of its 'stay-at-home' campaign in April was a severe setback. The freedom of the ANC to organise was being seriously limited. In March 1958 the government imposed a ban on the ANC in several rural areas (including Zeerust) where peasant unrest was manifesting itself. Already one prominent ANC official regarded a blanket ban on the ANC as inevitable "as soon as the ANC shows greater organisational efficiency ..."². In itself this was a revealing statement, both about the point reached by the state in relation to the national liberation movement and about the internal weaknesses plaguing that movement.

In the FSAW, too, signs of strain were coming to the fore. In January 1958 the National Secretary, Helen Joseph, was obliged to report to the NEC that "owing to the extreme pressure of work" she had not been able to carry out all the instructions from the last meeting³. Commemoration of Women's Day in August 1958, a major event in the FSAW calendar, was hampered by a ban on all meetings of Africans⁴. In Johannesburg the FSAW arranged an open-air meeting for non-African women,

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1. 'Report by the Federation of South African Women on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.6, FSAW C I 6.
 2. G. Mbeki: 'Bans and Banishment', in Fighting Talk, May 1958.
 3. 'Minutes of the Meeting of the NEC of the FSAW', 18/1/58, p.1, FSAW B I.
 4. FSAW circular, July 1958, and pamphlet advertising meeting, both FSAW C I 5.

taking great care to ensure that African women did not infringe the banning order. This was not a success. The lack of support from non-African women indicated clearly that the dynamism of the FSAW, certainly on the Rand, came from African women. After four years the FSAW had still not been able to achieve the broad support from South African women that it had hoped to achieve in 1954.

The anti-pass campaign too was being steadily driven back onto the defensive. In the first two years of their work, the reference book units issues some $\frac{1}{2}$ a million passes¹; between January and November of 1958 this figure was doubled to over a million books issued². During the course of 1958 these units finally began operations in the larger towns - a sign of increased confidence on their part and a signal for the opening of the last phase in the anti-pass campaign.

The first advances on the towns by the reference book units was oblique. In December 1957 it was announced that in future all nurses would have to produce identity numbers before they could be registered for the midwifery course. Although no mention of reference books was made, African nurses could only acquire identity numbers with these books. Black nurses were already in an uproar over the passage of the Nursing Act in 1957 which had introduced segregation into all aspects of the profession: training, registration, administration. The latest announcement provoked further protests³.

The FSAW had already associated itself with the opposition to the Nursing Act, which it had described as a "further attack upon the non-white women of South Africa, one which amounted

1. South African Institute of Race Relations: Survey of Race Relations, 1956-57, p.66.
2. Ibid., 1957-58, p.51.
3. On this see M. Jarrett-Kerr: 'Apartheid in Nursing'.

to an attack on the health of the nation." In January 1955 the National Executive agreed to make support for the nurses against the compulsory production of identity numbers "the major campaign of the Federation in 1958"¹.

Apart from their genuine support for the issues involved, there were some sound tactical reasons for doing this. The FSAW was always anxious to broaden its appeal to as wide a range of women's organisations as possible. Black nurses represented a particularly influential segment of women since nursing was one of the few occupations open to black women that carried high status within the community. In November 1957 the FSAW assisted in convening a national conference of nurses to discuss the implications of the Nursing Act². In January 1958 the NEC affirmed the importance of using "such national non-Congress multiracial conferences ... for making fresh contacts with women delegates to stimulate interest in the Federation"³. In addition, from the point of view of the anti-pass campaign, the attempt to enforce reference books on African nurses posed a dangerous threat. The FSAW regarded it as a new tactic by the government, a 'thin edge of the wedge' for the pass units in the cities. Now, declared the FSAW, this move against nurses amounted to

"an attempt to insinuate passes for women into the cities and large towns where until now Verwoerd has not dared to send his pass units."⁴

In preparation for the campaign a detailed programme was drawn up which relied on familiar tactics: liason with the

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1. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 18/1/58, p.3, FSAW B I.
 2. Organising Committee of the National Conference of Nurses: Circular No. 2, 7/9/57, FSAW C II.
 3. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC, 18/1/58, p.2, FSAW B I.
 4. FSAW correspondence, 3/2/58, FSAW to ANC, FSAW C II.

nurses' organisations; leafletting; mass demonstrations to hospital authorities, the South African Nursing Council, the Minister of Health; attempts to involve other liberal women's organisation; publicising the government's proposals internationally. The whole campaign was conducted with a maximum of newspaper publicity. It culminated with a mass demonstration of women outside Baragwanath Hospital, the major black hospital in Johannesburg, on the 22nd March, 1958.

In itself this was a failure. In the build-up to the demonstration the FSAW had sought and achieved extensive newspaper exposure for the proposed gathering. One result was an enormous showing of force by the police which effectively prevented the mass turn-out the FSAW had hoped for. Little more than 300 women managed to circumvent the police cordon thrown round the hospital. One report described the demonstration as a "comic opera ... with a large cast" since police, heavily armed, outnumbered demonstrators while inside the hospital a siege mentality prevailed¹. "... Rumour has it that gas masks were held in readiness at the casualty station"². The FSAW found the police reaction less amusing. It described the display of armed force as "unprecedented and outrageous" in view of its own repeatedly stated commitment to peaceful methods of political protest³. The authorities had made themselves clear: no more Pretorias would be tolerated. Yet a limited victory was gained when the South African Nursing Council announced that the identity number requirement for African nurses would not be enforced⁴.

The reference book machine was not deflected from its course, however. From mid 1958 passes started to be issued to women

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1. Jarrett-Kerr, op.cit., p.36.
 2. Ibid., p.37.
 3. FSAW letter to New Age, 29/3/58.
 4. Jarrett-Kerr, op.cit., p.37.

in Durban, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, the East Rand. In none of these places did they meet with serious resistance. By October the reference book units had started to work in the vicinity of Johannesburg, the major stronghold of the ANCWL and the FSAW. Increasingly, a sense of grim urgency had replaced the earlier optimism within the FSAW. A letter from the joint secretaries of the Transvaal region (Bertha Mashaba and Lily Naidoo), sent to the ANCWL to arrange a joint meeting where resistance to the pass units in Johannesburg could be planned, captured the gravity of the situation. It referred to the "hour of crisis" that had approached and appealed to the ANCWL to respond promptly: "Please, Dear Sisters, treat this matter as urgent"¹.

The arrival of the reference book units in Johannesburg in mid October signalled the last major act of resistance to passes for women. In commenting on the lack of resistance encountered by the units in Cape Town and Durban, an article in Drum had concluded:

"Now everyone is asking: when will the passes come to Johannesburg and how will the women in that big city react to them?"²

The reaction of women in Johannesburg showed that resistance to passes had not been completely smothered by that stage. At the same time, the course of events in Johannesburg during October and November highlighted the limitations of the anti-pass campaign, as then conceived, as a lever for change.

The Johannesburg Anti-Pass Demonstrations, 1958.

Adopting a strategy similar to that used with the nurses in early 1958, the reference book units initially moved cautiously

1. FSAW correspondence, 14/10/58, FSAW C I 6.

2. Drum, November 1958: 'Why Women Don't Want Passes', p.33.

in Johannesburg. They singled out as their first targets, a group of black women who were particularly isolated politically and vulnerable economically, domestic workers in the white suburbs. In mid October white households in Johannesburg were circularised by the Native Commissioner, instructing them to send their "Native female servant/s" to his offices "in order that she may be registered for the Native Population Register and issued with a reference book"¹. The weak bargaining position that most of these women workers had, was described by the FSAW thus:

"... living in the servants' quarters in the backyards, African women from the country, the farms, the small reserves, women far from their homes, forbidden by trespass regulations to have their husbands or even their tiny children with them, to lead a family life, isolated and unaware, dependent upon the "madam" for the roof over their heads ..."²

With this approach it seemed at first as if in Johannesburg, too, reference books would be issued to African women without incident. But within a week the picture had changed dramatically. Beginning on the 21st October, local branches of the ANCWL organised a counter-offensive which rapidly snowballed into an exuberant campaign of civil disobedience which took the authorities and leaders of the Congress Alliance alike by surprise. The still dynamic ANCWL branch at Sophiatown precipitated this by organising a march on the Native Commissioner's offices to stop domestic workers from taking out passes. Police intercepted the march and arrested the women, 249 of them, for holding an illegal procession. News of the arrests spread rapidly and soon, from all the Johannesburg townships, women began flocking to the

1. Untitled typescript on the Johannesburg anti-pass protests, no author, (hereinafter 'typescript'), p.4, quoting the circular in full, FSAW C I.

2. Ibid., p.2.

pass offices to court arrest themselves. On the first day a total of 584 women were arrested. By the end of the week this figure had risen to 934. The following Monday a further 900 women were added to those already crowding the jails and police cells in central Johannesburg¹.

This display of passive resistance was a vigorous demonstration of grassroots opposition to passes among women. From all accounts, the mood amongst the women was defiant but highspirited. Commented Drum:

"You would not have guessed that this was the serious business of arrest for some breach of the law. It looked like a great festival. The women sang, and danced and pranced, flailing their arms and poking out that defiant thumb ..."²

The arrests were splashed across the newspapers with numerous photographs of women in exuberant, challenging poses, being arrested or filling the police vans. Once again, the fact that it was women involved in the demonstration added a special slant to the manner in which the news was presented. The position that black women held in the minds of most white South Africans was succinctly expressed by a headline in the Johannesburg daily, The Star, after the first batch of arrests - "No Nannies Today"³.

What the demonstrations revealed was that, in its preparations for resistance, the official Congress leadership was lagging behind its own rank and file on the highly politicised Rand. Although the ANCWL and FSAW executives had been active in mobilising opinion before the arrests, with meetings and

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1. 'Typescript', pp.4,5,6, FSAW C I 1.
 2. Drum, December 1958: 'The Battle of the Women', p.20.
 3. The Star, 22/10/58. The FSAW itself appealed to this mentality in a circular urging white women not to let their servants take out passes, arguing that their own children would suffer if their nanny were to be arrested; FSAW pamphlet, FSAW C I 6.

pamphlets, they had not entertained any ideas of mass civil disobedience at that stage. The move towards this had come chiefly from Women's League leaders at the branch level. In describing the demonstrations as "the biggest, best-organised resistance" since the Alexandra bus boycott of 1957, Drum referred to the manifestation of a "ghost organisation" amongst women demonstrators similar to that seen in the 1957 boycotts themselves¹. This description an ANC report on the campaign confirmed.

"There was no definite plan for courting imprisonment but after the arrest of the first demonstrators from Sophiatown other areas were organised by leaflets and visits to express their solidarity."²

Once the period of civil disobedience had begun, the leadership in the FSAW and ANCWL showed themselves anxious to keep the momentum going. Impressed by the evidence of the militancy and discipline on the part of the women, they wanted to adopt a policy of "no bail and no fines" for those women already in jail and keep the demonstrations to the pass office going for "as long as the support of the women could be maintained".³

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1. Drum, Dec. 1958: 'The Battle of the Women', p.21. V. Mngomo has described how, in Alexandra, the decision to march on the Native Commissioner's Offices was spread throughout the township by ANCWL members walking round the streets and talking to people. On the morning of the march, the leaders were at the busstops very early to dissuade women from going to work; the response from local residents was very good. Interview.
 2. 'An ANC Report on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.1, FSAW II G 11
 3. 'Report by the Federation of South African Women on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.2, FSAW C I 6.

On this issue the women ran into opposition from the ANC. It adopted a far more cautious assessment of the situation, arguing that the continuation of mass arrests would place an impossibly heavy financial burden on the Congress group and the fact that women were prepared to remain in jail "was not borne out by the facts"¹. In countering this last argument, the FSAW pointed out, with some justification, that it was not, in the main, the arrested women who were anxious to be bailed out. Rather, it was their husbands who were undermining the effectiveness of the demonstration by bailing them out on their own initiative, in their anxiety to get them back home again.

More was at stake than just a disagreement about tactics. During the course of this debate a further difference of opinion arose as to where the final authority for decision-making in the Congress Alliance lay, whether with the ANC or the TCC². In this dispute the FSAW appears to have been associated with the TCC. The authority of the ANC prevailed, however. The civil disobedience phase was called off and a new "phase" in the resistance to passes in Johannesburg launched. This followed a proposal made by the FSAW and ANCWL of organising a mass multi-racial demonstration to the Mayor of Johannesburg in late November.

1. 'An ANC Report on the Anti-Pass Campaign', pp.1,2, FSAW II G 11.

2. See below, p.340. After referring to "unpleasantness" which arose with the TCC and FSAW because of a mistaken impression that the ANC would discuss "each and every aspect" of the campaign with other organisations, the ANC's report, 'An ANC Report on the Anti-Pass Campaign', stated "the real policy in regard to the anti-pass campaign", namely that the ANC was responsible, and the task of the other organisations was one of co-ordination. FSAW II G 11.

In the rush of enthusiasm that the mass arrests had generated, an extremely ambitious total of 20 000 women was first suggested as the goal to be aimed at in the demonstration. This was soon scaled down to more sober and realistic proportions¹. In organising the demonstration, the FSAW experienced intense pressure from the authorities to call the event off. Originally it had hoped to stage a mass rally of women on the steps of the City Hall in Johannesburg. After a similar rally organised by the Black Sash was banned, and in the face of police warnings that "lawlessness would not be allowed"², the FSAW revised its plan. In place of the mass rally, it held a small poster parade on the City Hall steps. The rest of the women were directed to file past the parade one at a time and leave their individual signed protest forms against the pass laws with the demonstration leaders.

An intensive programme of visits to the Reef townships by FSAW organisers drew a response of between three and four thousand women to the steps, on the 27th November 1958. The FSAW insisted that this should be regarded as a success. It had upheld the right to peaceful public protest despite intimidation; the discipline of the women protestors had, once again, been commendable and furthermore, the following day the Mayor and City Council granted the FSAW an interview about the implementation of the pass laws in Johannesburg.

With this demonstration the momentum of the anti-pass protests in Johannesburg came to a halt. Whether the civil disobedience phase of the demonstrations could have been maintained for a significant length of time is difficult to say. The FSAW and ANCWL executives had thought so:

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1. 'Report by the Federation of South African Women on the Anti-Pass Campaign', FSAW C I 6, and 'Typescript', FSAW C I 1, describe the planning and execution of this protest.
 2. 'Report by the Federation of South African Women on the Anti-Pass Campaign, p.5, FSAW C I 6.

"The Joint Executives of the Federation of and the ANC Women's League met and considered the ANC's decision that the first phase had ended ... Regret at the decision was expressed for there had been encouraging signs that had a lead been given for further demonstrations at the Pass Office, it would have been followed. Nevertheless, the authority of the ANC was regarded as supreme ..."¹

Later in the same report, the FSAW was more openly critical of the failure of the men in the ANC to support the anti-pass campaign fully.

"The Federation awaits direction from the ANC as to the course which the anti-pass campaign will follow and requests that this direction may be given in the very near future ... Women await with impatience the active entry of the men into the anti-pass campaign."²

Certainly, by the end of 1958, the limitations of the anti-pass campaign as then constituted were clear. It had not succeeded in preventing the imposition of passes on women, only in delaying it. At the end of 1958 the government could announce that over 1 300 000 reference books had thus far been issued to women³. In January 1959 the publication of revised Native Labour Regulations drew African women still more deeply into the system of labour control that the pass laws were designed to buttress. These extended the control of Labour Bureaux, already existing for African men, over African women. Although unemployed African women were not legally required to register with these bureaux, as in the case of the men, no women could henceforth be legally employed in the urban areas unless thus registered.⁴

1. Ibid., p.4.

2. Ibid., p.6.

3. 'Typescript', p.9, FSAW C I 1.

4. M. Horrell: Legislation and Race Relations, p.37.

Reference books were still not compulsory for women but the pass laws net was being drawn around them more tightly, as Muriel Horrell's description of these revised regulations for women makes clear:

"Furthermore, it became necessary for all women in towns to obtain written proof of their authority to be there in order to safeguard themselves against arrest."¹

Developments in 1959

With the ending of the Johannesburg demonstrations, the anti-pass campaign itself came to a virtual stop. In late 1958, 1959 was hopefully designated "the greatest anti-pass year" by the ANC's Planning Council, which outlined a plan of action for the next eighteen months. The momentum for the campaign could no longer be sustained, however, and little was achieved in this direction in 1959. In November 1959 the executive report of the Transvaal ANCWL, presented to the annual provincial conference, pointed out critically:

"... it seems that the campaign against passes is being ignored because very little has been done to intensify the campaigns ..."²

If the anti-pass protests had been more or less contained, the widespread mood of resistance amongst African women had not yet been broken. This was given dramatic proof during the second half of 1959 when massive unrest erupted amongst African women in Natal³. An estimated 10 000 women or more were involved in the disturbances which focussed on a very

1. M. Horrell, op.cit.

2. 'Executive Report presented at 7th annual Conference of ANCWL Transvaal', Nov. 1959, p.2 (Reel 8, Hoover Institute Microfilm Collection).

3. On the Cato Manor and Natal disturbances see Ladlau: The Cato Manor Riots, 1959-1960; Yawitch: 'Natal 1959 - the Women's Protests'.

wide range of grievances. Beginning in the Cato Manor district of Durban in June, as an expression of discontent at enforced population removals and police raids against illegal beer brewing - for many women their only source of income - the disturbances spread rapidly to the countryside. Here women protested, often violently, against measures that weighed particularly heavily on them in the Reserves - aspects of the government's rural 'Betterment Schemes'¹, increased taxation, influx control - as well as reference books. The rural unrest in Natal represented an outpouring of pent-up frustration and anger on the part of women against the harsh and steadily deteriorating conditions under which they lived.

For the most part, these women were acting conservatively, in defence of an eroded traditional way of life. Yet threaded through their actions, in a way that was reminiscent of the women in Zeerust in 1957, was a new sense of their political relevance and an unaccustomed assertiveness. Kuper, in his book An African Bourgeoisie, has described the movement as "remarkable for the dominant role of traditionally subordinate Zulu women"². A comment made to Drum magazine by one participant in the disturbances captured something of the militancy of the women's mood, as well as the novelty of much of their behaviour.

"Said an irate mother, when reproached that African women should now be carrying sticks: 'It is true that African women never carried sticks before. But then they never carried passes before, either!'"³

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1. These schemes, designed "to improve methods of crop-production, land-usage and animal husbandry" are described by Yawitch (op.cit., pp.4,5) as disruptive of the "entire lifestyle" in the Reserves, by restructuring traditional systems of land allocation (which affected women particularly adversely) and instituting cattle-culling in an attempt to reduce over-stocking of the land.
 2. Kuper: An African Bourgeoisie, p.17.
 3. Drum, Oct. 1959: 'Trouble in Natal', p.24.

Initially these protests were spontaneous affairs, organised at a grassroots level. As in Zeerust, the FSAW was not directly linked to them, although it seems very likely that its many anti-pass protests in the years preceding the unrest, would have served as an example and encouragement to the Natal women. Once the protests had started, the ANC and ANCWL took up the women's grievances and assisted in organising further demonstrations and articulating demands. Throughout they worked actively to prevent violence from spreading¹.

Although the ANC was not involved directly in initiating the demonstrations and disturbances in Natal, it certainly benefitted from them. During 1959 the ANC in Natal experienced a sudden and marked revival. Its membership increased remarkably; it was the only ANC region to meet its projected recruitment total (of 15 000) in 1959². The regional committee of the FSAW, too, benefitted from this, showing signs of much greater activity in the early 1960's than at any time during the 1950's³.

The Cato Manor riots and rural disturbances revealed that women were still prepared to adopt militant methods of opposition. By the end of 1959, however, the difficulties facing the FSAW nationally, as a political movement trying to organise women, had become more serious. It was becoming increasingly difficult to organise as a multiracial organisation. In early 1959 a ban was proclaimed on all meetings

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1. In August 1959, ANC President Lutuli issued a statement condemning the violence, which was distributed throughout the villages of Natal by volunteers. Yawitch, op. cit., p.8. On the role of the ANCWL in the Cato Manor riots, there is material in the Treason Trial Record ('ANC Women's Association Two Stick's Branch', 10/3/56, Treason Trial Exhibit G 183), as well as in the pages of New Age in 1955 and 1956, to suggest that it was active in the area before 1959. How active, however, is not clear.
 2. See below, p.273, footnote 3.
 3. See below, p.296.

of Africans outside the townships. A further ban on mixed social gatherings was threatened as well. Marcelle Goldberg, at that stage president of the FSAW in the Transvaal, described the implications, to a regional conference of the FSAW, thus:

"The Federation of South African women is a multiracial organisation and thus directly in the line of these attacks. Our very existence is threatened."¹

By 1959, the FSAW had not managed to achieve a satisfactory distribution of the work-load in the day-to-day running of its affairs. Too much depended on the work of a few women. In March 1959, Helen Joseph reported to the NEC that "the national work of the Federation had not received sufficient attention" during the previous year, due mainly to the "pressing demands of the Transvaal region" of which she was Joint Secretary as well².

This heavy reliance of the FSAW on a few key individuals to keep it functioning, reduced the efficiency of the organisation and made it particularly vulnerable to restrictions and bannings placed on its leaders. During 1959 these continued to take their toll on the organisation. Just two months after her speech to the Transvaal provincial conference, Marcelle Goldberg was banned and restricted to the district of Johannesburg for five years³. Then in November, Elizabeth Mafeking, a leading activist of the FSAW in the Western Cape and President of the African Food and Canning Workers Union, was served with a banishment order from her home in Paarl, driving her into exile in Lesotho⁴.

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1. 'President's report to the Provincial Conference of the FSAW (Tvl)', p.6, FSAW A 13.
 2. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 2/3/59, p.2, FSAW B I.
 3. Newspaper cutting from The Star, 14/4/59, FSAW F II.
 4. 'Elizebeth Mafeking', biographical sketch, FSAW F I.

Nevertheless, despite the very real limitations cramping the scope of the FSAW by this time, the mood of the organisation was still one of resolution and ultimate confidence. The Transvaal's provincial conference in January 1959 had provided encouraging evidence of the vigorous support the FSAW could rally to it. Despite the pouring rain (which earned the conference the nickname "Operation Umbrella"), over one thousand delegates packed the conference hall, coming from all over the Reef¹. Women's Day 1959, was celebrated by large prayer meetings in the major centres. In late 1959 or early 1960, the FSAW was quite confidently planning its contribution to the general campaign of demonstrations and rallies, launched by the ANC in mid-1959 as part of its drive to "make 1959 the Greatest Anti-Pass Year"².

"... agreed that the participation by the Federation should be to call upon women in all the organisations to participate fully in the demonstrations and activities planned for March 31st."³

For all the concern about the threat of a government crackdown on the national liberation movement, neither the FSAW nor the Congress Alliance as a whole could envisage the abrupt changes that the events of March 1960 would bring.

3. 1960 - 1963

The FSAW plans for 1960 were abruptly disrupted by the momentous events that followed after the Sharpeville shootings on March 21st. The banning of the ANC and ANCWL stripped

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1. 'Operation Umbrella! An "outside" impression of a great conference', anonymous article, FSAW A 13.
 2. ANC: 'Make 1959 the Greatest Anti-Pass Year', FSAW B 13.
 3. 'Notes from Regional Executive - Transvaal Executive Committee', nd, FSAW B I.

it of most of its membership. The 1954 decision to base it on an affiliated rather than an individual membership now acquired a new significance - though had the FSAW ever developed a mass individual membership of its own, there can be little doubt that, sooner or later, it too would have been banned. During the State of Emergency, many of the top leaders in the FSAW were detained, including Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi, while those who were not rounded up, went into a temporary retreat.

Following the mass detentions and the outlawing of the ANC, the old Congress Alliance was in disarray. It took months for it to regroup and begin the painful process of adjustment to the new political situation. By 1960, its former strategy of mass demonstrations and civil disobedience had proved a failure as a way of bringing about political change. Nevertheless, it was not till mid 1961, after an unsuccessful attempt to mount a nation-wide 'stay-at-home' at the end of May 1961, that these tactics were finally abandoned by the Congress leaders.

For the FSAW the effect of these developments was ultimately crippling. In the polarised political climate after Sharpeville, its position was ambiguous. Never banned itself, the FSAW retained its commitment to non-violent methods of opposition, at a time when its former allies in the Congress Alliance had adopted the principle of violent resistance as the only course of action open to them. As a legal organisation the FSAW could hardly have done otherwise. More than mere legalism was involved however - belief in peaceful methods of change was still deeply entrenched amongst its members. Thus in 1961, Lilian Ngoyi, formerly President of the banned ANCWL, attacked the proliferation of pistol clubs amongst white women in the aftermath of Sharpeville as a "disgrace to womanhood". "How can there be peace in a country with

these clubs?" she demanded¹. Yet at the same time, the FSAW's freedom to act as a legal political organisation was being curtailed more and more by banning actions against its leaders, political trials and restrictive legislation. It was clear that any signs of serious opposition would be ruthlessly suppressed by the government. The area in which the FSAW could manoeuvre had been drastically restricted.

Its collapse after 1960 was not immediate. The political upheavals after Sharpeville left it in a state of confusion, its executive dispersed, its projects abandoned. In the Transvaal, the one region for which reasonable records survive, no executive meetings at all were held between late 1959 and early 1961. By 1961, however, the FSAW was showing signs of revival. In the Transvaal the regional executive met in February of that year. The minutes for that meeting indicate that the NEC of the FSAW had already held a meeting where methods of reconstructing the FSAW were discussed. These were reported to the Transvaal regional committee as follows:

"Efforts to be made to build Federation on stronger basis. To organise among all sections, not only African women. Importance of approach to Trade Unions, churches and other bodies emphasised. Regions urged to organise Regional Conferences".²

The minutes also revealed a new respect for security - the style was more cryptic than before and those attending were referred to by initials only, not names.

Throughout 1961 the Transvaal executive, at least, was meeting regularly. Minutes survive for meetings held in February,

1. Drum, Oct. 1961: 'The Women Speak Up', p.47. These clubs are revealing, both on the highly charged situation prevailing after Sharpeville and the degree to which many white women identified themselves with the maintenance of the status quo.
2. FSAW: 'Minutes of the meeting of the Tvl. Regional Committee', 11/2/61, FSAW D I.

March, April, June and July¹. The tone of these meetings appears business-like. Numerous projects were discussed - study groups, a national newsletter (which appears to have been achieved for a few months at least), raising funds to employ a full-time organiser. In August 1961 the Transvaal organised a regional conference to coincide with the anniversary of Women's Day. Pre-publicity was extensive, although the final attendance at the conference is not known. 22 000 leaflets were duplicated and distributed, "of which 1 000 are for Indian women and 1 000 for Coloured women"². Numerous meetings were held all over the Rand to publicise the event, with towns as far afield as Ermelo, Bethal, Vereeniging and Nigel being visited. Arrangements for the commemoration of Women's Day itself showed a marked continuity with the pre-Sharpeville period. These included the sale of commemorative badges, a poster demonstration on the City Hall steps and a memorandum on "rents, arrests and housing" to be handed in to the Mayor³.

During this period strenuous attempts were made to mend the large hole torn in the fabric of the organisation by the banning of the ANCWL. Efforts were made to redirect the ex-membership of the Women's League into alternative clubs - called 'Save our Families Clubs'⁴ - which could then affiliate to the FSAW. In July 1961 the Transvaal FSAW reported that 17 such clubs had affiliated⁵. By mid 1962 there were 72 clubs across the country affiliated to the FSAW, 30 in the Transvaal, 18 in Natal and 12 each in the Western

1. These are all to be found in FSAW D I.

2. FSAW: 'Minutes of the Meeting of the Tvl. Regional Committee', 22/7/61, FSAW D I.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

and Eastern Cape¹. In addition to activities on the Rand, by all indications still the strongest centre, FSAW committees were functioning in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban.

The FSAW continued to make overtures to the Liberal Party, Black Sash and NCW. Now that the ANCWL had been banned, it was more anxious than ever to broaden its base. However, although a greater degree of co-operation appeared possible on specific issues, notably that of civil rights, this still fell short of affiliation. The FSAW in Cape Town, with its longer history of contact with liberal white women's organisations, achieved the most success in this area. By 1962 it was assisting the Black Sash to run a Bail Office and was in contact with the more conservative NCW as well².

The extent to which the FSAW had managed to recover after the slump of 1960 was demonstrated in September 1961. In that month the third national conference took place, in Port Elizabeth. From all reports it was a success. The conference was attended by over 400 delegates, women from Cape Town and the Rand travelling to Port Elizabeth by hired bus. The hall where the conference was held was crowded with additional guests, its 2 000 seats filled to capacity, according to a report in Drum³. The size of the gathering was proof that the FSAW still had a sizeable following but the open presence of Special Branch policemen - equipped with tape recorders - was a forceful reminder of the restrictions under which it operated⁴.

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.33. Unfortunately there seems no way of knowing what the average membership of these clubs was.
 2. See below, p. 292.
 3. Drum, Oct. 1961: 'The Women Speak Up', p.47.
 4. Ibid.

The conference was clearly a major political event for the embattled national liberation movement. Drum described it as "the first big-scale political meeting and the first open sign of political activity since the end of May demonstrations"¹. It appears to have generated the characteristic enthusiasm and spirit of earlier meetings. One participant remembers it as a "good" conference²; to the women present the possibility that this would prove the last national conference of the FSAW must have been remote.

At the Conference both Ngoyi and Joseph were re-elected to their positions as National President and Secretary respectively, a mark of the high status they enjoyed within the organisation. The Conference also reaffirmed the FSAW's stand on several issues. Resolutions were passed condemning the pass laws, the Bantu Authorities Act and Bantu Education. The meeting confirmed the FSAW's commitment to equal rights for women. In addition, it called for the lifting of the bans on the ANC and PAC; a stop to arbitrary arrests, prolonged trials, bannings, etc. In her presidential report Lilian Ngoyi's assessment of the political situation in South Africa was sober but not downcast:

"Freedom does not come walking towards you
- it must be won. As women we must go
on playing our part."³

In retrospect, the confidence and energy displayed by the FSAW at this time appears remarkable in view of the enormous odds stacked against it. In 1962 a visitor to the FSAW commented on this same lack of pessimism "despite the fact that there is no underestimation of the present strength of

1. Ibid.
2. Interview with M. Moodley.
3. Drum, op.cit., loc.cit.

the Nationalist government"¹.

However, by the end of 1961, the serious limitations to the FSAW's position were already clear. A month after her outspoken speech to the FSAW conference, Lilian Ngoyi was banned and subsequently confined to the Johannesburg township of Orlando for five years. A similar order was served on Florence Matomela, one of the founding members of the FSAW and a major source of its strength in the Eastern Cape². Thereafter the tempo of repressive action against FSAW leaders by the state quickened. In the next two or three years more and more of the organisation's most experienced and dedicated members were removed from office by banning orders, arrests and, as the pressure mounted, exile. Albertina Sisulu, Mary Moodley, Amina Cachalia, Liz Abrahams, Ruth Matseoane, Bertha Mashaba, Violet Weinberg ... the list of restricted leaders is a lengthy one. In April 1962 Helen Joseph's original banning order (imposed in 1957) expired but within a few months (during which time she resumed public political work vigorously) she was banned once again. In addition, she became the first person to be subjected to house-arrest, a new provision whereby an individual could be restricted to his or her house at the discretion of the Minister of Justice. Finally, during 1962 COD was banned as an organisation and thus removed from the FSAW as well.

During 1962 the FSAW was still a functioning body on the Rand, in Port Elizabeth, Durban and Cape Town. Both Natal and the Transvaal regions managed to hold provincial conferences which appear to have been well attended. In mid 1962

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.28.
 2. 'Never mind the wind and rain - we'll fight', paper clipping, FSAW F II.

there was even discussion on holding the next national conference in 1963, at which a 'Women's Bill of Rights' would be adopted.

"The thinking behind the compilation of such a bill is that although the Federation is an integral part of the Congress Alliance and subscribes to the Freedom Charter, it is felt that there is a special need for a Bill detailing the special demands of women which will have to be met in any democratic state."¹

Where this suggestion came from, and in what way this 'Bill of Rights' would have differed from or developed the 'Women's Charter' of 1954, is unfortunately not made clear.

No such conference was held. The Transvaal provincial conference, in August 1962, was the last meeting of any size convened by the FSAW; thereafter its decline was rapid. An undated typescript history of the FSAW, written probably in the mid 1960's, showed some of the fighting spirit that had always characterised the FSAW when it refused to concede that the FSAW had disappeared from the political scene. It admitted that it had "become impossible for the Federation to continue to function as an organisation although it has never been banned nor did it ever dissolve itself". But, it concluded, on a more positive note:

"From time to time, on historic funeral occasions, the women of the old Federation still emerge as a body wearing their Federation uniforms."²

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.38.
 2. 'Federation of Women', p.3, FSAW F II.

Nevertheless, quite quickly after 1962 and despite attempts to keep the NEC functioning, the FSAW ceased to function as a viable organisation with any mass following. There is no single date which marks its collapse. It was a cumulative process rather than a sudden event. Perhaps February 1st, 1963, the day on which it became compulsory for all African women to carry reference books, can be taken as a symbolic date for the ending of the FSAW. With the proclamation of this date and the FSAW's reluctant decision to comply, the anti-pass campaign of the 1950's was finally brought to a close. So too, was an era in the history of political organisation amongst women in South Africa.

CHAPTER 6THE FSAW, 1954 - 1963: STRUCTURE
AND STRATEGY

The previous chapter has chronicled the story of the FSAW, its rise, its brief but eventful political career, its decline. In seeking to mobilise women against the apartheid state in the 1950's, the FSAW had revealed that a large potential for political activism existed amongst them: a potential, that by the mid 1960's had been successfully contained. It is this that now needs to be examined more deeply, both the potential and the reasons why it should have been contained.

This is a complex subject, made more difficult by the general lack of studies, both empirical and theoretical, on women and their position within South African society. In analysing the make-up of the FSAW, three interlocking areas need to be considered: (1) the FSAW as a political organisation, its structure, administration and strategy; (2) its relationship with the Congress Alliance and with the dominant ANC in particular - here what is being considered is the place that the women's movement held in the national liberation movement; (3) the FSAW as a women's movement - its own assessment of its priorities and position. Finally, these need to be seen in a broader historical perspective which places the FSAW in the context of the South African social formation of its time. Obviously one cannot understand the FSAW except in relation to developments within the apartheid state in the 1950's and early 1960's. At the same time, the long-term structural changes in the position of women outlined in Chapter One were important in shaping the form the FSAW took as well.

These different aspects overlap and interact upon each other. It is not, for instance, possible to discuss the FSAW within the national liberation movement, without considering the

impact of the apartheid state upon it. Nor can one separate its structural weaknesses from its political difficulties, or the limitations imposed upon it by the position women occupied in society. These various threads will weave in and out of the following discussion. Until the different aspects have been delineated more sharply, however, no overall assessment of the FSAW is possible. With this in mind, this chapter will look at the organisation of the FSAW, its membership, administration and strategy. From this discussion many of its general difficulties and limitations will become apparent. The following chapter will examine the FSAW's relationship with the Congress Alliance and its standing as a women's movement within the national liberation movement.

1. THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE FSAW

The main structural features of the FSAW have been mentioned already. It was constituted as a federation of "organisations or groups of females above the age of 18 years"¹ and drew its membership entirely from its affiliated organisations - there was no individual membership. It was open to all women, unlike other political and cultural women's organisations at the time which incorporated some form of colour-bar in their make-up. Either they were fully segregated or else black and white women were divided into "parallel organisations". The FSAW laid great stress on its departure from those norms, describing itself as

"... the first women's organisation in South Africa to bring together women of the various racial groups on the basis of full equality and full co-operation in one undivided organisation."²

1. FSAW: 'Draft Constitution', p.1, FSAW A 7.

2. 'Federation of Women', typescript, nd, p.1, FSAW F II.

In practice, however, the FSAW did not escape the emphasis on ethnicity which was a key feature of the official 'apartheid' ideology of the Nationalist government. This was a product of its federal form. The membership of the FSAW was drawn entirely from the member organisations of the Congress Alliance, itself structured on ethnic lines.

It was thus based on a grouping of organisations each of which based their own membership on the four 'races' of official apartheid theory - the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organisation and the white Congress of Democrats. Even the Food and Canning Workers Union, the only SACTU union to establish formal ties with the FSAW, had been compelled by the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act to segregate its African members into a parallel African Food and Canning Workers Union¹. The FSAW was therefore a multiracial, rather than a non-racial organisation².

It is extremely difficult to give even a rough estimate of the number of women the FSAW could claim as members through its affiliated member organisations. No formal statistics appear to have been kept by these bodies - a poor reflection on their organisational efficiency - and from all accounts their membership fluctuated considerably over the years. In 1962 a visitor to the FSAW observed:

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1. Only the ANC had a formally constituted, separate women's auxiliary body, the ANCWL, which could affiliate to the FSAW without technically involving male members as well. The other three Congresses do not appear to have established such auxiliaries and their exact status within the FSAW was therefore rather hazy.
 2. The role of the ANC in bringing this about has been described already. The extent to which it dominated the FSAW in establishing this federal form is looked at in the following chapter.

"The actual number of members of the FSAW has probably never been counted because the membership of the affiliated groups and organisations varies from time to time."¹

Thus, in 1952, when the Defiance Campaign was at its height, the ANC's official membership was estimated at about 100 000. By December 1955, according to one available figure, this had dropped to 28 700, little more than a quarter of the 1952 figure². By the end of the decade, this had probably increased to some extent, but the ANC was still far short of a projected target of 120 000 which it had set for itself at the 1958 conference³.

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.35. In connection with the WIDF, although affiliation to it was envisaged by the FSAW's earliest sponsors, formal links with this international organisation were never established. The FSAW did, however, retain informal links as this report makes clear.
 2. From 'Report from 15th to 19th December '55', a police transcript of the proceedings of the ANC annual Conference, December 1955. Treason Trial exhibit, G808.
 3. In the Executive Report submitted to the Transvaal ANC Provincial Conference in December 1959, mention was made of the banning of some 40 ANC branches in the Transvaal, with an estimated membership of 6 000 - i.e. an average of 150 members per branch. Using this figure one can calculate the remaining branches (87) as having a combined membership in the region of 13 000. Natal, we are told, had achieved its membership target of 15 000, bringing the combined membership for the two provinces to 28 000. Both the Cape and the Orange Free State had failed to reach their targets of 50 000 and 5 000 respectively - by how much, however, is not stated. ANC (Tvl) 'Annual Report of the Provincial Executive Committee', Oct. 1959, pp.13-15, FSAW II G 7.

What the proportion of women amongst these figures might have been is hard to assess. Once again, figures are not forthcoming. If anything, the ANCWL was even less efficient about keeping statistics than the parent body. In 1959 the Executive Report to the annual ANCWL conference reported that "the executive is unable to give the correct membership of the ANCWL because no such reports were received from the respective provinces ..." But, it continued, "since 1954 women have joined the ANC in great numbers"¹. It is highly improbable that the proportion of women in the ANC ever approached half during the latter part of the 1950's, given the position of women in society, but it was clearly on the increase throughout this period. Political comment by Drum on the upswing in the numbers of women attending Congress meetings bears Ngoyi's statement out². It was a feature of the ANC that its membership always increased dramatically after a major political campaign - witness the impact of the Defiance Campaign - and political activity amongst women, with the anti-pass campaign, was extensive. The success of Natal's recruiting drive in 1959 - it was the only province where the ANC achieved its allocated membership target - was undoubtedly related to the widespread unrest and demonstrations amongst African women in that province.

Information on women within the Indian Congress is much more sparse, an indication of the low level of political activity amongst them within that body. The SAIC itself had entered into a period of decline after the successful passive resistance campaign of 1946. In Natal the number of branches

1. ANCWL: 'Annual Conference of the African National Congress Women's League', Sept. 1959, Executive Report, p. 2, FSAW II H 7.

2. See above, p. 217.

represented at the annual provincial conference of the Congress declined from 28 in 1947 to only 12 in 1959¹.

In 1956 the General Secretary reported to the Natal Provincial Conference that since the Congress of the People (in 1955) branch activity had shown a "steady decline" and no meaningful estimate of its membership was possible². Indian women, it has been said, were culturally probably the most suppressed group of women in South Africa. Such political activity as there was amongst them was confined to the districts of Durban and on the Rand and even there was limited to individuals rather than groups.

For the rest, both COD and SACPO were tiny organisations with a membership of one or two hundred at the most, confined largely to Cape Town and Johannesburg. Here, too, the contribution of these organisations to the FSAW was limited very much to that of individuals³. While this contribution was often large - it is difficult, for instance, to think of the FSAW without Ray Alexander or Helen Joseph of COD - in terms of numbers it remained slight. To the four Congresses must also be added the membership of the Food and Canning Workers Union which probably never exceeded several thousand during this period.

Drawing together all these sketchy fragments, one can reasonably conclude that the outside limits of the formal membership of the FSAW at any one time during the 1950's would have been in the region of 10 000 women. This figure would have included a large proportion of women who were members in

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1. Johnson: Indians and Apartheid in South Africa, p.125.
 2. Ibid., p.95.
 3. Mention should be made of one prominent exception to this on the Rand. On the East Rand, centred around Benoni, there was a particularly vigorous group of women within SACPO, under the leadership of Mary Moodley.

name only. Many ANCWL members in the small country towns were probably ignorant that a separate body by the name of the FSAW and to which the Women's League was affiliated, existed. The core of active women would have been considerably less - probably no more than a few hundred across the country. And in its day-to-day administration, as the following section will show, the FSAW relied on an even smaller number of women.

The above estimate applies to the 1950's. After the banning of the ANCWL in 1960, the FSAW was stripped of the bulk of its membership. In 1962 COD was also banned and the one channel through which the small number of white women had entered the FSAW closed. The attempt to redirect African women into alternative clubs which could then affiliate to the Federation had shown some signs of success in 1961/62 - in the Transvaal, for instance, these grew from 17 to 30 between July 1961 and July 1962¹. Their membership was a fraction of that of the former ANCWL, however, and as the pressures against the FSAW continued to mount, its general following dwindled away rapidly. By the mid 1960's it consisted of little more than a handful of committed, but embattled, committee members.

From the above discussion it is clear that the FSAW membership was based, overwhelmingly, on African women, affiliated to it through the ANCWL. In late 1958 or early 1959, a FSAW memorandum on the conduct of the anti-pass campaign on the Rand referred to the difficulties it had experienced in mobilising non-African women for the demonstration on Johannesburg City Hall steps in November 1958. Its comments can be taken as a summary of its standing among these women in general.

"Organisation of the Indian women presented great difficulties, arising from there being no specific women's organisation through which

1. See above, p. 263.

to work and the loose organisation of the TIC (Transvaal Indian Congress). All work has really to be done at the last moment by three or four Indian women and such work lacks the organisational value of the intensive work done through the ANC branches in the women's campaigns. COD women responded well ... but their small numbers cannot be denied. On this occasion no response was forthcoming from the Black Sash or the Liberal Party. Coloured women proved impossible to organise in Johannesburg, for lack of an organisation, although Benoni women of SACPO sent in a good number of Coloured women to the protest."¹

For all the FSAW's stress on solidarity amongst women and its own disavowal of the colour-bar, participation in it by non-African women was always limited. It remained conditioned by the dominant, colour-defined political divisions in society. The establishment of an organisation that would "embrace all women, irrespective of race, colour or nationality"² served as an ideal; it did not become an actuality.

As an organisation, the FSAW was confined to the large urban areas. Only in the four cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban were separate regional FSAW committees ever established - only in these areas was there sufficient political activity amongst non-ANC women in the Congress Alliance to make such committees viable. In the other major urban centres - Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, East London - the FSAW was represented by the ANCWL. These branches liased with the FSAW either indirectly, through the ANCWL provincial or national executives, or communicated directly with the FSAW executive themselves. The Bloemfontein ANCWL, in particular, kept up a fairly good correspondence with the FSAW - far better than that existing between some of the regional FSAW committees.

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1. 'Report by the FSAW on the Anti-Pass Campaign', nd, p.5, FSAW C I 6.
 2. FSAW: 'Report of the first National Conference of Women', p.1.

Outside the large towns the FSAW was entirely dependent on the loose and not always reliable network of ANC country branches (not all of which had separate Women's Leagues). The ANC had a showing in many of the smaller towns throughout the country but the level of their memberships, efficiency and activity fluctuated enormously. Frequently they were branches in name only. It is unlikely, too, that many ANC members in the more isolated regions were fully aware that the FSAW existed.

In the densely populated reserve areas - where in 1951 some 46% of all African women were living - the ANC was barely represented at all. Here, regular and sustained political work amongst women by it or the Women's League or indeed, any other 'liberation' body (the NEUM for instance) appears to have been non-existent. There are indications of some follow-up work being undertaken by the ANCWL in those areas where rural women themselves forced action upon their situation - in Zeerust in 1957/58 and later in Natal, in 1959. In Zeerust, contact was confined to legal and financial support - here the FSAW donated money as well - though Lilian Ngoyi did apparently meet with local women on one occasion after the unrest had begun¹. In Natal, in 1959, the ANC and ANCWL were both much more active but even there, the extent of their involvement was limited. In Natal ANC membership did increase spectacularly at this time and it is probable that a significant proportion were women who had been affected by the disturbances. (Whether this would have been maintained is another question - but one that the banning of the ANCWL the following year makes of academic interest only.) In both Zeerust and Natal, however, ANCWL work was a response to events outside of its own making, not the result of a definite programme of on-going politicalisation and recruitment of country members.

1. Interview.

The neglect of the country areas was undoubtedly a major flaw in the ANCWL and FSAW ambitions for establishing a mass political organisation amongst women. The Zeerust and Natal disturbances both showed that there was no lack of grievances on which to build, even though rural women were more tradition-bound than their urban counterparts, the superior authority of chief and husband more deeply entrenched. At least part of the reason why the attempt to organise rural women was not even seriously begun, rested with the meagre organisational resources of the ANCWL and the FSAW and the ever tighter constraints imposed upon them by government action against the national liberation movement¹. The FSAW was not oblivious to the importance of expanding its work outside the towns. In 1956 the Transvaal region of the FSAW listed the dearth of an organised movement amongst peasant women and its own lack of contact with them as one of its major difficulties². Time, money and personnel were all at a premium, however, with the anti-pass campaign in the cities absorbing most of its energies.

Thus neither the FSAW nor its major affiliate, the ANCWL, could claim a mass membership among South African women. Nevertheless, paid up membership alone is not a sufficient index of the strength of the FSAW. While the membership figures for organisations like COD and SACPO were an accurate indication of the support they enjoyed, the same could not be said of the ANC. There were many in the African townships who did not pay their annual subscriptions but yet considered themselves ANC members. The same would have been true of the ANCWL. For all its organisational shortcomings, the FSAW could, on several occasions, rally enormous numbers of

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1. In 1958 a ban was imposed on the ANC in the Marico (Zeerust) and Scutpansberg districts of the Transvaal.
 2. 'Report to the WIDF', FSAW E. The other three problems it listed were the banning of its leaders, lack of money and the "backward attitude" of the men in the Congress Alliance.

women. The mass gathering of women outside the Union Buildings in August, 1956, testified to that. On that occasion, the FSAW drew between ten and twenty thousand women together, at least as many women as that projected as a maximum for its entire membership. These women came from all the main cities and towns of South Africa and many of the smaller towns besides. FSAW conferences were always well attended. Between four and five hundred delegates attended its national conferences in 1956 and 1961¹. Regional meetings and demonstrations were, for the most part, similarly well-supported, especially in the Transvaal. In November 1958 three thousand women from the Reef participated in the FSAW protest outside the Johannesburg City Hall and had it not been for police intimidation, it is likely the figure would have been higher. The Transvaal Provincial Conference in January 1959 drew in the region of 1 000 delegates, numbers of them coming from further afield than the Reef².

Within the limits already described - urban, Congress supporters - the range of support the FSAW enjoyed was impressive. The bulk of this support came from working-class women but there was a sprinkling of professional and university-educated women as well. Inevitably the small group of better educated and financially more secure women - members of the petit-bourgeoisie - were influential at the executive level; they did not, however, deflect the FSAW away from its populist sympathies. It directed itself primarily to the black working class women and housewives, many of whom it drew into positions of leadership and authority within its committees³.

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1. Figures for the 1956 conference from FSAW correspondence with the ANCWL, 5/4/57, FSAW C I 5; for the 1961 conference from Drum, Oct. 1961: 'The Women Speak Up'.
 2. See below, p.2??.
 3. Dora Tamana, Annie Silinga, Katie White, Mary Moodley, Liz Abrahams, Elizabeth Mafeking were all women prominent within the FSAW who would fall into this category.

2. ADMINISTRATION

Not having an individual membership, the FSAW relied very largely on its executive committees - both national and regional - to see that its identity, as an organisation distinct from that of its affiliated members groups, was maintained. Indeed, without an active committee, there could be no FSAW - a statement which goes a long way to explaining why the successive bannings of its leaders by the government should have been so devastating for it.

The importance of the executive committees was exaggerated still further because of the failure to convene national conferences regularly. In terms of the Constitution the National Conference, representing all the branches, was the highest decision-making body in the FSAW and should meet annually "if possible"¹. This never did prove possible and only three such conferences were held, in 1954, 1956 and 1961. The shaping of FSAW policy and its programme of action was, therefore, in the hands of its executive committees. These functioned at two levels, national and regional. Of the two, it was the regional committees that were the more important.

The National Executive Committee (NEC)

In the constitution it was laid down that the next highest decision-making body after the National Conference was the NEC². As far as can be made out, this consisted of the National President, Secretary and Treasurer, four Vice-Presidents, (one for each region) and 18 committee members³.

1. FSAW: 'Draft Constitution', p.1, FSAW A 7.

2. Ibid., p.2.

3. This is based on the list of names of the first NEC supplied in FSAW correspondence, 12/5/54, FSAW B II. It does not accord with the proposals in the 'Draft Constitution' which lists 6 Vice-Presidents and 20 committee members, in addition to the President, Secretary and Treasurer.

These were to be elected by the National Conference. Since, in practice, this met so seldom, many women who served on the NEC were not elected but co-opted by the already existing committee. In addition, a Working Committee consisting of a majority of committee members living within a twenty mile radius of the FSAW Head Office was instituted, to deal with the problem of running an organisation when committee members were dispersed so widely across the country.

The NEC was never a particularly effective body. The National President, Lilian Ngoyi, and Secretary, Helen Joseph, both enjoyed considerable prestige within the organisation after their election to office in 1956. At one meeting in Sophiatown, Ngoyi was referred to as "our mother, leader of the women"¹; the contribution of Joseph as an administrator was invaluable. Much of their work for the FSAW was based on the Transvaal region, however, rather than on the NEC as such. Once the shift of Head Office to Johannesburg had taken place in 1956, the distinction between the National and Transvaal executives was frequently blurred, with the latter the more active body.

The difficulties that plagued the NEC in its early years were described in the previous chapter. Even after the Head Office had been shifted to Johannesburg, matters did not greatly improve. NEC meetings were infrequent. In the period between October 1956 and March 1959 only six meetings in all were held²; the Constitution laid down two meetings a year as a minimum. Attendance at the latter two meetings (the only ones for which minutes survive) was poor, with 8

1. "'Copy of notes taken by N. Const. John Patose, at meeting of ANCWL: Sophiatown: 12/8/56', p.2, Treason Trial exhibit G 854.

2. This is calculated from a variety of sources, including available minutes of meetings and correspondence. See FSAW correspondence, 6/6/57, FSAW C I 5; FSAW circular 26/5/57, FSAW B I; FSAW NEC minutes, FSAW B I.

women present at the 1958 meeting and only 7 at the 1959 one¹. At this last meeting "great disappointment was expressed by the members present at the absence of so many of the Johannesburg members as this was the first meeting of the Executive after fourteen months"². In introducing her report to the 1959 meeting, the Secretary, Helen Joseph, admitted that "the national work of the Federation had not received sufficient attention during the year since the last meeting ..."³. The reason for this she attributed to "the pressing demands of the Transvaal region", for which she was also one of two joint-secretaries (the other was Bertha Mashaba). In her explanation can be seen a major organisational weakness of the FSAW, its over-dependence on a small number of key individuals.

After 1960 the NEC was under even greater pressure. No record exists of any NEC meetings for 1960 - most of its members were in detention during the State of Emergency. By February 1961 it had recovered to the extent of calling a meeting at which plans for reconstructing the FSAW after the banning of the ANCWL were discussed⁴. From this time on, however, the FSAW was in a state of siege. The security situation was such that direct and open contact between the Head Office and the regions was often difficult and thus the co-ordinating and supervisory role of the NEC declined still further in relation to the regional committees.

Many of the weaknesses inhibiting the NEC were not peculiar to it, but shared by the regional committees as well. Administrative inexperience, too few responsible and active women, lack of money, the difficulties members experienced

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1. From 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC of the FSAW', 18/1/58 and Ibid., 21/3/59, FSAW B I.
 2. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.1, FSAW B I.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Tvl. Regional Committee: 'Minutes of Meeting held Saturday 11/2/61' refers to this meeting of the NEC; FSAW D I.

in attending meetings, tied as they were by family responsibilities - these and other factors are looked at in greater detail below. One major problem that hampered the NEC was that of communications between the different and far-flung centres. The failure to maintain satisfactory contact between the regions was an indication of the weakness of the FSAW as a national organisation and a major factor in the high degree of regional autonomy it experienced.

From the very beginning, in 1954/55, the Cape Town-based NEC was complaining of inadequate or non-existent communications with Natal, the Eastern Cape and Kimberley. "It is sickening how these people never acknowledge letters or report on anything", grumbled a Cape Town correspondent in mid 1955¹. This situation did not improve substantially with the shift of the Head Office to Johannesburg. In 1959, the National Secretary's report to the NEC described correspondence with the different regions as "irregular". In the case of the Eastern Cape, news of its activities came often via the columns of the newspaper New Age, rather than direct from the regional committee itself².

Part of the problem was geographical - regions were widely scattered. In 1956 the Transvaal region attributed its "relative autonomy" from the FSAW Head Office, then still in Cape Town, to "distance and communication difficulties"³. Part of the problem was also the lack of money which prevented the appointment of a full-time organiser who could tour the country and maintain contact between the different areas. NEC members were generally unable to take time off from their work or their families for such travel. To a request from Cape Town for a visit by Lilian Ngoyi, the Transvaal Secretary replied:

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1. FSAW correspondence, 19/8/55, FSAW B II.
 2. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.3, FSAW B I.
 3. 'Report to the WIDF, p.1, FSAW E.

"I wish to point out to you the difficulty confronting the President. She is a person with a big family to support and has nobody helping her. We feel that a three week visit means to her three weeks of having no money to support her family."¹

Compounding these difficulties was the growing need for secrecy and caution in correspondence as the ominous threat of police surveillance grew. Already in the mid 1950's much of the FSAW correspondence between Cape Town and the Transvaal regions was unsigned and unaddressed. After 1960 security consciousness was even more acute and its inhibitory effect on inter-regional and NEC communications crippling. Not all the NEC's difficulties were external, however. Responsibility for failing to keep contact between the regions had often to be attributed to slackness on the part of the regional committees themselves.

The Regional Committees

With both the National Conference and the NEC not operating at their maximum, the regional committees came to form the organisational basis of the FSAW. Although the NEC did initiate some activities, much of the FSAW's work was planned and carried out at this local level. The Regional Committees were thus of major importance within the FSAW. In this section a brief survey of their relative strength and contribution to the FSAW will be made.

As already described, only four regional committees were ever established, the Transvaal, Cape Western, Cape Eastern and Natal². In practice, the regions in which the committees operated were confined largely to the immediate vicinity of

1. Quoted in M. Benson: Struggle for a Birthright, p.183.

2. In the Orange Free State no separate FSAW was established, as mentioned earlier. Here the FSAW worked through the provincial ANCWL.

the city in which they were based, i.e. Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and Durban. Of the four, the Transvaal and Western Cape were the two most solidly constituted regions. Committees were established soon after the inaugural conference and functioned throughout the FSAW's short history. The Eastern Cape and Natal committees were much less stable.

The Transvaal region, based on the Rand, the financial and industrial centre of the country, was by far the most dynamic of all four regions, although, because it is the only one for which adequate documentation survives, it is possible that one can exaggerate its dominance and relative strength. Between 1954 and 1963 it was responsible for many of the FSAW's most dramatic protests - the two demonstrations to Pretoria in 1955 and 1956, the protest outside the Johannesburg City Hall in November 1958 - and numerous smaller ones besides. It organised several major conferences which were generally very well attended. The last FSAW conference of any size was held in the Transvaal in August 1962.

Once the FSAW Head Office had been moved to Johannesburg in 1956, the Transvaal region's dominance within the FSAW became especially marked. As already mentioned, overlap of membership in the NEC and Transvaal Regional Executive was quite extensive: for some of the time Ngoyi and Joseph both duplicated their respective positions as President and Secretary on the NEC, in the Transvaal Regional Committee as well. It seems clear that various decisions made for the FSAW emanated, strictly speaking, from the Transvaal committee rather than the NEC¹.

1. This blurring between the two committees is seen in the minutes for a Transvaal Regional Committee meeting in late 1959 or early (pre-Sharpeville) 1960 where discussion was led by the "National President" on what the participation of the FSAW in the ANC's anti-pass campaign should be. See 'Notes from Regional Executive - Transvaal Executive Committee', FSAW D I.

Johannesburg was the heartland of the Congress Alliance and on the Rand the FSAW was in close (though not always harmonious) contact with the NCC of the Alliance and the other Congress organisations as well. The Head Office of the ANCWL was in Johannesburg, too. Overlap between ANCWL and FSAW committees, both regional and national, was considerable as well. Lilian Ngoyi held the extremely important position of ANCWL National President, in addition to her posts in the FSAW. Bertha Mashaba, Ruth Matseoane, Kate Mxkato were amongst those who served on both FSAW and ANCWL committees at the same time. The workload within the Congress Alliance was distributed often amongst a very small network of individuals.

The overlap between the FSAW and ANCWL facilitated communications but at the same time, the very informality it encouraged led, on occasion, to confusion and some friction. In 1957, for instance, the ANCWL Transvaal executive expressed dissatisfaction with the manner in which the FSAW was organising the Anti-Pass Pledge and Group Areas campaigns, feeling that it had not been properly consulted. To this the FSAW replied that the participation of the ANCWL "at all levels" had been "full" -

"As far as the Working Committee of the Federation is concerned, its very composition ensured close co-operation and full liaison with your Executive Committee".¹

Such difficulties with the ANCWL, which arose from time to time, never proved really serious. More difficult were relations with the ANC proper, which are discussed in Chapter Seven. It was on the Rand that the FSAW was most assertive and active as an independent organisation amongst women - and on the Rand that tensions with male members of the Congress Alliance were most in evidence.

The difficulties that the Transvaal FSAW experienced in

1. Letter from FSAW (Tvl) to the ANCWL (Tvl), 5/4/57, p.4, FSAW C I 5.

organising non-African women have been mentioned already. Nevertheless, the multi-racial character of the FSAW was most convincingly expressed there. COD and SACPO were probably stronger on the Reef than elsewhere in the country, while relations between the FSAW and Transvaal Indian Congress, its youth section in particular, appear to have been good¹. Beyond Johannesburg itself, attempts were made to set up additional local committees on the East Rand, West Rand and Pretoria. Only in the East Rand did the attempt take root, in the form of the active East Rand Working Committee. This was based primarily on SACPO members in Benoni. In Pretoria and the West Rand the FSAW was obliged to work through the ANCWL.

Further afield, the FSAW's contact with women in the outlying towns and districts of the Transvaal was intermittent and unsatisfactory. Here it was dependent on the ANC network of branches for making contact with women. The inadequacy of the FSAW's links with the countryside have been mentioned already. The Transvaal region was aware of this deficiency and did make some attempts to reach women from beyond the Reef.

In late 1958 or early 1959, a FSAW committee member, S. Sibeko, travelled to Potchefstroom, Klerksdorp and several towns in the Western Transvaal, to advertise the forthcoming FSAW Provincial Conference (held in January 1959). She travelled by local bus - few FSAW women could drive and fewer still had access to cars². In her report the difficulties of this kind of work - slow, time-consuming, unpredictable - as well

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1. The youth section of the SAIC was called in regularly to assist with catering and transport arrangements at FSAW conferences.
 2. Helen Joseph had a car - a mark of her privileged status as a white. This one asset contributed significantly to her mobility, efficiency and usefulness for the FSAW, and indeed the Congress Alliance. It was used extensively by the FSAW. The 1956 tour of the Congress centres sponsored by the NCC was made in her car. Interview with Helen Joseph.

as the contrast that existed between the politically sophisticated townships of the Rand and the small, isolated locations of the country towns, comes through clearly.

"I had no address for Klerksdorp and was advised at Potch. not to go because I must enter there with my Pass book and to get a permit that will have the name and address of where I am going to ...

Bethal no contact the man to be seen was on the farms tried to get in touch with him but failed ...

Ermelo got there by Bus as there was no train going there ... got to his (her contact's) home after all the buses had gone ... so I put up at his home for the night ... A meeting was called 14 women and 8 men came spoke to them. It was not too free with the women because they had already taken pass books ..."¹

Despite the difficulties, the response she encountered overall was encouraging. Several delegates to the conference were recruited - this was probably one of the most representative ever staged by the FSAW - and contact made with a number of potential activists. It was this kind of demanding, time-consuming spadework that was essential if the FSAW were ever to expand into the rural areas, yet proved so difficult to arrange. Sibeko's own conclusion was pertinent - "A full-time organiser is really needed"².

Activities in the Western Cape were on a much smaller scale than in the Transvaal. The character of the FSAW too was somewhat different - the African component was proportionally smaller and links with factory women (in the food canning industry) stronger. The ANCWL in the Western Cape, though not unimportant, was not as flourishing a body as on the Rand.

1. S. Sibeko: 'Report for the Western Transvaal, pp.1,2, FSAW A 13.

2. Ibid., p.3.

Part of the reason for this, it has been suggested, lay in the smaller African population and the greater residential insecurity of African women in Cape Town, particularly once the 'Eiselen Line' had been proclaimed in 1955. While this provided a focal-point for protests, in the long-term it obstructed the emergence of a well-developed and stable organisation amongst women. This point is borne out by the conduct of the anti-pass campaign in Cape Town. Feelings against the issuing of passes and the stepped-up evictions of women deemed 'illegal' residents were high; numerous meetings, marches and deputations were organised by the ANC and the Women's League. The scale, however, was small compared to activities on the Rand. An ANCWL anti-pass conference in Cape Town in January 1955 drew only 80 delegates, one in February 1956, 81¹. Both were lively meetings - "spirited" was New Age's description for the 1956 meeting - but hardly compared to similar meetings on the Rand where hundreds of women could be relied upon to attend. A further reflection on the relative weakness of the ANCWL in the Western Cape was its failure to mount any counter-demonstrations when the Reference Book Units finally reached Cape Town in mid 1958.

Joseph has suggested that, while on the Rand the ANCWL formed the basis of the FSAW, in Cape Town it was the trade unions that were more important². Certainly the role of trade unionists was very large in the Cape Town FSAW, though the ANCWL was not by any means unimportant. The historic contribution of Alexander in building up trade union activity amongst women workers in the Western Cape has been described. The links she forged with the trade union movement proved strong. The Food and Canning Workers Union (including its African 'parallel' counterpart), which was based in the Western Cape, was the only union to affiliate to the FSAW. Its officials figured prominently among the local FSAW leadership - Liz Abrahams,

1. New Age, 13/1/55 and 1/3/56.

2. Personal communication.

Elizabeth Mafeking, Ruth Gottschalk. Through its branches the FSAW reached out into the small agricultural towns lying beyond Cape Town: Paarl, Wellington, Worcester, Stellenbosch. The Paarl and Worcester branches of the union, in particular, were in close contact with the regional committee of the FSAW.

Yet, outside of the union leadership, it seems doubtful that many of the women working in the food processing factories were well-informed about the FSAW. As in the ANCWL, the affiliation of union members to the FSAW was automatic. There were no local FSAW committees in the Western Cape except in Cape Town. In Paarl, the area where the FSAW was probably best known, FSAW meetings were not separate from union ones. Any business of the Federation that needed to be discussed would simply be raised at the end of a union meeting¹. Contact between the FSAW regional committee in Cape Town and union branches in the Boland towns was extremely informal, depending largely on the overlap of committee members in the FSAW and the union. All regional functions of the FSAW appear to have taken place in Cape Town only. According to Abrahams, who lived in Paarl, whenever there was an important FSAW meeting or demonstration, delegates from Paarl, Stellenbosch and Worcester would travel to the city by bus to participate.

Outside the Food and Canning Workers Union, the following the FSAW had amongst 'Coloured' women was remarkably slight for a city where the bulk of the black population was fitted into this category². SACPO was not strong. It was rivalled by the

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1. Personal communication from Liz Abrahams. The following account is based on her description of the links between the FSAW and Food Canning Workers Union (of which she was General Secretary after 1956).
 2. The breakdown of the population of the metropolitan area of Cape Town in 1957 was as follows:

'Coloured	272 314
White	247 442
African	49 793
Asian	8 099

From Population Census, 1951, Vol. 1, pp.46,47, UG 42-1955.

strongly entrenched Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) which stood apart from the Congress Alliance, adopting a critical, at times openly hostile, attitude towards it. For the local FSAW this meant that access to a large and potentially important group of women was made extremely difficult.

The strength of the NEUM in Cape Town undoubtedly attributed to the commitment the regional FSAW committee had shown for the principle of individual rather than affiliated membership in 1954/55. Alexander did not mention the NEUM directly, but in citing the reasons why she favoured an individual membership, she referred to the "Cape Coloured Women" who would otherwise be excluded from participation¹. Once the individual membership issue had been dropped, attempts were made to establish a 'League of Non-European Women' in 1956. An inaugural meeting was held, at the City Hall in June, but nothing enduring materialised from it².

In making contact with white liberal women's organisations - the Black Sash, NCW, some church groups - the FSAW had its greatest success in Cape Town. This was the only region to sustain its links with these organisations, though this contact never amounted to affiliation on the part of any of them. By 1957 the FSAW, along with the ANCWL, the Black Sash, NCW and the Anglican Mothers' Union, had established a broad anti-pass committee, the Cape Association to Abolish Passes for African Women. How active this Association was and how close the co-operation between its members might have been, is not documented. These links did prove enduring and probably gained in significance after 1960, once the ANCWL had been

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1. FSAW correspondence, 2/9/54, FSAW B II.
 2. FSAW circular, 24/5/56, FSAW B II. This was the third 'League' to have been initiated amongst this section of women in Cape Town, following the two Non-European Women's Suffrage Leagues of 1938 and 1948 described earlier. All three failed. It would be a useful piece of work to study the political consciousness amongst this group of women, economically more integrated into the labour force yet politically more marginal than either white or African women.

banned and the FSAW was struggling to reconstruct itself. In mid 1962 the FSAW in Cape Town was described as working on "a very broad front"¹. It ran a Bail Office with the Black Sash and was in touch with the NCW and an unidentified group of Quakers². In that year, Helen Joseph visited Cape Town and was invited to address a meeting organised jointly by the FSAW, NCW and this group of Quakers. In the FSAW this was regarded as something of a "triumph"³.

Since the FSAW in Cape Town is so poorly documented, it is difficult to explain why contact with these white groups should have been easier in that city than elsewhere⁴. The role of individuals does seem to have been important. In this regard, the contacts Alexander had built up over many years with an extremely wide range of women's organisation in Cape Town, from the Union of Jewish Women to the Food and Canning Workers Union, must have proved useful. She herself had kept in touch with the NCW from the 1930's⁵. It is perhaps tempting for those who subscribe to the view that the Cape 'Liberal Tradition' has continued to infuse the

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa, op.cit., p.25.
 2. Ibid., p.25.
 3. Ibid., p.26.
 4. In Johannesburg relations between the FSAW and Black Sash did improve as the Black Sash radicalised after 1956. (See C. Michelman: The Black Sash of South Africa for a history of the Black Sash.) In late 1958 the Black Sash applied for permission to hold a public protest meeting in support of the women's anti-pass demonstrations. In 1962 some FSAW women participated in a vigil it organised in protest against the so-called Sabotage Bill. These women joined in their private capacities, however, not as representatives of the FSAW and there were never any formal or sustained links between the two organisations on the Reef.
 5. Personal Communication.

social, if not the political, life in Cape Town, to take this as a further manifestation of that tradition. But the contact was too limited and the number of women it involved too small to amount to a significant interaction between women across colour lines. If it was a manifestation of the 'Liberal Tradition', it was equally a manifestation of the extent to which that had atrophied by the mid twentieth century.

The third region to be considered, that of the Eastern Cape, centred on Port Elizabeth, was far closer to Johannesburg in character than to Cape Town. Here, too, the ANCWL was predominant within the FSAW, although the Food and Canning Workers Union was not unimportant. Port Elizabeth was an extremely strong ANC centre - in 1956 a NCC report described "the high standard of ANC organisation" there as "deeply impressive and unequalled in any other area"¹. The ANCWL contributed to this vitality. Helen Joseph who visited Port Elizabeth in 1956, was particularly struck by the militancy and commitment of the women she met. In her estimate, Port Elizabeth ranked second to Johannesburg as a centre for political activism amongst black women². A later visitor in 1962 echoed her views - "The women of Port Elizabeth are great fighters"³.

The level of political activity amongst women in the other Congresses was low, however, affecting the status of the FSAW regional committee. According to a report submitted to the NCC in 1956, COD in Port Elizabeth was "weaker than any other area" while SACPO suffered from a "generally inactive" membership⁴. Thus, although it was from Port Elizabeth that the original idea to launch the FSAW had come, a separate

1. 'Report on a tour of the Major Centres of the Union submitted to the NCC, for discussion', p.3, FSAW II B.

2. Personal communication.

3. WIDEF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa', op.cit., p.34.

4. 'Report on a tour of the major centres of the Union, op.cit., p.3.

FSAW committee was not established there immediately after the inaugural conference. The first signs of a FSAW committee, acting under the name of the 'Congress of Mothers' Committee', came only in September 1955, at a public meeting¹. The following month, in October, this sought formal affiliation with the FSAW². Most of its support came from ANCWL members, with SACPO and the Food and Canning Workers Union providing a sprinkling of additional members.

Despite the reported high level of organisation within the ANC in the Eastern Cape, communications between the local FSAW committee and the Head Office in Johannesburg were poor. Just how poor was revealed in 1959, when Joseph reported to the NEC that for her information on developments in Port Elizabeth, she had relied largely on newspaper reports³. Nevertheless, although the lack of material on the FSAW in Port Elizabeth blurs one's picture, the impression gained from interviews and scattered references is that Port Elizabeth was a strong centre of activity. The school boycott launched in 1955 against Bantu Education schools was particularly well supported - in 1956 it was reported that over 4 000 children were still boycotting government schools there⁴. The anti-pass campaign was vigorously pursued. In January 1956 a huge outdoor meeting was arranged by the 'Congress of Mothers'. Lilian Ngoyi was guest speaker, addressing the enormous gathering - 6 000 people was New Age's estimate - from the back of a parked lorry⁵. In 1959 Joseph's report to the NEC on the Port Elizabeth FSAW concluded

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1. New Age, 22/9/55.
 2. Letter from Secretary, Congress of Mothers' Committee, to FSAW, 22/10/55, FSAW C I 2.
 3. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.3, FSAW B I.
 4. 'Report on a tour of the Major Centres of the Union', op. cit., p.3.
 5. New Age, 19/1/56.

"Militant anti-pass campaigns are undertaken in the name of the Federation, mobilising both African and Coloured women in intense activity and solidarity."¹

The importance of Port Elizabeth to the FSAW was shown by the decision to stage the third National Conference there, in 1961. This too, as already described, drew a very large crowd of guests and supporters in addition to the several hundred delegates.

The fourth FSAW region, Durban, was by contrast, very weak and also very unstable. On several occasions over the years it ceased to operate altogether, but always flickered back into life again. During 1954 and 1955 there was little, if any, FSAW activity. By March 1956, a group consisting of the ANCWL and "loose groups" of Indian and 'Coloured' women had come together and were requesting affiliation to the NEC². In June of that year, the report of the NCC sponsored tour indicated that a FSAW committee was functioning by that stage. Unfortunately the report did not elaborate on the extent of this committee's activities, but its general comments on the strength of the Congress Alliance in the Durban area sketched out the limits in which the FSAW would have been operating: co-operation between the ANC and NIC was "excellent", COD was extremely weak and amounted to little more than a handful of active individuals, SACPO was non-existent³. The basis of the FSAW in Durban was thus clearly the ANC and the Indian Congress.

Both organisations were weak during most of this period. The

1. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 23/1/59, p.3, FSAW B I.

2. FSAW correspondence, undated letter from 'M' with note "replied 20/3/56", FSAW B II.

3. 'Report of a tour on this Major Centres', op.cit., p.4.

decline in the NIC has already been mentioned¹. In the ANC in Natal, different factions had long divided the organisation. The ANCWL involved itself in some fierce and well-supported demonstrations against passes in 1955 and early 1956 but, by 1956, tensions within the organisation were already visible². In late 1956 these erupted into a disruptive power struggle amongst its leaders which led to the expulsion of two senior executive members, the veteran Bertha Mkize and G. Kuzwayo³.

By 1959 the FSAW committee in Natal had foundered. "No Federation Committee has yet been established but contact is maintained with the ANCWL, the Natal Indian Women's Congress and the COD", was how Helen Joseph reported on the Natal region to the NEC in March of that year⁴. Three months later the Beerhall Riots in Cato Manor exploded onto the scene. One effect of these riots and the subsequent disturbances in the countryside was to stimulate political organisation within Natal greatly. The ANC experienced a resurgence in its membership and the FSAW, too, appears to have enjoyed a boost.

Thus, in the early 1960's, when elsewhere the organisation was struggling to find its feet again, the FSAW in Natal experienced something of a revival - an indication of the degree to which women had been politicised by the events of 1959. By July 1962 it had established 18 'Save our family'

1. See p. 274.
2. This is made apparent in an article in Drum, Jan. 1956: 'Will our Women Carry Passes', describing the organisation of a Durban anti-pass protest.
3. 'Report of Natal Provincial Annual Conference of the ANC, 28-29 July 1956', Treason Trial exhibit No. 795, p.12.
4. FSAW: 'Minutes of the Meeting of the NEC, Mar 21st 1959', p.3, FSAW B I. It is not clear what could have been meant by the 'Natal Indian Women's Congress', other than the women members of the Congress proper - as far as can be ascertained there was no separate women's auxiliary of the NIC.

Clubs, six more than either the Eastern or the Western Cape regions had achieved¹. It also managed to stage a Provincial Conference at this time. This was attended by Helen Joseph, enjoying a brief respite between the expiry of one banning order and the imposition of a further and more severe order in October. Her own impression of the Conference was that it was not well organised and did not compare with meetings arranged on the Rand². Nevertheless, in view of the dismal record of the FSAW in Natal in the 1950's, the fact that the conference was held at all, and at that time in the FSAW's history, was remarkable. The Natal disturbances of 1959 had undoubtedly injected a new enthusiasm and energy into the regional organisation and this allowed it to delay for several years its final collapse.

Decision-Making Within the FSAW

In its day-to-day affairs the FSAW relied heavily on a small group of extremely hard-working individuals to keep it functioning as an organisation. A very large part of the workload rested upon the Secretaries, both national and regional. In the early years Alexander complained of a lack of initiative on the part of members of the NEC, then based in Cape Town, which meant that she needed to spend more time with them than she would have liked³. This heavy reliance on the contribution of a single individual continued even once the FSAW had weathered its initial difficulties, and Helen Joseph assumed a very large responsibility for the ongoing administration of the FSAW as well, as National Secretary after 1956 and, for much of the time, Secretary of the Transvaal Region too. In 1959, when asking for a six-month leave of absence from her position as secretary in

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1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.35.
 2. Personal communication.
 3. See, for instance, FSAW correspondence, 12/5/55, FSAW B II.

the Transvaal, she was critical of the degree to which the organisation had come to depend upon her.

"This state of affairs cannot go on and the Federation come to a standstill just because I am unable to cope with the work of Regional Secretary."¹

Clearly, this over-dependence on a few key individuals was a source of weakness to the FSAW, as well as an indication of the difficulties it encountered in recruiting sufficient women who could sustain an active and regular involvement in its administration. One example of how this detracted from the efficiency of the organisation is provided by an incident that took place in the Transvaal region in early 1955. A FSAW delegation failed to keep an appointment which the Johannesburg City Council had requested with it. Several days later, on the 15th February, a Council official wrote to the FSAW to enquire why the appointment had not been kept - but not till the 18th April, over two months later, did the FSAW post off its reply, making apologies and requesting a further appointment. Its excuse for its failure to communicate with the Council promptly was that their secretary (Helen Joseph) had been overseas and postal arrangements in her absence had been "unsatisfactory"².

Part of the problem lay in a lack of bureaucratic skills and experience on the part of many FSAW committee members. This increased the demands made on those women who did possess such skills. This in turn, as well as placing exceptionally heavy demands on a few people³, tended to perpetuate the

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1. FSAW correspondence, 30/10/59, Helen Joseph to Marcelle Goldberg, FSAW D I.
 2. FSAW correspondence with Johannesburg City Council, 5/2/55, 15/2/55, 18/4/55, FSAW A 2.
 3. Joseph, for instance, served on the executive committees of the FSAW (both National and Provincial, in the Transvaal) and COD, as well as holding a full-time job. From December 1956 till March 1961 she was one of the accused in the Treason Trial, which siphoned off enormous amounts of her time.

problem by inhibiting the development of organisational and administrative expertise amongst a wider circle of women.

Given a situation where class was demarcated largely (though not exclusively) on colour lines, proportionate to their numbers white women did play a large part in running the FSAW. The small number of white women within the FSAW had generally had far greater opportunities to develop administrative capabilities than their black colleagues. It was not mere coincidence that in the NEC elections of 1954 and 1956, the key administrative position of National Secretary went on both occasions to white women (Ray Alexander and Helen Joseph). As members of the privileged white community, they enjoyed advantages denied most black women - education, mobility (Joseph's car, for instance), far greater financial security, comfortable and private working conditions - all of which made it easier for them to assume executive responsibility.

In contrast, most black women had had scant opportunity for developing organisational skills; on the level of physical surroundings alone they were enormously disadvantaged. The average township house consisted of two or three rooms; families were large and the pressure on accommodation such that, frequently, children were obliged to continue staying with their parents even after they were married and had children of their own. However, this polarity on colour lines should not be exaggerated. The trade unions, in particular, provided black women with a valuable training-ground for learning administrative skills and, as already mentioned, supplied the FSAW with some energetic and capable leaders. Bertha Mashaba, in particular, one of two joint-secretaries in the Transvaal region, was a particularly competent and hardworking organiser¹.

1. A Joint-Secretaryship was set up in the Transvaal region in late 1956, mainly, it would seem, to try and relieve Helen Joseph of some of her work as both National and Provincial Secretary. See FSAW correspondence, 4/9/56 and 8/10/56, FSAW B II.

Not only administrative matters but general policy-making too was in the hands of a relatively small number of women (though, as the next chapter will show, they were not independent of control coming from the ANC and the Congress Alliance's Consultative Committees). The part played by Alexander and Watts and a small planning group at the inaugural conference has been described. This type of centralised control continued to operate throughout the FSAW's history.

At times the degree to which decision-making was centralised was overt. In 1955 an unsigned letter from Cape Town to an unidentified NEC member in the Transvaal, was urging the importance of holding a conference, "not on the scale of last year, but a conference of selected women" to iron out the difficulties facing the FSAW¹. That same letter also expressed the dominance of the FSAW leadership in the shaping of policy more subtly. Talking about politicising new recruits, it stated that "we must give them material to enable them to put forward things in the correct way although in their way".

Although the executive committees were ultimately responsible to the National Conference, that body met too infrequently to carry much weight. In the absence of regular annual or even bi-annual elections, the executive committees were very powerful and relatively independent bodies. (That the National Conference was not dissatisfied with the manner in which its national executive operated, was shown when both Ngoyi and Joseph were re-elected to their executive posts in 1961, after a five year period in office.) Yet while decision-making was concentrated in the FSAW committees, this should not be taken to mean that the general membership of the FSAW were not able to take the initiative at times. One very clear instance of the FSAW executive following rank-and-file example came in October 1958 in the anti-pass campaign in Johannesburg. There the decision to embark on a programme of Civil Disobedience came not from the top, but

1. FSAW correspondence, 24/3/55, FSAW B II.

from what Drum called a "ghost organisation" working amongst women in the different branches of the ANCWL.

The central role played by a few key women within the FSAW did not pass without criticism, coming, it would seem, mainly from outside the FSAW rather than from within. Accusations were levelled against it of highhandedness. At the time of the Congress of the People, one correspondent in New Age criticised the FSAW's meeting to discuss 'What Women Demand' for its lack of free discussion and debate from the floor. This had remained obedient to the leaders¹. The following year, during the wrangle about the ratification of the FSAW's constitution, the COD executive made some veiled comments about "the cult of the individual", though later these remarks were retracted².

Committee members were not unaware of the importance of training new recruits to assume a more active and assertive role within the FSAW. This was a point that Alexander, in particular, stressed in the early years. On one occasion she wrote to Joseph, not without a trace of paternalism:

"... in our country we have to strain every nerve of ours to train Non-European leaders, rather slow and painstaking at first but in the long term policy will yield better results"³.

It was for this reason that a joint-secretaryship was instituted in the Transvaal in 1956.

1. This criticism is spelled out and replied to in a letter from the Transvaal Regional Committee to New Age, 9/7/55, FSAW II A.

2. See 'Extract from first letter from Cape Town read at meeting of NEC 20/8/56', FSAW A 7. The NEC referred to here is that of COD, not the FSAW. On this dispute see above, p.209 and below, p.321.

3. FSAW correspondence, 4/9/56, FSAW B II.

Finances

In the FSAW, money was always a problem. Its inadequate financial resources were both an index of its weaknesses as an organisation and an inhibitory factor in its further development. Throughout it operated on a shoestring budget, collecting money for its various campaigns largely on an ad hoc basis. The 1957 Anti-Pass Pledge campaign, for instance, was meant to be financed entirely from money collected from the women who signed the Pledges - "pennies for pledges" was the FSAW slogan.

The FSAW had almost no financial resources of its own on which to operate. Probably at no stage did it ever have more than £15 or £20 in the bank. In the Transvaal, the highest balance carried over from one year to the next between 1956 and 1961, was a mere £13.18.10¹. That was in 1957/58. The smallest was 2/9 (between 1958/59). The only available reference to the NEC's funds, in the minutes of its 1959 meeting, reported that its account at that time stood at £7.5.1². The total annual budget for the Transvaal during these years was always very small. Only once did it exceed £200. That was in 1958 and almost half of this sum was raised after the middle of October, when the FSAW was engaged in its fiercest anti-pass struggle in Johannesburg³.

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1. FSAW (Tvl): 'Financial Statements, 1956-59: FSAW D I 4, and 'Finances to 22/7/61', FSAW D I (1).
 2. 'Minutes of the Meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.2, FSAW B I.
 3. Unfortunately budgets exist for the Transvaal region only - but this was the strongest and most active FSAW centre. In this connection, a startling example of the FSAW's inefficiency and financial carelessness came at the end of 1958, when the Transvaal regional funds - admittedly unlikely to be more than a few pounds by that stage - disappeared without trace. They "went to one or two different people and got lost in transit and we never knew at which stage". FSAW correspondence, 1/12/59, FSAW D I 4b.

Raising money was a continual battle. The FSAW lacked a regular source of income. Affiliation fees from its member organisations were only £1.1s per branch per year and even then frequently not forthcoming. Several times the FSAW was obliged to send out circulars reminding member groups about paying their fees. In 1959 the NEC reported that

"... funds could not increase unless the promised branch donations of one guinea a year from the ANCWL were received regularly, for 1957 6 branches from the Eastern Cape, two branches from the Kimberley area and one donation from Durban had been received. Nothing had been received in respect of 1958."¹

This depressing situation vindicated one of the arguments that had been put forward in their favour by the supporters of the individual membership camp. In April 1956, in raising the membership issue once again, the Cape Town based NEC pointed out that an individual membership would bring in much more money for the FSAW, through members' subscriptions². Political priorities (in this case relations with the ANC) took precedence over financial ones, however, and thereafter the matter was not pursued further.

Apart from affiliation fees, the FSAW was entirely dependent on donations and money it could raise by various fund-raising devices - cake sales, rummage sales, raffles, the sale of commemorative badges and pamphlets. Here too, the FSAW experienced difficulty in collecting money from branches for items issued to them to sell locally. At the NEC meeting in 1958 it was reported that "large sums of money" were still outstanding from branches for sales of the booklet 'Strijdom you have struck a rock', a booklet printed in early 1957 to commemorate the demonstration in Pretoria in August 1956³.

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1. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.2, FSAW B I.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 20/4/56, FSAW B II.
 3. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC, 18/1/59', p.2, FSAW B I.

Fourteen months later, by the time of the next NEC meeting, some of this money was still outstanding and the committee agreed that these amounts be "written off"¹.

No general meeting went by without a collection being made amongst the audience.

"... it does not help us to say quite a lot of things and yet we don't do it, it does not help us to say we are going to do this and we don't do it. It does not help us to do this work and yet we have not got any money."²

This was how one speaker urged women to donate money generously, at a FSAW meeting in Johannesburg in May 1955. The sums realised were small. A successful meeting in the Transvaal would bring in £5 or £6. The Provincial Conference in January 1959, which was extremely well attended - by as many as 1 000 delegates, according to some reports - produced £10.13.10³.

Donations, an extremely irregular and unreliable form of support, were the largest single source of income for the Transvaal region in the period from August 1956 till December 1961 - £98.12.6 out of a total of £703.3.11 raised in that time⁴. Most of this appears to have come from the wealthier members of the FSAW in COD, but women from the other Congresses did, on occasion, make contributions too. At no stage did the FSAW receive funds from abroad. In this regard, the only

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1. 'Minutes of the meeting of the NEC', 21/3/59, p.1, FSAW B I.
 2. 'Women's Meeting held in the Trades Hall, 30 Kerk Street, Johannesburg on the 29th May, 1955', p.17, Treason Trial exhibit G 777.
 3. FSAW (Tvl): 'Financial Statement for 1959', FSAW D I 4b.
 4. Calculated from FSAW Financial Statements, FSAW C I 6, D I. This figure excludes any income derived in 1960, for which no statement is available. It is unlikely that any money raised in that crisis year would have amounted to much. Probably the absence of a financial statement means that no records were kept that year.

financial assistance the WIDF ever contributed to the FSAW was for the air fares of Ngoyi and Tamana for their overseas tour in 1955¹.

The major reason advanced by the FSAW for its financial difficulties was the general poverty of its members - that its support came from "the lowest income group" in the country². Undoubtedly this was an important factor. Black women, who formed the bulk of the FSAW's membership, were, as the first chapter has shown, economically on the very bottom rung in society. Money was extremely tight; for most women it was a constant struggle to make ends meet. Nevertheless, this alone is not a sufficient explanation of why the FSAW should have struggled so, financially.

In 1955 Alexander pointed out perceptively that if African women could raise as much money as they did for the various churches to which they belonged, there was no reason why they could not raise enough to support one full-time worker for the FSAW³. Her comments raise some interesting questions. A glance at some of the amounts of money raised at that time by African women's 'manyanos' (women's church societies) confirms that substantial sums of money could be raised by women in the townships if they set their minds to it. £3101 raised in 1953 by the South Eastern Transvaal section of the Women's Missionary Society in the African Methodist Episcopal Church; £2074 raised in 1954 at the same group's national conference alone; £1000 raised by the women's fund-raising committee of the Methodist church in Evaton towards a new church building - these figures are by no means exceptional as a study on these societies has pointed out⁴.

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1. Personal communication from Helen Joseph.
 2. 'Report to the WIDF', op.cit., FSAW E.
 3. FSAW correspondence, 3/9/55, FSAW B II.
 4. M. Brandel-Syrier: Black Women in Search of God, p.70.

Fund-raising formed a very large and successful part of the manyano women's business.

"For most churches they are the fund-raising institutions and the churches could not exist without the women's financial help. This goes a long way to explain the power and status of the manyanos."¹

Clearly, then, an enormous fund-raising potential did exist amongst women in the African townships, the general poverty notwithstanding. But while the manyanos were able to tap this, the FSAW did not. This raises some interesting questions about the differences between the two organisations, which relate to their quite different standings in the community and highlight some of the difficulties the FSAW faced.

As a political organisation within an undemocratic society, the FSAW was a much riskier organisation for women to work for and support financially, than any church group. (It was also not a respectable organisation for benefactors in the business world to assist.) Furthermore, the FSAW was battling against the full weight of ideological pressures which frowned upon women, and black women in particular, involving themselves in political activity. The church, by contrast, was a legitimate area for women (and blacks) to work in, as well as offering an emotional and psychological release from the pressures of life under the apartheid system². These factors combined to make it much more difficult for the FSAW to root itself as firmly amongst its members, as an integral part of their lives, as the manyanos proved capable of achieving. Religion offered a more attractive and less

1. Ibid.

2. B. Sundkler's study, Bantu Prophets in South Africa, has shown how for many blacks, male and female, the Church operates as one of the few areas where they can give expression to leadership aspirations and capabilities, without exposing themselves to the risks involved in political work. The manyanos are an important area of women's organisation in South Africa which deserve further study.

threatening path to salvation than politics-and it showed, in hard cash terms.

There were, however, other more material factors involved in the FSAW's poor financial standing as well. Its ambiguous position within the Congress Alliance was a definite obstacle to fund-raising. It seems, from a few scattered references, that the FSAW suffered financially because many women did not see it as a body separate from the ANCWL and, therefore, deserving of separate support. At the same time, within the Alliance itself, the financial commitment the ANCWL owed the FSAW was not always clear and some resentment was felt about the FSAW encroaching on ANC territory in this regard. In 1959 Transvaal President Marcelle Goldberg, felt obliged to clarify the position:

"Our policy has not been to accumulate funds but to see that money is raised for each campaign as it is undertaken for we do not compete with the affiliated organisations for financial support".¹

This would seem to have been a case of turning necessity into a virtue - on other occasions the appeal for money was far more insistent.

The FSAW's chronic money shortage undoubtedly handicapped it. At no stage could the FSAW afford to employ a full-time or even a part-time organiser. Instead it had to rely entirely on voluntary work by women, many of whom had full-time jobs of their own, apart from family and other commitments. A letter from the ANCWL in Bloemfontein in 1957 highlighted the need for an organiser who could maintain regular contact with local branches and help consolidate and expand the FSAW's support:

1. 'President's Report to the Provincial Conference', 27/1/59, p.5, FSAW A 13.

"... progress is very slow here, many women slackened in their activities and mostly lack of money as the other branches are not co-operating in our Region. The reason is that they do not understand as yet and would like to be visited now and then if it was possible, we asked them to call on us if they can afford transport but they have not done so ..."¹

The importance of having at least one full-time member of staff if the FSAW were to expand, was recognised and plans for employing somebody frequently discussed. In 1955 it was hoped that Ngoyi herself would be able to take on such a job². Without the necessary money, however, nothing ever came of these plans.

The FSAW did not collapse because of lack of money. Invariably funds were found to finance its various campaigns, albeit sparingly, and volunteer work kept running costs to a minimum. Nevertheless, financial difficulties acted as a serious brake to its effectiveness as a political organisation. In November 1961 Helen Joseph described the FSAW's weak financial position and its effects thus:

"The Federation is in serious financial difficulties and if we are to maintain our existence and develop as we should, and indeed as we know that we can, the finances have to be found to keep our activities going and to pay the expenses of having an organiser, which we know to be essential for our progress."³

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1. FSAW correspondence, Jane Motshabi to FSAW secretary, und, C 1957, FSAW C I 6.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 18/4/55, FSAW B II.
 3. FSAW correspondence yo Jabavu 'Save our Families Association', 22/11/61, FSAW D I 3.

From the above survey it is clear that, organisationally, the FSAW was weak. It depended entirely on part-time, volunteer work; communications between branches and regions were poor; finances extremely limited. Its methods of conducting its affairs were informal, loose and not always that efficient. The Transvaal region was probably the best organised of the four regions, but there, too, administration could be extremely lax at times. Administrative inefficiency and inexperience were, in fact, major shortcomings of the entire Congress Alliance - the FSAW was probably one of the more, if not the most, efficiently run of all its member organisations¹.

Not all the FSAW's difficulties were ones over which it had a great deal of control. Many of the problems that hindered its development as an organisation stemmed from the restrictions placed on women by their position within the family. A very large proportion of the women on its committees were married, with children to look after. For them it was often difficult to attend meetings. Frequently, their only free time was late at night, when travel in the townships was particularly unsafe for women.

The demands of childcare often forced women to cancel or cut short their meetings. In April 1955, for instance, Josie Palmer missed two Transvaal committee meetings, the first because her daughter was ill, the second because her babysitter arrived too late for her to catch the train². (In this connection, the fact that Helen Joseph had no children of her own, made her that much more independent an agent within the FSAW compared to women who did have children.)

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1. One informant recalls that there was a marked distinction between FSAW conferences which were generally well run and a pleasure to attend, and ANCWL conferences which were often poorly organised.
 2. FSAW correspondence, 4/55, FSAW B II.

In organising conferences, women's family commitments had constantly to be borne in mind. In early 1954, when discussions on when to hold the inaugural conference were still proceeding, Alexander suggested the Easter long weekend as being most suitable for the East London and Durban women. That was the easiest time for them to "get away and leave the children at home".¹

Apart from their responsibilities as mothers, many women had unco-operative husbands who disapproved of or resented signs of too great an independence on the part of their wives. This "backward attitude" of the men, as the FSAW termed it, was a real deterrent on women's political involvement and one the FSAW had constantly to fight against. In 1954 at the inaugural conference, Ngoyi's comments that had it not been for "the husbands", many more women would have been present, drew cheers from the audience². The extent to which male attitudes that women's place was in the home could disrupt women's political effectiveness, was manifested during the anti-pass demonstrations in Johannesburg in October 1958. There it was the husbands of many of the women who had been arrested, who undermined their strategy of civil disobedience by bailing them out, before either the FSAW or ANC had even come to a decision on what the best course of action would be. When women did have sympathetic and co-operative husbands, they generally had still to attend to domestic matters before they felt free to spend time on political work. Thus Virginia Mngomo's husband allowed her her freedom - but first she had to ensure that he had enough food and clean shirts and socks etc., laid on for the week³.

1. FSAW correspondence, 8/2/54, FSAW B II.

2. See above, p. 196.

3. Interview.

Clearly, given the existing division of labour between the sexes, political involvement by women would disrupt the family, at times even tragically so. In its report on the October 1958 mass arrests of women in Johannesburg, Drum included the following story:

"But at home life is bleak. Mrs. Elmah Mtshazo of 29 Gibson Street, Sophiatown, went to jail with her 18-year-old daughter. She returned to find that her 9-year-old daughter was critically ill. The little girl died next day."¹

The FSAW's own attitudes towards women's priorities in this regard were ambivalent. It was extremely critical of the "customs and conventions" that relegated women to the exclusive confines of the family and was committed to drawing more women into the national liberation movement. Yet at the same time, much of its appeal to women was based on a call to defend their homes, their children, their families from the onslaught of destructive laws. There was a bitter irony in the fact that the situation described by Drum above, that of a child dying because its mother was in jail, formed one of the strongest arguments used by the FSAW and ANCWL in opposing the pass laws for women: what would happen to their children if women were subjected to arbitrary arrest for infringing or being suspected of infringing the pass laws?

Of a different order, but also very damaging to the FSAW as an organisation, were the difficulties it experienced in operating in the context of the apartheid state of the 1950's. Ultimately, the restrictions this placed on it proved crippling. As a multiracial organisation, it struggled to convene meetings to suit all its members. Non-African women could not enter the African townships without permits; black women in the white suburbs in any capacity other than that of domestic worker or nanny were conspicuous and subject to official harassment. One single example of how the laws

1. Drum, Dec. 1958: 'The Battle of the Women', p.22.

of the land could upset the smooth functioning of the FSAW, which could be multiplied many times over - in August 1957 Mary Moodley, chairwoman of the East Rand Working Committee, reported that she had been unable to attend an important branch meeting of the ANCWL in Benoni because of the problem of getting a permit to enter an African area. Her failure to attend the meeting exacerbated existing tensions between ANCWL and SACPO women in Benoni about the allocation of funds between the two groups¹.

In convening national conferences there was the additional problem that in terms of the Urban Areas Act, no unqualified African could remain in a "prescribed" (urban) area for longer than 72 hours without official permission. In organising the inaugural conference, its convenors decided to "take a chance" and not apply for permits for the non-Johannesburg African delegates for "if permits were applied for, Saturday would be spent at the Pass Office and not at the Conference"². This decision involved taking extra precautions, for instance, ensuring transport for these women "so there is as little chance as possible of their being picked up"³.

As an opposition movement in an increasingly totalitarian state, the FSAW was subject to enormous pressure from the government in the form of police surveillance, harrassment of its leaders, bannings and intimidation. Successive bannings of its leaders obstructed the development of a stable and experienced core of committee members. Over the years it was obliged to become increasingly security-conscious; the inhibitory effect of this on inter-regional communications has been described already. By 1962, executive committee meetings were conducted in an atmosphere of siege, with great stress

1. See M. Moodley: 'East Rand Working Committee Report', FSAW D I, 2b.

2. FSAW correspondence, 3/4/54, FSAW B II.

3. Ibid.

being laid on secrecy and confidentiality¹.

Yet for all its organisational shortcomings and difficulties, the FSAW still managed to stage some impressive demonstrations and conferences. The monster gathering of women in Pretoria in 1956 was a remarkable achievement, and one realised in the face of innumerable obstacles. The real strength of the FSAW lay not so much in its day-to-day organisational work, as in the enormous response it could generate amongst sections of women, urban African women in particular, and their disciplined and militant contribution to its programme of action. In order to complete the discussion on the FSAW as an organisation, a look is now needed at how it directed this response - its tactics and long-term strategy for bringing about its aims.

Tactics and Strategy

From the beginning, the FSAW saw itself as a fighting organisation - its report on the inaugural conference in 1954 opened with the statement that the women had come together "to fight for women's rights and for full and equal citizenship for all"². Its purpose was avowedly political, its commitment to the national liberation movement unequivocal.

As an opposition movement, the FSAW fitted squarely into the general pattern of black resistance movements in the 1950's. Its tactics were those of a legal, democratic body with mass aspirations, relying on public pressure and negotiation, rather than confrontation with the authorities, to achieve its aims. When women did turn to confrontation - the Winburg pass-burnings, the Johannesburg anti-pass protests in 1958,

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1. The 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.2, describes security precautions taken at a meeting of the FSAW Transvaal Executive Committee.
 2. FSAW: 'Report of the first National Conference', p.1.

the Beerhall riots in Natal in 1959 - the move came spontaneously from below, rather than from the leadership of either the FSAW or the ANCWL.

Throughout its career, the FSAW stressed that non-violence was a key aspect of its methods of protest and resistance. During the course of being cross-examined by the Public Prosecutor in the Treason Trial, Helen Joseph was emphatic on this point. "We would never laud any acts of violence whatsoever".¹ She elaborated upon this in a description of the FSAW that reflected conventional views on women's inherently peace-loving nature:

"We are an organisation of women. As women we want to create life, want to preserve it, not destroy it."²

Such a response would not be unexpected in a political trial where the charge was one of High Treason against the state. Nevertheless, the FSAW's entire history was a testament to Joseph's remark. Even after 1960, when the political climate had radically altered with the banning of the ANC and its subsequent - reluctant and initially clumsy - adoption of a programme of violent struggle, the FSAW remained committed to its non-violent principles.

Linked to its stress on peaceful methods of change, the FSAW adopted a law-abiding approach to its various demonstrations and protests. At times it was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that it stayed within the bounds of the law. In 1957, for instance, legal advice was sought on the wording of the 'Anti-Pass Pledge' - on the off-chance that in the event of passes becoming compulsory for women, an injudiciously

1. Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, p.13951.

2. Ibid.

worded 'Pledge' could be misconstrued as an incitement to disobey the law¹. Again, in 1958, great care was taken in planning for the Women's Day commemorations to see that African women would not attend the scheduled rally and thus infringe a prohibition on meetings amongst Africans then in force. Later that year, a similar legalistic concern was shown in planning the demonstration to the Johannesburg City Hall steps².

The FSAW's major concern was to prevent unnecessary recriminations against it and participants in its campaigns. In the case of the City Hall demonstration, it referred to "the tremendous responsibility for the safety of the women"³, that rested upon it. (Along with this, it was also concerned to uphold "the very right to peaceful legal protest" which it saw to be at stake⁴.) It was not opposed to methods of civil disobedience, long a tactic of black resistance movements in South Africa, provided that these were peaceful. Thus, in 1958 it wholeheartedly supported the strategy of mass arrests and no bail in the anti-pass demonstrations in Johannesburg. It was disappointed when the ANC decided to call of that "phase" of the campaign.

The methods of political struggle the FSAW adopted in pursuit of its aims showed a remarkable consistency throughout its history. It relied most heavily on public demonstrations of disapproval of particular institutions or pieces of legislation; education, of both the general public and members, as to the implications of these; negotiation with the authorities to achieve reforms. The methods most commonly used included mass demonstrations and deputations to the

1. This is described in the 'Minutes of Special Meeting of NEC of Federation, 7/12/56', quoted in the Treason Trial Record, Vol. 67, p.14241.

2. See above, p.255.

3. 'Report by the FSAW on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.5, FSAW C I 6.

4. Ibid.

authorities, conferences and public meetings, letters and statements to the press, pamphleteering. These methods were not abandoned after 1960 although the tolerated limits in which they could be used had shrunk ominously by comparison with the pre-Sharpeville period. The Transvaal region's proposals for the celebration of Women's Day in 1961 did not differ markedly from similar celebrations in the 1950's - badge sales, a poster demonstration on the City Hall steps, a memorandum to the Major on rents, arrests and housing¹. Only the absence of a mass meeting of some description hinted at the increased restrictions on political expression that were then in operation.

Throughout, the FSAW also relied heavily on publicity as an integral part of its protests, to draw attention to the issues involved and advertise itself and its campaigns to as wide an audience as possible. In 1958 Helen Hoseph wrote a letter to The Star, criticising it for failing to print a news report, which the FSAW had submitted, on a successful boycott of the reference book units in Roodepoort. She appealed for more extensive coverage of such items, especially in view of "the frequent publication of official statements" of the number of books issued².

Publicity made the FSAW's demonstrations more vulnerable to official obstruction, however. The protest to Baragwanath Hospital in early 1958, for instance, was preceded by an extensive build-up in the Johannesburg newspapers and the police were out in full force on the appointed day. In a subsequent letter to New Age, the FSAW condemned "the air of secrecy" the "tension and suspicion" which it accused both hospital authorities and police of creating, since it had publicly announced beforehand that its intentions were to hold a peaceful demonstration³.

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1. 'Minutes of a meeting of the Tvl Regional Committee held 22/7/61, FSAW D I.
 2. Letter from Helen Joseph to The Star, 18/12/58, FSAW C I 6.
 3. Letter from Bertha Mashaba and Helen Joseph to New Age, 29/3/58, FSAW C II.

Towards the end, and especially after the bannings of the ANC and PAC in 1960, the FSAW did develop a greater sophistication in dealing with the contingencies of police counter-action against its activities. Thus in 1961, the minutes of a Transvaal Executive Committee meeting, at which plans for a forthcoming regional conference were discussed, included a terse reference to "Alternate Venue" for the conference¹. This venue was not named. Presumably it was there as a precautionary measure, in case the meetings at the original venue were banned or obstructed. The general orientation of the FSAW remained, however, towards legal and public activity.

Although the FSAW envisaged some far-reaching changes in the political sphere, aimed at achieving a broadly democratic society, it lacked any comprehensive overall strategy and blueprint for how the changes it desired to see could best be brought about. Its campaigns were related to the eradication of specific abuses, rather than forming part of a coherent, long-term strategy for political change. During the Treason Trial, Helen Joseph was cross-examined by the Public Prosecutor about the object of FSAW campaigns. Her reply summed up this ordering of priorities which prevailed within the FSAW:

"The object ... was to campaign against a specific evil as we saw it, to endeavour to get that evil removed and at the same time to do an amount of educational work amongst European people, to highlight the particular grievance against which the campaign was directed, and to focus attention generally upon the conditions in this country in which the majority of the population live".²

The FSAW was not so naive as to imagine that these evils and grievances could be done away with without a major restructuring

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1. 'Minutes of a meeting of the Transvaal Regional Committee held 22/7/61', FSAW D I.
 2. Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, p. 14060.

of the political institutions in South Africa. In further evidence during the course of the Treason Trial, Joseph made this clear too:

"... it is correct that the Congress linked these campaigns with the general struggle for the end of apartheid, because one and all the evils against which those campaigns were directed had their roots in the system of apartheid."¹

Nevertheless, what the "general struggle" entailed, was left at the level of rhetoric rather than strategy.

Thus, in the case of the anti-pass campaign, the major focus of FSAW activity, the pass laws were recognised as a crucial component of the migrant labour system, "maintained in order to preserve a supply of cheap labour to the farms and to the mines ... and also because they ... are a means of suppressing the movement of the African people towards obtaining their freedom".² In mobilising women against passes, the FSAW recognised that it was attacking a key structure in the apartheid state. In 1957 it declared that:

"in this vast, unmeasured and as yet inadequately organised potential of the resistance of women to passes lies one of the strongest weapons against the present government, against apartheid itself."³

Yet the main thrust of its own anti-pass campaign was on a local, rather than a national scale and reactive rather than innovative. It amounted most often to resistance to the work of the Reference Book Units as they appeared in particular areas. The manner in which these local campaigns were to be incorporated within a broader, nation-wide struggle against

1. Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, p.14060.

2. Evidence of Helen Joseph, Treason Trial Record, Vol. 68, p.14420.

3. Anonymous typescript, 'Women and Passes', Oct. 1957, FSAW C I 1

apartheid was left to the strategists in the ANC and NCC to develop. "... the women are waiting for the Congress lead", commented Helen Joseph in January 1956¹. By late 1958 and early 1959, in the aftermath of the anti-pass demonstrations in Johannesburg, the FSAW was showing signs of impatience at the failure of these bodies to provide it with strong and dynamic leadership. Nevertheless, it never seriously questioned their ultimate authority. Thus Lilian Ngoyi in late 1959:

"It is important to understand that the struggle against passes is controlled direct by the African National Congress. The struggle of the women is merely part of the general struggle of the African people".²

The FSAW was an activist body, responding vigorously to political issues as they arose. In many ways this was the source of its strength and its appeal as a political pressure group in the 1950's. Its protests and campaigns were among the most extensive and best organised of any mounted by the Congress Alliance. At the level of political theory and overall strategy, however, it was weak. In the long term, it underestimated the strength of the political forces it was opposing and failed to adjust its tactics to the increasingly totalitarian environment in which it found itself operating.

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1. From an article written by Joseph, in Fighting Talk, Jan. 1956, quoted in the Treason Trial Record, Vol. 67 p.14234.
 2. 'Presidential Address', p.2, in 'Annual Conference of the African National Congress Women's League held at the Communal Hall, Orlando', FSAW II H 7. Relations between the FSAW and ANC are discussed further in the following chapter.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CONGRESS ALLIANCE:THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND NATIONAL LIBERATION

The FSAW's position within the Congress Alliance was not always clear. Partly this was a structural problem, relating to the federal nature of the FSAW and how it was integrated into the national liberation movement as a result. On the one hand, the FSAW was an independent body, with its own constitution and a set of aims which related specifically to women. On the other hand, all of its member groups, apart from the Food and Canning Workers Union (and even that was affiliated to SACTU) were auxiliaries or part of other, separate organisations to which they were ultimately responsible.

Because the FSAW was constituted on the basis of the member organisations of the Congress Alliance, its own ranking within that Alliance was not sharply delineated. Thus, even though it participated in all the Alliance's campaigns and was regarded by it as an organisation to which specific, women-oriented tasks could be allocated, the FSAW was never officially represented on the NCC, the highest co-ordinating body within the Alliance¹. According to Helen Joseph, this was because the NCC felt that the FSAW was already sufficiently represented through its member organisations. To allow it an additional representative of its own would have duplicated this representation unnecessarily and, presumably, accorded it an unmerited weight in decision-making. Because of the informality that characterised the Congress Alliance, as well as the fact that, for at least part of the time, Joseph served on the NCC as a representative of COD², this exclusion did not

1. Interview with Helen Joseph.

2. She served on the NCC from its inception in 1955 till October or November 1956. Evidence of Helen Joseph, Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, p.14012.

mean isolation for the FSAW as might have been expected. It did, however, reflect the ambivalence felt by the male-dominated Congress Alliance on the role and scope of the women's movement within the national liberation movement. (This point is developed further, below.)

The structural clumsiness of the FSAW led, on occasions, to complications about decision-making and the allocation of authority between it and the various Congress organisations. The dispute with members of the COD executive, about the ratification of the FSAW's constitution at its second National Conference in 1956, was a clear example of this. In this case, the COD NEC criticised the procedure adopted by the FSAW. They argued that before the FSAW adopted its constitution, the document should have been ratified by each of the FSAW affiliates (ANC, COD, etc.) first, at their own national conferences¹. Following on from this, they then accused the FSAW leadership of pushing through the constitution in a "high-handed manner"².

The FSAW responded by vigorously defending the independent authority of its National Conference. Its reply to the COD allegations brought out clearly the extent to which its dependence on its affiliated organisations could obstruct its own smooth running. It pointed out that its National Conference consisted entirely of members from the affiliated Congress groups and that these delegates had voted, by 291 votes to 79, in favour of adopting the Constitution in August 1956, without further delay. Moreover, the draft of the Constitution had been circulated to all member organisations in 1955, more than a year before the FSAW conference.

"... if these organisations had failed to discuss the Constitution or circulate it, this must be laid at the door of these organisations. This, however, should not be allowed to hold up the development of the Federation of South African women."³

1. See above, p. 209.

2. Extract from letter from unidentified COD member in Cape Town, 17/9/56, amongst notes on COD NEC meetings, FSAW A 7.

3. 'Statement for the Information of COD Members', p.1, FSAW A 7.

If member groups were dissatisfied with the constitution as adopted, there was provision for amendments to be introduced at the next conference. Meanwhile,

"The Federation is young and must be flexible but at the same time it needs a framework within which to function, a foundation on which to build"¹.

The difficulties arising from member organisations being responsible in two different directions at once were most acute in the case of the ANCWL. The ANCWL was by far the most important organisation within the FSAW, supplying it with the bulk of its members and supporters and many of its leaders. At the same time, the League was also an auxiliary of the ANC, the dominant and largest organisation within the Congress Alliance. In its constitution, its primary allegiance to the ANC was explicitly stated:

"The African National Women's League is an auxiliary body of the African National Congress. It is under the political direction and control of the Congress, and it follows the policy and programme of the Congress."²

The ambiguities of the ANCWL's position led to friction between it and the FSAW on occasion, although the difficulties thus created in relation to the ANC itself were ultimately more serious³. At times the ANCWL appeared anxious to preserve its identity as an independent organisation. The misunderstandings that arose in 1957 during the course of the Anti-Pass Pledge campaign in the Transvaal have been mentioned already⁴. In this case, the issue centred on the relationship between the FSAW and ANCWL branches and the correct channels

1. Ibid., p.2.

2. 'Draft; Rules and Regulations of the African National Congress Women's League', p.1, FSAW II H 1.

3. Relations between the ANC and FSAW are looked at below.

4. See above, p.286.

through which they should communicate. The ANCWL executive complained that it was not being kept properly informed by the FSAW which was side-stepping its offices and dealing directly with Women's League Branches.

"... we are not told of anything, you can imagine your office being side-stepped, e.g. Pledges, straight from the Federation to the Women's League Branches. I mean this is not healthy, we are interested to know what the Federation is doing and have to be together."¹

In reply, the FSAW pointed out the extent to which FSAW and ANCWL committees overlapped - their "very composition ensured ... full liason"². Its approach was conciliatory, concluding with a plea for unity in the face of the external threats facing the Congress Alliance.

"The whole Congress movement is threatened today as never before ... We plead that now is the time for us to demonstrate our unity as women and to resist all efforts to divide us. We must close our ranks and not divide them."³

Such friction, which surfaced from time to time, never seriously threatened the working relationship between the FSAW and ANCWL. For the most part, the FSAW's plea for unity found its echo within the ANCWL and cooperation between the two organisations was extensive, their executive committees and campaigns blurring into each other. In a letter to the press in November 1955, Ngoyi spoke of the "deep feelings of friendship and sympathy" that existed between "women of different races"⁴. Several informants have agreed that amongst the

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1. FSAW correspondence, ANCWL (Tv1) to FSAW (Tv1), 31/3/57, FSAW C I 5.
 2. Letter from FSAW (Tv1) to the ANCWL (Tv1), 5/4/57, p.4. FSAW C I 5. The full excerpt is quoted above, p.286 ; footnote 1.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Letter from L. Ngoyi to Rand Daily Mail, 2/11/55, FSAW C I 2.

women involved in the FSAW, these sentiments were widely shared. Where disagreements between the FSAW and ANCWL did arise, it was more often than not due to the intervention of the ANC itself - as in the case of the initial dispute about the FSAW's membership, in which the ANCWL, under pressure from the ANC, resisted the notion of an individual membership for the FSAW. On most campaigns there was a broad unanimity of purpose between the ANCWL and FSAW.

This was particularly marked in the campaign against passes in Johannesburg, in 1958. In this instance, the executive committees of the FSAW and ANCWL appeared to be working in closer harmony than either organisation with the ANC itself. When the ANC insisted on calling off the first civil disobedience "phase" of the protests, the FSAW and ANCWL, jointly, expressed disappointment at the decision; they both agreed that the political potential in the tactic of mass arrests had not been exhausted and should have been pursued.

The awkwardness of the FSAW's federal structure was not simply a matter of poor design. It had been imposed upon it by the ANC, using its superior authority within the Congress Alliance to prevail over the arguments of those sponsors of the FSAW who favoured an individual membership. The reasons for the ANC's stand throw light both on relationships between organisations within the Congress Alliance and on the standing of the women's movement within the national liberation movement in general and with the ANC in particular.

The FSAW was modelled on the multi-racial and loosely federal structure of the Congress Alliance. The ANC's insistence on this was based on its fears that a unitary women's organisation would compete with the ANCWL for membership as well as prove too independent of ultimate Congress control. The position the ANC adopted with regard to the FSAW, in 1954/55, was consistent with the stand it had already taken on the composition of the Congress Alliance. Although committed to co-operating with other political organisations with which

it shared "common objectives and ... methods"¹, the ANC had always insisted on its separate identity as an African political party. It had never been prepared to surrender its independence and authority to combine with its political allies in a single, non-racial organisation². In discussing the Congress Alliance, it stated:

"Co-operation will always be on the basis of equality and mutual respect for the individuality and identity of our organisations."³

In effect, the ANC was upholding the dominant colour-conscious ideology of ethnic exclusivism and 'racial pride' which, under various guises, had informed South Africa's political life since 1910. The ANC of the 1950's took its stand on a vision of a "multi-racial, corporate society". Although it attacked discrimination on the grounds of colour, it accepted colour-based group identification as a basic factor in South Africa's political life. In working towards its goal of a multi-racial society, it saw itself as the vanguard organisation of the African majority of the population, and was not prepared to abandon its ethnic integrity and position of leadership to a non-racial political party.

1. From 'Programme and Policy', African National Congress Handbook, p.5, FSAW II G 2.
2. In the 1940's, discussions between the ANC and AAC towards achieving closer unity had foundered at least partly because the ANC insisted that they form an exclusively African organisation, which could then cooperate with other non-African political groups. Thus Mr. A.P. Mda of the ANC: "We should appeal to Africans as such, to unite as Africans. An African united front would not be opposed to an alliance with other oppressed groups, organised in their national organisations". From 'Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the National Executive Committees of the ANC and the AAC, April 17-18, 1949', in Karis and Carter: From Protest to Challenge, Vol. II, p.383, Document 70(a).
3. 'Programme and Policy', African National Congress Handbook, p.5, FSAW II, G 2.

"Since its inception the ANC accepted South Africa as a multi-racial society in which all racial groups have the right to live in dignity and prosperity. In fact the ANC was founded in order to unite the African tribes into a political force in order to demand full democratic rights within the multi-racial framework of our society."¹

During the 1950's the ANC successfully maintained this viewpoint in the face of criticism coming from both the Africanist faction and the leftwing members of the Congress Alliance (within COD in particular). The Africanists, later the PAC's, criticism of the Alliance's multi-racial construction has been outlined already. They were more concerned about white dominance in the Alliance than non-racialism². In the late 1950's, provoked in part by Africanist accusations that the Alliance was supporting apartheid ideology, some COD members took up their criticisms and raised the question of transforming the Congress Alliance into a unitary national liberation organisation³. Their tentative overtures in this direction were not successful. The ANC, by far the largest and politically most significant of the Congresses, was too powerful for its objections to be overruled.

As in the Congress Alliance, so too in the FSAW the ANC's insistence on a multi-racial structure carried the most weight. In this case it was not prepared to expose the ANCWL either to competition from another women's organisation or to the risk of being absorbed in a non-racial movement outside its control. In 1955 the FSAW had accepted that without the ANCWL it could never hope to be more than a peripheral organisation within the national liberation movement. Since it felt that the first priority of the women's movement was to achieve victory for the national liberation movement, it accepted the limitations of the federal structure imposed upon it by the ANC.

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1. ANC: 'Report of the 46th Annual National Conference, December 1958', p.26, FSAW II G.
 2. See above, p.201.
 3. See, for instance, an article by P. Rodda: 'The Africanists cut loose' in Africa South, Vol. 3, No. 4, July-Sept. 1959.

The relationship between the FSAW and ANC did not, however, fit simply into the general pattern of ANC-Congress Alliance interactions. More was at stake than a straightforward tussle for power between two political organisations, even though this played its part. A large source of tension, over and above the points already raised, was that the FSAW was an organisation of women and, as such, a challenge to prejudices against women's political autonomy and adulthood, prejudices which were deeply rooted within the ANC and Congress Alliance. An overly independent and non-racial women's movement threatened not only ANC hegemony within the Congress Alliance; it threatened male hegemony within the Alliance as well.

In 1956 the FSAW singled out the "backward attitude of the men" towards women's political activity as a serious brake on its progress.

"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. This prejudice is so strong that even when many of those in leading positions in the ANC appear to be co-operating with the Federation, it is sometimes difficult to avoid the conclusion that they would prefer to hinder the work of the Federation and to withdraw their own women-folk from activities."¹

This ambivalence on the part of the men wove itself in and out of most of the ANC's dealings with the FSAW and ANCWL, throughout the period under discussion. The range of attitudes the ANC displayed towards the political work of the women was wide and its approach often inconsistent - sometimes admiring and supportive, at other times (occasionally at one and the same time) uneasy, resentful and anxious to assert male control.

The formation of the FSAW in 1954 was generally welcomed and

1. 'Report to the WIDE', p.3, FSAW E.

encouraged by the various Congress bodies. Certainly at a theoretical level, they recognised the importance of mobilising women for the political struggle. This the national liberation movement had already accepted in the 1940's; by 1954 few would have openly questioned it. The ANC also conceded that for women to be able to take part in political work more actively, some restructuring of traditional relationships between men and women was necessary. In 1955 the ANC executive declared:

"... we know that we cannot win liberation or build a strong movement without the participation of the women. We must ... make it possible for women to play their part by regarding them as equals and helping to emancipate them in the home, even relieving them of their many family and household burdens so that women may be given an opportunity of being politically active. The men in the Congress movement must fight constantly ... those outmoded customs which make women inferior and by personal example must demonstrate their belief in the equality of all human beings, of both sexes."¹

As had characterised the entire history of the women's movement within the national liberation movement, however, in practice both actions and attitudes often lagged far behind accepted principles. Advances had been made since the days when politics was unquestioningly assumed to be a male domain; a full and unequivocal recognition of women's political rights had yet to be granted.

This lag between theory and practice was most marked at the ANC rank and file level. Many male members of the ANC were deeply conservative and traditionalist in their attitudes towards women. Indeed, as already pointed out, for many African men their chief reason for opposing passes for women was that the government was thereby usurping their authority.

1. '43rd National Conference of the ANC held in Bloemfontein from the 17th-19th Dec., 1955', p.10, Treason Trial exhibit G 809.

For both men and women, passes for women posed a threat to the stability and security of the home. The counterpart to that was frequently a tenacious conviction that women's proper place was in the home and nowhere else and that, within it, their correct status was one of subordination to men. In 1962, after the FSAW had been in existence for 8 years and the revived ANCWL for some twenty years, one observer described how influential these attitudes still were at ANC branch level.

"The national leadership of the ANC has agreed that the FSAW shall have an independent political existence but it is not always easy to get this across in some areas. In one, for instance, the women found that they had to get the men to endorse all their arrangements and while this may have been partly the tightening up of general political control ... the women nevertheless felt they were being subjected to too much male domination."¹

The debate on birth control at the FSAW's meeting to discuss 'What Women Demand' in May 1955, revealed how strong the belief in women's subordinate position within the family was, in Congress circles². Many women present expressed apprehension at what their husbands' reactions to contraception would be. By freeing women's sexuality from their reproductive role and at the same time allowing women control over so large and important an area of their lives, contraception threatened the already declining authority of the husband within the patriarchal family of the 1950's³. The jocular dismissal with which some male Congress members greeted this debate - that this was not the stuff of politics - testified to the limited perceptions on what women's emancipation entailed, that were held by many men within the national liberation

1. WIDF: 'Report on a visit to South Africa sponsored by the WIDF', p.33.
 2. See above, p.220.
 3. This declining status of the husband and the rise of the matrifocal family was discussed in Chapter One.

movement. These men were content for women to be organised, to assist the men, to fight for equality and an end to discrimination in general terms. The question of sexual equality and sexual discrimination, however, raised disturbing questions which placed in jeopardy one of the few areas where black men were assured of a position of relative power and prestige, the family. Thus many Congress members either refused to take such questions seriously or resisted including them within the programme of the national liberation movement.

It was rare for male resistance to female political achievement to assume overt forms within the Congress movement of the 1950's. Attitudes were more often equivocal, resistance finding expression in a general passivity on the part of Congress men towards the political campaigns of the women rather than an active opposition. Thus, while men applauded the women's anti-pass campaign, few joined in, despite constant urgings from the FSAW, ANCWL and senior ANC members themselves.

It was also rare for the issues involved to be publicly discussed. The Sechaba article, 'Don't Stifle the Work of the Women's Federation', which appeared in 1956, was an unusually direct discussion of male opposition to women's political activism. In supporting the work of the women's organisations, this article criticised "some Congress members" for not voicing openly their doubts and misunderstandings about the form and scope of the women's movement¹. The fact that such an article was necessary, indicated the extent to which resentment towards the FSAW clouded the surface of apparent ANC support. Something of the conflicting emotions generated within the ANC by the women's campaigns and demonstrations of the 1950's - the admiration tinged with unease - were captured by a comment that concluded a Drum article on the October 1958 disturbances in Johannesburg:

1. 'Don't Stifle the Work of the Women's Federation', pamphlet reprinted from Sechaba, Sept. 1956, FSAW E.

"Meanwhile the men have stood by looking on, bewildered and stunned. And as one of them said: "God, the women are showing us something"."¹

Generally, the national leadership of the ANC adopted a more sophisticated approach to the FSAW. It was openly supportive of the women so long as they did not trespass on its territory or usurp its authority. The article, 'Don't Stifle the Work of the Women's Federation', was adamant that the FSAW was a "full-blooded member of the freedom movement and must not be regarded - or treated - as a step-child."²

In the Transvaal, the FSAW experienced greater difficulty with the Provincial Executive of the ANC. The Transvaal ANC was, from all accounts received, far less generous in its support and enthusiasm for the women's organisation than the National or other provincial branches. In the absence of detailed information on the relationships between the FSAW and ANC executives in the other areas, it is difficult to be sure why the Transvaal region, particularly, should have proved the most difficult region of the ANC for the FSAW to work with. The fact that the Rand was the centre of both FSAW and ANC activity could have been a factor -- any of the general tensions that existed between the two organisations would be exacerbated by the greater pressure of events in that region. The Transvaal was also the home-base for the Africanist faction within the ANC. Whether there was any link between the Africanists' brand of exclusive African nationalism and the Transvaal ANC's form of anti-feminism, however, remains a speculative (though intriguing) question.

As the decade wore on and women came more and more to the fore in the anti-pass campaign, the prestige and status of women within the Congress Alliance and the ANC definitely

1. Drum, Dec. 1958: 'The Battle of the Women', p.22.

2. 'Don't Stifle the Work of the Women's Federation', p.1 FSAW E.

increased. The election of Lillian Ngoyi to the ANC National Executive in 1955 was one sign of that. Another was the ANC's decision to commemorate August 9th as 'Women's Day' in honour of the massive demonstration staged by the FSAW and ANCWL in Pretoria in 1956. In a speech in 1959 Chief Lutuli, National President of the ANC, emphasised that all offices in the ANC were open to everybody, male and female, on the basis of merit: recognition and promotion would be based on equality between the sexes¹.

Nevertheless, even the ANC National Executive (and despite its condemnation of those attitudes which relegated women's political role to the conference kitchen) saw at least part of the work of the FSAW and ANCWL in very conventional terms. Women's political priorities were regarded as centering on domestic issues, a perspective which the FSAW itself generally shared. Hence the allocation of the Freedom Charter clause dealing with "Houses, security and comfort" to Helen Joseph for discussion at the Congress of the People in 1955. Of all the clauses, this was regarded as most appropriately 'women's work'. Hence, too, the delegation of accommodation and catering arrangements for major national conferences - the Congress of the People in 1955, the National Workers' Conference in 1958, the National Anti-Pass Conference in 1959 - to the women's organisations. In a recent publication, Hilda Bernstein (Hilda Watts) recalls that while the ANCWL of the 1950's was "a means of organising women for the "national liberation struggle", it also served as "a means of obtaining the usual work out of the women - feeding and finding accommodation for delegates to conferences and similar work"¹.

At the same time, traces of the ambivalence that characterised much of the ANC's dealings with the women's organisations at

1. 'Chief Speaks: A message by Albert J. Lutuli', 9/8/59, p.3, FSAW A 14.

2. H. Bernstein: For their triumphs and for their tears, p.43.

the rank and file level, could be detected at the national leadership level as well. In June 1958 Chief Lutuli was asked in an interview by Drum, if it were not true that women were playing a "much bigger - perhaps the crucial part" in Congress politics. His reply toned down any suggestion of women competing with men politically:

"There are signs that women are beginning to play an effective part in politics. I cannot visualise a situation in which the movement will be overwhelmingly feminine, but they will play a very important part. More and more African women will not only actively but in silent ways contribute to the struggle."¹

The hint of unease that women might be challenging the traditional leadership position of men which colours this assessment of their political contribution, was present more strongly in a statement Lutuli issued the following year, on the occasion of 'Women's Day'. He began by paying tribute to the courage and initiative displayed by women in the anti-pass campaign:

"They are pairing effectively with their men-folk. At times they seem a length ahead of men. This is all for the good ..."²

Later in the same message, however, the political assertiveness of women became a stick with which to chide the men of the ANC for their own failure to contribute actively to the anti-pass campaign:

"Women are putting men's traditional dignity and so-called superiority in jeopardy. Do African men of our day want to play second fiddle to women?"³

This, by implication, was an unacceptable proposition.

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1. Drum, June 1958: 'Luthuli Talks', p.59.
 2. 'Chief Speaks - a message by Albert J. Lutuli', 9/8/59, p.3, PSAW A 14.
 3. Ibid., p.4.

Relationships between the FSAW and the Congress Alliance were, of course, a two-way stream. The FSAW itself, though far clearer on the need for women to participate actively and as equals in the national liberation movement, was not always consistent on the question of what women's political role should be. Its attitude towards the ANC and that body's attempts to dominate it, swung between criticism and conciliation, adding to the complexities of their relationship.

In 1954 the 'Women's Charter' had outlined what the FSAW regarded as the double responsibility facing the women's movement - allegiance to the national liberation movement and participation in its campaigns on the one hand; commitment to the emancipation of women from their inferior position in society on the other. This duality of purpose the FSAW continued to uphold throughout its short career. Ultimately, however, it never doubted that its first responsibility was to the general liberation struggle, by blacks, against the white supremacist state. Not till that had been won, could most women expect to free themselves from sex-based discrimination.

"... the fundamental struggle of the people is for National Liberation and ... any women's organisation that (stands) outside this struggle must stand apart from the mass of women ... this statement does not in any way mean that the Federation of South African Women was not concerned with the problem of women's rights, and that it did not strive for the emancipation of women ... what was realised was that it would be impossible for women to achieve their rights as women in a society in which so many fundamental rights were denied to both men and women by virtue of their sex."¹

Any conflict that threatened the unity of the national liberation movement should, therefore, be avoided. At the same time, the senior position of the ANC within that movement, as leader

1. Statement by Helen Joseph, Treason Trial Record, Vol. 66, p.13996.

of "the mass of women" should be respected. For this reason, the FSAW tended often to downplay friction between it and the other Congress bodies. "I would like to remind you that the Federation ... is not an organisation set up in opposition to those already existing organisations ..."

Transvaal President Marcelle Goldberg stressed in her report to the provincial Conference of the FSAW in January 1959¹. As the anti-pass campaign wore on, the FSAW also appeared anxious to appease fears amongst ANC men that the women's campaign was in some way reflecting poorly on their (the men's) virility. In this vein, Lilian Ngoyi included the following remarks in her speech to the annual ANCWL Conference in 1959:

"Naturally nothing must be done to curb the initiative of the women; at the same time, women must discuss each stage of the campaign of (sic) the mother body. The impression seems to be gaining ground that the women are courageous and militant whilst the men frightened and timid, this idea is harmful to the internal disputes and harmony (which) now should exist."²

Partly Ngoyi's views corresponded with the conscious, political choices the FSAW had made, as outlined above, concerning the priorities facing the women's movement. Yet these conscious beliefs were also buttressed by other, often less conscious, attitudes which reflected the extent to which the FSAW, too, had been influenced by patriarchal ideology. This also played a part in making it more amenable to ANC authority than it might otherwise have been.

In its general approach, the FSAW was committed to the full emancipation of women from their subordinate position in society. This the 'Women's Charter' and its 'Aims' had

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1. 'President's Report to the Provincial Conference, 27/1/59; p.1, FSAW A 13.
 2. 'Presidential Address', p.2, in 'Annual Conference of the African National Congress Women's League', FSAW II H 7.

made clear. Nevertheless, patriarchal ideology ran deep and was not confined to male members of the Congress Alliance only; the FSAW, too, was susceptible to it. Many of the women involved in the FSAW and the ANCWL's activities accepted that women were, in some way, subordinate to men, their responsibilities primarily domestic and their political contribution supportive rather than innovative. The conservative defence of home and custom which had characterised much of the protests by rural women, in Zeerust and in Natal, during the 1950's had helped shape urban women's anti-pass protests too. "... Verwoerd is to break our homes with this (sic) pass laws", commented one woman at an ANCWL meeting at Moroka township, Johannesburg, in 1955¹.

Within the FSAW, the degree to which the importance of the battle against sex discrimination was stressed, varied from woman to woman and from occasion to occasion. Even amongst the FSAW leadership, where women's rights and the abolition of sex discrimination were strongly endorsed, women's domestic role as wife and, more often, mother was continually being stressed. Frequently 'mother' and 'woman' were interchangeable terms in the FSAW rhetoric, as the following extract from a protest against the pass laws which the FSAW submitted to the Mayor of Johannesburg in November 1958, illustrates;

"We say to you, and we speak from our hearts as mothers, whatever our race, that the pass system is in itself a crime against humanity; to inflict it upon women is an even greater crime - a crime against motherhood."²

Such sentiments reinforced conventional views that women's primary identification was domestic and maternal and, in

1. 'Copy of notes made by N/D/Const. Phillip Maskanya at a meeting of the ANCWL held at Moroka, on 23/10/56, p.2, Treason Trial exhibit G 850.

2. 'Memorandum on the Pass Laws', FSAW C I 6.

this way, contributed to the often unconscious reservations about women's political autonomy that existed within the Congress Alliance.

In addition to the above factors, the pressure of events on the Congress Alliance in the 1950's meant that such contradictions as did exist between men and women within it were often pushed to one side. Not only were they overshadowed by that common threat that all the national liberatory organisations of the 1950's were facing from an increasingly totalitarian state. The FSAW was also preoccupied for much of this time with the immediate demands of planning and organising the anti-pass campaign - most of its energies were channelled into that. As a result, it had little time in which to develop its generalised reflections on the subordinate position of women in society into a clear critique of male/female relationships within the Congress Alliance. This too made it less critical of male dominance in practice than many of its statements about women's emancipation would suggest.

Yet the extent to which the FSAW was prepared to accept a junior position within the Alliance should not be exaggerated. For all the qualifications to its stand on women's rights that undoubtedly did colour both its outlook and its activities, the FSAW never regarded itself as a mere tea-making appendage to the Alliance. It saw women as being political actors in their own right and, within the limits already described, defended its own decision-making powers and autonomy strongly. In the long term, it was clearly committed to the ideal of a society where neither sex nor colour could serve as criteria for discrimination against individuals. Moreover, as an activist body above all, it was critical and impatient of passivity in other organisations and ready to resist attempts to curb its own initiative.

Finally, political involvement for women in the 1950's had generally a radicalising effect on their perceptions of themselves and their place in society. Women in the FSAW

were encouraged to assume greater responsibility and independence; the short-term success of many of their campaigns made them value their own political contribution more highly as well as view the performance of other Congress organisations more critically. In this regard, one effect of the FSAW on its members was to encourage the trend towards greater female independence and de facto authority within the urban African family of the 1950's, already remarked upon in Chapter One. "The women of Africa are on the march" a woman from Zeerust had commented in 1957. Her metaphor was an apt one and, whether consciously or not, the direction in which women were moving was away from those traditional boundaries that had formerly circumscribed their lives.

Relationships between the FSAW and Congress Alliance were thus complex. The conduct of the anti-pass campaign, the major campaign on which the FSAW embarked, brought out many of the tensions, both structural and ideological, as well as the ambiguities that marked this interaction. The campaign also demonstrated the extent to which these tensions hampered the political effectiveness of the FSAW as a resistance movement. This chapter will thus conclude with a brief look at the way in which decision-making within this campaign was shared between the FSAW and ANC.

Decision-Making in the Anti-Pass Campaign

The exact demarcation of authority between the FSAW and ANC in the organisation and coordination of the anti-pass campaign was never clear. From the beginning, the ANC regarded itself as ultimately responsible for the campaign, but it was divided on the best tactics to adopt and failed to initiate a well worked-out plan of action. It recognised the importance of broadening the women's anti-pass campaign into a general campaign involving men as well. In 1956 the NCC reported:

"Clearly the women are in the front rank of the battle now opening. But the struggle is not one for women alone... By themselves the women can perhaps resist the latest attacks. But their resistance would be stronger and lead more surely to victory if the menfolk fight with them ... This must be a joint campaign of men and women, whose aim is to end the pass system and the government which upholds it."¹

Yet the details of the ANC campaign were not immediately forthcoming. Not until 1958/59 did the ANC put forward a more long-term and comprehensive plan of action for fighting against the imposition of passes on women: by then, much of the momentum of the campaign had already been lost.

The FSAW, in contrast, though it never had a clearly worked out longterm strategy, launched immediately upon an extensive campaign of conferences, meetings, demonstrations and local protests, in conjunction with the ANCWL, as soon as it was announced that passes would be introduced for women. Ultimately it conceded that final authority on the campaign rested with the ANC. In the absence of a clear lead from the men, however, it assumed a large measure of independence, an independence it became increasingly reluctant to yield. This manifested itself in 1956 when it rejected a request from the TCC for a written report on the women's demonstration to Pretoria in August. As the anti-pass campaign proceeded, the confidence of the FSAW in its judgment and abilities increased. Then, in 1958, when the anti-pass disturbance erupted in Johannesburg, the relatively independent path the FSAW had been pursuing up till then ran up abruptly against ANC objections.

Although both the FSAW and ANC were involved in organising preliminary anti-pass meetings on the Rand in October 1958, the initiation of the period of mass arrests in Johannesburg towards the end of the month was largely spontaneous, emanating

1. NCC: 'Memorandum on Anti-Pass Campaign', 25/10/56, p.2, FSAW II B.

from the women arrested themselves. Once the protests had been set in motion, differences arose between the FSAW, working in close cooperation with the TCC, on the one hand, and the Transvaal Provincial Executive of the ANC on the other. These differences related not only to the best tactics to be pursued, but also to where final decision-making amongst these organisations lay. The Transvaal ANC wished to assert its seniority and dominance with regard to both the FSAW and the TCC: male authority and ANC hegemony had become fused into a single issue.

To what extent these differences developed into open confrontation is not clear. What is clear is that, in the words of an ANC report, "unpleasantness" arose when "certain decisions" were made by the ANC "without other organisations within the Congress movement, especially in relation to the TCC and the Women's Federation."¹ The ANC made its own position quite clear: it was not obliged to consult with these bodies on all aspects. It stated emphatically what the "real policy" within the Congress Alliance should be:

"... namely, that the ANC was responsible for the anti-pass campaign and that the NCC, TCC or any other body would be concerned with the question of coordination of the aspects which may be taken up by the allies."²

By the third week of the protests the initiative had passed to the ANC. The mass arrests were called off and the second aspect of the campaign, that of organising for the mass rally on the City Hall steps, launched. The FSAW diplomatically, but unambiguously, expressed its own regrets at the turn of events.

"The role of the TCC at this time became obscure, as information was received that the newly elected Transvaal Provincial Executive of the ANC was entirely responsible

1. 'An ANC Report on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.2, FSAW II G 11.

2. Ibid., p.3.

for the anti-pass campaign. The co-ordinating machinery of the TCC, through which until then the Federation had worked and from whom such wholehearted cooperation had been received, was therefore no longer fully available, although contact was maintained."¹

It also, along with the ANCWL, had reservations about the strategy the ANC had adopted. Nevertheless, as on the membership issue, it accepted that ultimately the ANC's authority within the Alliance was superior.

It is difficult to assess from this distance whether the women were correct in their judgment that they would have been able to keep up the momentum of the civil disobedience campaign for much longer. Having submitted to the ANC's authority, however, they were entitled to expect that the participation of the men in the rest of the campaign would be active. In this they were disappointed. The FSAW's report on the Johannesburg campaign concluded by describing women's impatience as they waited for the "active entry" of men into the campaign². This was echoed by a speaker at the Provincial Conference of the Transvaal region of the FSAW in January 1959.

"I want to appeal to Conference that the women here must tell the ANC that we the women have asked the men to help us ..."³

This appeal was not effectively answered and in 1959 the women's anti-pass campaign more or less subsided. Women by themselves were not economically or politically powerful enough to resist the imposition of passes indefinitely. In the absence of active male participation, the energy generated amongst women by the anti-pass campaign became much easier for the state to contain.

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1. 'Report by the Federation of South African Women on the Anti-Pass Campaign', p.4, FSAW C I 6.
 2. Ibid., p.6.
 3. 'Record of proceedings', Provincial Conference, 25/1/59, FSAW A 13.

In seeking to understand why male support for the anti-pass campaign was never strongly forthcoming, one can advance several reasons - the internal dissensions and the organisational weaknesses plaguing the ANC, the fact that men already carried passes and thus lacked the same psychological motivation that women possessed, confronted with a new and alarming threat to their position. No analysis will be complete, however, without taking into account the ambivalence that many Congress men felt towards women in politics, and the extent to which this determined that the anti-pass campaign would remain a predominantly female and, therefore, limited political campaign. Despite continued urgings from the FSAW, NCC and the ANC executive, the anti-pass campaign of the 1950's was, in the final analysis, regarded as a sectarian 'women's issue' by the Congress Alliance; it was not accorded full status as a general political campaign. Few men were prepared to work under or even alongside women. While women might be "pairing effectively with their menfolk", the same could not be said wholeheartedly in reverse.

CONCLUSION

As a political organisation, the FSAW was breaking new ground amongst women in South Africa. There were three main aspects to its programme which distinguished it from other contemporary or earlier national women's organisations - its commitment to the emancipation of women, its commitment to the national liberation movement and, related to both of these, its multiracialism.

Before the FSAW, almost all other women's organisations, from left to right across the political spectrum, had been organised as mere auxiliaries to parent, male-dominated bodies. They had been seen chiefly in a 'tea and typing' capacity - "bottlewashers" in the phrase of one FSAW speaker. The ANCWL itself had been formed in this mould. The one qualified exception to this general pattern had been the white women's suffrage organisation, the WEAU. This, however, had had a limited political programme and, with the passage of the Women's Enfranchisement Act in 1930, it had disbanded. The FSAW was thus the first national women's organisation to include a comprehensive programme for the emancipation of women along with its general political programme - and to take up this issue with its male colleagues. For all the qualifications that tempered its stand on women's emancipation in practice, it represented a real and serious attempt to incorporate women into the political programme of the national liberation movement on an equal footing with men; for this alone, it warrants recognition.

The FSAW also rejected the colour-consciousness that had permeated other women's organisations. This flowed inevitably from its more developed feminist consciousness, which reinforced and expanded upon the multiracial tradition already

present within the Congress Alliance. . . . Because women were seen to suffer serious disabilities on account of their sex, the FSAW could envisage the possibility of a universal women's movement aimed at removing those disabilities and cutting across existing colour lines in society. While directing its attention to the problems facing the black majority of women in South Africa, it continually addressed itself in much broader terms to all women. "No woman can be free while her sister is in chains", claimed one FSAW document in 1959¹.

In claiming this unity, the FSAW exposed itself to the contradictions facing any women's movement with universalist aspirations in South Africa. As it was to discover after 1954, and Chapter One has shown, all women in society do not share a common experience or identity. The divisions of colour, irrational and discriminatory though they appeared to the FSAW, corresponded to more complex relationships of power and wealth and it was these, ultimately, that determined the nature of women's varied political allegiances. Throughout the 20th Century the primary identification of women had not been with their sex, but with their colour group; this was as true of women in the 1950's as it had been of women at the time of the Bantu Women's League.

The commitment of the FSAW to the national liberation movement was in itself an indication of the primacy of non-sex-related issues for women in South Africa. In linking the women's movement to the national liberation movement, it reflected - and chose to reflect - the political priorities of the majority of South African women. In speaking of the rights of all women, it was, in fact, attacking the basis of the South African state in which the dominant interests of most white women were vested. Those few white women who

1. Pledge of support from the FSAW for the anti-pass struggle of African women, nd, c March 1959, FSAW C I 7.

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were involved in it, though playing an important part and strengthening its commitment to a multiracial society, were not representative of their group.

The FSAW encouraged a considerable widening of the scope of political activity amongst women compared to what had existed in the early years of the century, in Maxeke's day. By the 1950's, politics was no longer so exclusively the domain of the small middle-class elite. Its focus had broadened to incorporate significant numbers of working-class women as well. Nevertheless, the FSAW failed to implant itself deeply amongst its followers, whose political activity, though frequently militant and well-supported, remained sporadic and concerned mostly with short-term objectives. There were many reasons for this, which relate to the complexities of the FSAW's position in the South African political spectrum. As has been described in the previous chapters, the FSAW was the product of both developments in the national liberation movement and changes in the position of women, and it is in these two areas that the major reasons for its failure can be found.

As an organisation involved in the Congress Alliance, the FSAW was subject to the increasingly damaging restrictions placed upon the national liberation movement by the government in the 1950's. During that time both the FSAW and the Congress Alliance failed to devise an alternative strategy with which to resist these onslaughts upon their viability as political organisations. The march of events after 1954 was rapid and before the FSAW could establish itself on a firm footing, it had been overtaken by political events outside its control. Once banned, the ANC turned to new methods of underground political organisation and resistance. The FSAW, however, never banned itself, found it impossible to adjust to the changed political climate after Sharpeville. In programme, tactics and methods of organisation, it remained rooted in the 1950's.

At the same time, the FSAW was also handicapped by the still restricted position women occupied in society. Its establishment in 1954 had testified to the extent to which the traditional, subordinate status of women had been restructured during the course of the 20th Century. By the 1950's women had acquired a larger degree of independence, and mobility than that they had enjoyed before. Nevertheless, their status, particularly in the towns, the centre of political organisation, was riddled with ambiguities and tensions. These hindered the development of political organisations amongst them.

Throughout the 1950's, the position of black women in the towns was in a state of flux and uncertainty. While many of the traditional restraints on their position were crumbling and women's status within the family was growing, patriarchal ideology was still dominant, its sagging influence bolstered by government policy. By that stage, economic developments had loosened the bonds of traditional tribal institutions and the patriarchal family network, but the direct involvement of African women in the economy was still very limited. Women were thus the recipients of many of the disruptive social effects of the economic developments taking place - the migrant labour system and its corollary of influx control were particularly harshly felt - without, as yet, having benefitted from any of the advantages that flowed from being involved in productive work, in the form of greater economic independence and security. The political activism of black women in the 1950's was a response, largely, to the extreme pressures squeezing them; those very pressures, however, made sustained organisation amongst them difficult.

What the FSAW did reveal was the enormous potential for political involvement that existed amongst women on issues of immediate, vital concern to them. As had characterised most political activity by black women throughout the 20th Century, the issues round which women in the FSAW were mobilising were frequently conservative - a defence of embattled institutions such as the family and the home.

In many ways the programme of the FSAW, as set out in the 'Women's Charter', was in advance of the thinking of most of the women to whom its appeal was directed. Yet in organising within the FSAW, women were coming into contact with new perspectives. The horizons of the female world were widening, new patterns of behaviour emerging. At the same time, the broadening out of black resistance to include women as well, introduced a new dimension to the political struggle being waged against the white supremacist state. The anti-pass campaign revealed clearly the potential source of strength for the national liberation movement that women represented. In 1957, a FSAW article, entitled 'Women and Passes' described the possibilities of this campaign thus:

"... in this vast, unmeasured and as yet inadequately organised potential of the resistance of women to passes lies one of the strongest weapons against the present government, against apartheid itself."¹

It was a potential that in the 1950's, however, was only suggested, never realised. In many ways, the history of the anti-pass campaign was the history of the FSAW; the defeat of that campaign was the defeat of the FSAW too. Formed in 1954, its peak period came between late 1955 and the end of 1958, when the campaign against passes was in full swing. Although neither the FSAW nor the ANCWL could claim responsibility for all the anti-pass protests mounted by women during this time, their role in directing, articulating, and encouraging their resistance was substantial. By 1959, however, the campaign was losing its momentum in the face of the escalating government repression and in the early 1960's it was finally broken. With the enforcement of the compulsory carrying of passes by women in early 1963,

1. 'Women and Passes', p.6, typescript article, hand dated October 1957, FSAW C I 1.

the FSAW lost its major rallying point amongst women... Its own eclipse after 1963 followed quickly.

Yet despite the short lifespan of the FSAW - little more than eight or nine years - it remains a significant organisation in the history of women's political activity in South Africa. Its failures, as much as its successes, cast light both on the position of women in the 1950's and early 1960's, as well as the problems faced by any organisation aiming to improve the position of women in South Africa. It was an organisation working towards a society free from any form of discrimination, whether on the grounds of sex, colour or class. As such, it was pioneering organisation amongst women. In stressing that women needed to organise as a group to fight against those "customs and conventions" which kept them in a position of inferiority to men, it was a pioneering organisation within the national liberation movement too. Although conceding priority to the national liberation movement, it did not lose sight of the necessity of the women's movement if full equality for women was to be won. Their struggle was, it argued, more than "just the struggle of the non-European people of South Africa for freedom, justice and security" in general terms. It was a "struggle within a struggle, which transcends them ... a struggle which will continue long after freedom has been won ..."¹.

The FSAW pointed out a route for this struggle to take. In linking these two issues, the emancipation of women and the overthrow of the white supremacist state, in the way that it did, it represented a landmark in the history of both the women's movement and the national liberation movement in South Africa.

1. 'A way to a better South Africa: Women have important part' by "A Woman Leader", p.4, article written for Golden City Post, September 1957, FSAW E.

APPENDICESAPPENDIX A

List of signatories to the invitation to attend the FSAW's inaugural conference, from 'Conference to Promote Women's Rights', 16/3/54, FSAW. (spelling from original)

SIGNED BY :Cape Town:

Mrs. Frances Thaele	Mrs. Dora Tamana	Mrs. Katie White
Mrs. Annie Selinga	Mrs. Gladys Smith	Mrs. Eveiyn Ngose
Mrs. Narvi Moodlay	Mrs. P. Seqwana	Mrs. Evelyn Mankayi
Mrs. Hilda Lotz	Mrs. Jean Bernadt	Mrs. Hilary Flegg
Mrs. R. Ndimande	Mrs. Sarah Carneson	Miss Hetty McCloud
Miss Vera Phillips	Miss Ray Alexander	Miss Nancy Dick

Johannesburg:

Mrs. D. Twala	Mrs. M. Cachalia	Miss Josie Palmer
Mrs. J. Rose-Innes	Mrs. Lucy Mvubele	Miss Ida Mtwana
Mrs. Sarem Mseko	Miss M. Sita	Miss Hetty du Preez
Mrs. Helen Joseph	Mrs. Betty Flusk	Mrs. M. Fischer
Mrs. Sybil Hedley	Miss Betty du Toit	Mrs. M. Naidco
Mrs. M. Heppner	Miss Hilda Watts	

Port Elizabeth:

Miss Chrissie Jasson	Mrs. M. Swanepoel	Miss L. Diedericks
Miss A.M. Coe	Miss M. Pijoos	Mrs. M. Draai
Mrs. Frances Baard	Mrs. Rosie Jamangile	Mrs. E. Perring
Mabel Mdinga		

Durban:

Miss Gusta Kuzwayo	Miss Ruth Shabane	Miss Bertha Mkize
Mrs. Henrietta Ostrich	Mrs. Fatima Seedat	Mrs. Fatima Meer
Dr. K. Goonan	Mrs. R. Singh	Mrs. Harija Seedat
Dr. H. Ropper	Mrs. Edith Benson	Mrs. J. Aronstein
Dr. A. Singh		

East London:

Mrs. Cordelia Mahlangani
 Dr. Thelma Appavo
 Mrs. G.A. Frier
 Mrs. Martha Nxesha

APPENDIX B

Women known to have attended the inaugural conference and the organisations which they represented.

Cape Town and area:

1. Dora Tamana - ANCWL, Retreat Women's Vigilance Association.
2. Esther Nose - Retreat Women's Vigilance Association.
3. Emma Razono - Nyanga Women's Vigilance Association.
4. Albertina Gwenkane - Nyanga Women's Vigilance Association.
5. Rosie Mpetha - Nyanga Women's Vigilance Association.
6. Annie Silinga - ANCWL, Langa Women's Vigilance Association.
7. Winifred Seqwana - ANCWL, Langa Women's Vigilance Association.
8. Gladys Smith - Cape Housewives' League.
9. Katie White - Guardian Christmas Club.
10. Hetty McLeod - Cape Factory Workers Committee.
11. Hilda Lotz
12. Freda von Rheda - Food and Canning Workers Union.
13. Mabel Jones - African Food and Canning Workers Union, Worcester.
14. Elizabeth Mafeking - African Food and Canning Workers Union, Paarl.
15. Betty Kearus/T. Steenkamp - African Food and Canning Workers Union, Paarl.
16. Ray Alexander - COD.
17. Cecilia Rosier - COD.

Craddock:

1. Cecilia A.N. Kuse - ANCWL.

Durban:

1. Fatima Meer - SAIC.
2. Bertha Mkize - ANCWL.
3. Henrietta Ostrich - African Women's Association.

East London:

1. Martha Nxesha - African Food and Canning Workers Union.

Johannesburg:

1. Hetty du Preez - Garment Workers' Union, no. 2.
2. Lilian Ngoyi - ANCWL.
3. Rica Hodgson - COD.
4. Rahima Mcoso - SAIC.
5. Helen Joseph - COD.
6. Ida Mtwana - ANCWL.
7. Josie Palmer - Transvaal All-Women's Union.
8. Hilda Watts - COD.
9. Amina Cachalia - SAIC.

Kimberley:

1. Sister M.F. Thompson - ANCWL.

Port Elizabeth:

1. Florence Matomela - ANCWL.

APPENDIX C

'What Women Demand', compiled in preparation for the Congress of the People, 1955. FSAW 11 A.

WE DEMAND Four months maternity leave on full pay for working mothers.

Properly staffed and equipped maternity homes, ante-natal clinics, and child welfare centres in all towns and villages, and in the reserves and rural areas.

Day nurseries for the children of working mothers.

Nursery schools for the pre-school children.

Birth control clinics.

WE DEMAND THESE FOR ALL MOTHERS OF ALL RACES.

WE DEMAND Compulsory, free and universal education from the primary school to the University.

Adequate school feeding and free milk for all children in day nurseries, nursery schools, and primary and secondary schools.

Special schools for handicapped children.

Play centres and cultural centres for school children.

Properly equipped playgrounds and sportsfields.

Vocational training and apprenticeship facilities.

WE DEMAND THESE FOR ALL CHILDREN OF ALL RACES.

WE DEMAND Proper houses at rents not more than 10% of the earnings of the head of the household.

Indoor sanitation, water supply and proper lighting in our homes.

The right to own our own homes and the land on which we build them.

The right to live where we choose.

Housing loan schemes at low rates of interest.

Lighting in our streets.

Properly made roads and storm water drainage.

Adequate public transport facilities.

Parks and recreation centres.

Sportsfields and swimming pools.

Public conveniences.

WE DEMAND THESE FOR ALL PEOPLE OF ALL RACES.

WE DEMAND Better shopping facilities, particularly in the non-European townships.

More dairies, and full supplies of pasteurised whole milk.

Mobile vegetable markets.

Subsidization of all protective foods: Bread, Meal,
Meat, Milk,
Vegetables
and Fruit.

Controlled prices for all essential commodities:
Food, Basic Clothing, Fuel

Fair rationing of essential foods and fuel when in short supply.

WE DEMAND THESE FOR ALL PEOPLE IN ALL PLACES.

WE DEMAND The right of ALL people to own and work their own farms.

The development of all uncultivated land.

The fair distribution of land amongst ALL people.

The mechanisation of methods of food production.

The scientific improvement of land by:

- a. Irrigation and intensive farming.
- b. Control of soil erosion and improvement of the soil.
- c. Supply of seed to all people producing from the land.

Efficient organisation of the distribution and marketing of food.

WE DEMAND SUFFICIENT FOOD FOR ALL PEOPLE.

WE DEMAND More and better land for the reserves.

Schools for children living in the reserves.

Maternity, medical and social services in the reserves.

Shops and controlled prices in the reserves.

Planned agricultural development of the reserves.

The abolition of migratory labour which destroys our family life by removing our husbands and which destroys their health through the conditions of their labour and the compound system.

WE DEMAND THAT THE RESERVES BECOME FOOD PRODUCING AREAS AND NOT RESERVOIRS OF CHEAP LABOUR.

WE DEMAND The transfer of trust farms to the ownership of the African people.

The abolition of convict farm labour.

The payment of minimum cash wages for all men and women on farms.

The abolition of child labour on the farms.

The abolition of the 'tot' system.

Free compulsory universal education for all children in rural areas.

Paid holidays for all farm workers.

The inclusion of farm workers in all industrial legislation.

WE DEMAND THESE RIGHTS FOR ALL PEOPLE IN THE RURAL AREAS.

WE DEMAND That equal invalidity and old age pensions be paid for people of ALL races,
Homes and proper care for ALL aged and sick people.
National medical services for ALL sick people.
Adequate and equal hospital services for ALL people.
Increased cost of living allowances adequate to meet the rising cost of living.
That all African workers in all spheres of employment be covered by unemployment insurance and illness allowances.
The consolidation of part of the cost of living allowance into basic wages.
That no person be required to carry a pass or reference book.
Equal rights for ALL people.

WE DEMAND THESE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS FOR ALL PEOPLE.

WE DEMAND FOR ALL WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The right to vote.
The right to be elected to all State, Provincial or Municipal bodies.
Full opportunities for employment in all spheres of work.
Equal pay for equal work.
Equal rights with men in property, in marriage, and in the guardianship of our children.

AND TOGETHER WITH OTHER WOMEN ALL OVER THE WORLD

WE DEMAND The banning of atomic and hydrogen bombs.
The use of the atom for peaceful purposes and the betterment of the world.
That there shall be NO MORE WAR.
That there shall be PEACE AND FREEDOM FOR OUR CHILDREN.

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- ✓ Liz Abrahams
- Ray Alexander
- Amina Cachalia
- Helen Joseph
- Virginia Mngomo
- Mary Moodley
- Lilian Ngoyi
- Dora Tamana
- Katie White