

HISTORY OF THE FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN

The Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) was launched at a conference on the 17th of April 1954. Over 200 enthusiastic delegates met 'to discuss women's problems and promote women's rights'. A Women's Charter, which set out basic demands for:- creches; equal opportunities for women; equal pay; maternity rights and benefits; and the removal of influx control and racial discrimination, was adopted.

1. Aims of FEDSAW

The conference set out the AIMS of FEDSAW as follows:-

- to create a broad-based, non-racial organisation, to unite women and work towards full liberation;
- to strengthen, build and bring together women's groups through joint campaigns;
- to organise women around day-to-day issues like rent and electricity increases; food price increases; removals; creches; township facilities; and bus fare increases;
- to link local demands of women to national struggles;
- to demand an equal role for women in society, and in the political struggle.

2. How did FEDSAW organise?

Women were thus organised at two levels. Firstly, to put forward 'women's demands' and, secondly, to play an active role in the national campaigns, like the Defiance Campaign.

FEDSAW encouraged women to participate in planning the Congress of the People in 1955. Women collected 'women's demands' for the Freedom Charter.

That year a 'Congress of Mothers' was organised to discuss ways in which women could implement the aims of the Freedom Charter.

FEDSAW's focus throughout its existence was on basic problems women experienced. There were protests against municipal beerhalls which stole a major source of income from women.

FEDSAW demanded proper accommodation for migrant workers, and played a major role in forming alternate schools during the boycotts of Bantu Education. The women organised for a better life for their children - and the success of the 'potato boycotts', to protest against exploitation of child labour on farms, was a strong demonstration of their organisational skill and determination.

FEDSAW spoke out against rent increases which posed an added burden for women, but the most energy and militancy was put into the Anti-Pass Campaigns of the 1950s. Since the government's attempts to introduce passes for women in 1952, FEDSAW led a concerted and organised campaign against what was seen as a threat to the safety of women, to employment in urban areas, and to the unity of families.

Women in the OFS marched to magistrates' offices to protest. In Zeerust and Winburg, they burnt their passes. In Johannesburg they courted arrest. Thousands of women - in urban and rural areas, in factories and communities - refused to take out passes. This massive show of solidarity

led to a march by women in 1955, and a demonstration at the Union Buildings by 20 000 women on the 9th of August 1956. On this historic day women were led by Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Lillian Ngoyi and submitted thousands of petitions to Minister Strydom. The song they sang:

"Strydom, you have struck a rock;
You shall be killed"

Lives on each year as our National Women's Day song.

The strength of FEDSAW arose from its focus on basic problems that affect women. And its ability to reach out to a wide network of women all over South Africa.

It is this struggle that we must carry forward - to realise the demands enshrined in the Women's Charter and the full equality of all women in all spheres of society.

3. How was FEDSAW structured?

Many women's groups existed all over the country. These groups were united under the umbrella of the Federation of South African Women. The women belonged to women's groups which fought the day-to-day struggles of women. But, most of the women came from the political organisations of that time, including some trade unions.

These were: the ANCWL, the South African Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People's Congress. Women from the Food and Canning Workers Union joined in mass.

A National Executive was elected at the launching conference. And, in each province, a Regional Executive was set up.

In this way, the Federation of South African Women could draw on a network of women throughout the country.

