

STANDING UP but not being counted

Will women's interests be looked after in the New South Africa?

That all depends on the hand we have in its making, writes

Zubeida Jaffer, a member of the ANC's Women's League

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The young man lunged forward and I thought I was about to die. He didn't do it but the effect could not

could not be an opponent of apartheid and not be equally committed to fight sexism because the two, for me, had become intimately intertwined.

Now out of jail and another five years on, there is hope for a democratic future. But the new South Africa must not only treat blacks as equals. We must make sure that women are accorded the same dignity. To do this women must be present at the negotiating table where far-reaching decisions will be taken about our future. If we sit back and believe that the detail of negotiating that new future will be taken care of by the men, we will have no voice to ensure that our rights are protected.

And it can so easily be an all-male affair. By including two women in its delegation when it met with the government at Groote Schuur early last year the African National Congress attempted to address the issue. At its subsequent meeting with the government in Pretoria, however, no women were present.

Will the key decisions about our future be taken by black and white males with little or no participation by the women of this country who make up half the population?

For the majority of men in our country, women's rights are just not an issue. Despite progressive statements that have been made by our organisation, women who have been active in politics know there is a vast difference between policy and practice. The most enlightened of our men think sexual harassment, abortion and wife-battering are problems of a personal nature and not of political or social consequence. They are considered best dealt with within the home or by committees, priests and imams. They are not matters for public discussion and public censure.

While the participation of women in all aspects of political life is considered a priority within the ANC,

there is little thought given to how this is to be achieved. When a member of my local ANC branch argued that women needed to be represented on our branch executive, he was opposed by both the men and women present. 'Everybody should have an equal chance,' somebody said. 'Why particularly women? That's discrimination,' said another.

We know from experience that it will be the outstanding women who will be elected on to a committee, alongside a group of men who are not expected to be quite so exemplary.

It is not 'discriminatory' to push women into the leadership. Affirmative action can only re-adjust an imbalance that has left most of us pretty voiceless until now. The ANC Women's League has realised this and now want the organisation to ensure that 30% of all people nominated for any position within the ANC be women. They further want 30% of the national executive of the ANC to be women. Currently only three of the 35 are women - Ruth Mompati, Gertrude Shope and Jackie Molefe.

They are no longer prepared to take a back seat. Leading league member and recently returned exile, Nosiviwe Mapisa says she is not in favour of 'token' women in the ANC leadership: 'But we have women within the movement of the right calibre to ensure that those nominated will be genuinely worthy,' she says. 'Sexism is so entrenched in our society and can only be changed if women are represented in all decision-making bodies. Once women have a voice, they can use it to deal with questions like abortion and contraception.'

For this 34-year-old activist, who spent two spells in detention, who left behind her two-year-old son when she fled from her East London home into exile in '84, coming home has been a rude awakening. The boy, brought up by her parents, is now eight and, says Nosiviwe, no longer a child but a 'little man'.

GENDER
(Articles by
Z. Jaffer)

*In 1980, Zubeida Jaffer was detained, for a total of two months, under the General Laws Amendment Act and then under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act. She was later charged with possession of banned books and acquitted. In 1985 she was detained for six weeks under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act and was released without being charged

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I stood trembling after his heavy hands struck my body. Then this burly Afrikaans police captain called in a junior security police officer and said: 'Rape her'.

The young man lunged forward and I thought I was about to die. He didn't do it but the effect could not have been much different. I was terrified. Vulnerable. A woman alone. Trapped on the sixth floor of the Sallam Building in Port Elizabeth. The year was 1980, August 1980.*

At times there were two men interrogating me, then there were three, then four, then five. Tall, strong, vicious men.

Here I was not allowed to forget that I was not only black but also a woman. The abuse never seemed to stop. 'Answer the questions or we'll sleep on you. You are just a mattress.'

Five years later and in detention again.* I did not want them to know I was pregnant. I knew it would never stop. I wanted my baby. I wanted it so much. But in spite of my silence the police knew I was pregnant – it had been in the newspapers when I was detained.

'If you do not want to cooperate, I will make you drink a chemical to kill your baby. Think of your child. Don't think of yourself.'

I thought of my child. I wanted it. I struggled, not knowing what to do. I was a woman about to be a mother.

I was standing face to face with the epitome of a racism and sexism in our society which just had to be fought. I

could not be an opponent of apartheid and not be equally committed to fight sexism because the two, for me, had become intimately intertwined.

Now out of jail and another five years on, there is hope for a democratic future. But the new South Africa must not only treat blacks as equals. We must make sure that women are accorded the same dignity. To do this women must be present at the negotiating table where far-reaching decisions will be taken about our future. If we sit back and believe that the detail of negotiating that new future will be taken care of by the men, we will have no voice to ensure that our rights are protected.

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For this 34-year-old activist, who spent two spells in detention, who left behind her two-year-old son when she fled from her East London home into exile in '84, coming home has been a rude awakening. The boy, brought up by her parents, is now eight and, says Nosiviwe, no longer a child but a 'little man'.

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Raised by an older generation, her son has become a victim of sexual stereotypes: 'When I want to kiss or cuddle him . . . he holds back because he is a boy. I've heard him tell his aunt to be quiet because he is talking to his grandfather 'and we are men'. And I find that he thinks there are chores he cannot do around the house because girls should do them. I'm angry that I was not there for him so he would be different. But I'm hopeful that it is still not too late,' she says.

Visiting London recently, I spent a week in a house run by exiled South African men. I marvelled at the sight of these men cooking and cleaning and seeing to themselves. After the first day or two though, because of my presence, it was possible for them to slip into their old ways.

Back home, they have loving mothers and wives and sisters waiting for them who most certainly will lavish care and attention on them, sweeping away the years of taking responsibility for their own existence.

Are we to blame? The mothers. The sisters. The wives. Why is it that so many of us have participated in the fight against apartheid, yet very few of us hold leading positions within our movement?

Even at the launching rally of the Women's League in Durban last August, men were once again predominant. That afternoon the drum majorettes, the male bodyguards, the dominance of male speakers and the failure to highlight the specific pain experienced by women did little to inspire confidence.

But the launching of the League as an independent organisation in itself does represent a major step forward for us. It does say something. It says that sexism is ingrained in our lives and the development of a non-sexist ethos will require that we critically challenge all aspects of our conduct.

We know that this will be fraught with difficulty. Not only will men resist the changes but also older women who believe in many age-old customs. Take the question of *lobola*, the traditional African bride-wealth, for instance. Although older women are more conservative, younger women are generally critical of this tradition.

'Like many younger people I consider *lobola* demeaning to women,' says Khosie Xaba, who left the country as a teenager in '76 to work for the ANC. 'My husband agrees. But now that we are back in South Africa, his parents and mine are already talking of



getting together to discuss it.'

Today the ANC is once more a legal political party, after years of operating in exile and underground. Many who have never been politically active are rushing to join. These new members within the ANC have a strong commitment to eliminating racism but have little or no understanding of the wrongs of sexism.

And when we women want to tackle their sexist perceptions, we are warned by our male comrades that we have to take it easy. Some men have real fears, they say, and cannot immediately understand what we are saying. They feel too threatened. It's reminiscent of the 'white fears' bogey that is constantly held up as reason for not moving faster to dismantle apartheid.

It makes me so angry when I think that we are always expected to shelve our concerns. For so long now we have

had to forego concern about problems that we specifically face, in the interest of a broader national political agenda. At the consultative conference of the Women's League held at the time of its public launch, the greater part of the discussions focused on the Natal violence. Little if any attention was given to 'women's issues'.

It's going to be no easy task to insist that we cannot confine our discussions to the Natal violence. As members of the ANC we are committed to do this through our branch structures, but when we attend meetings of the Women's League, we go there because of a particular need to discuss those problems which only we women experience.

How we resolve this tension will greatly influence the speed of the League in tackling sexist practices. At least we have the advantage that ►

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the national executive of our organisation has made a comprehensive policy statement on this question.

On 2 May last year it said genuine equality will have to be based on a real understanding of gender oppression. Efforts are also underway to draw up a Charter of Women's Rights. The Women's League is spearheading a national campaign to determine women's needs which will be incorporated into this charter that will guide a future government on women's issues in the new, non-sexist South Africa.

Painfully aware of our limitations but proud too of our many achievements, I couldn't help wondering what women in the country's white political parties were doing to ensure that their voices be heard during this decisive period in our history.

I called up some leading women in the National Party and the Democratic Party to hear what they had to say.

I was astonished to discover that women within the National Party, through their organisation, Vroue Aksie, largely busy themselves with informing women about initiatives being taken by their husbands.

But even this is a significant move away from earlier days when their organisation was oriented towards 'social get-togethers for the ladies'. Chairman of the Transvaal Vroue Aksie, Mrs Antoinette du Plessis, who automatically holds this position because her husband, Barend, is the Transvaal National Party leader, attributes this shift to the efforts made by Mrs Marika de Klerk.

'Mrs De Klerk, when her husband was still leader of the Transvaal, built up Vroue Aksie into a more action-directed organisation, instead of an organisation that only makes fudge for the men. That's still the role men foresee for us,' she said.

These women within Vroue Aksie, however, see themselves as playing a 'behind-the-scenes' role in the negotiating process. 'Women are really the power behind the throne. We are very often the people who form the minds of the men by informal discussion. We play such an important part in the informal politics of the country. We can actually get men to calm down or get them to really do a war dance,' she says.

Like many women in the NP ranks, Mrs Du Plessis sees no reason to fight for women's rights. 'If we talk about negotiations, it's not actually to protect any rights of women. We would rather like to have discussions towards a peaceful South Africa. In a peaceful South Africa, I feel that our rights will be in order,' she said.

Yet after more than four decades as the

ruling party, the National Party has only three women in parliament and five on the President's Council. One is Martha Olkers, also the Deputy Mayor of Grahamstown, who says the role of women in a new South Africa is discussed at branch level in the NP, although the women don't 'make too big an issue of it - the issue of getting the constitution accepted was so much more important.'

The other problem, she says, is which women to put on a negotiating team: 'In our senior group [of the National Party] there is no female. Rina Venter is most senior but she will not be included because being a new member, she is low down on the cabinet protocol list,' she says.

'They should have involved us earlier so that some of us would have been in the top structures. It's a lesson for them. I think there should be women because women have always been the go-betweens and negotiators between our husbands and children and everything else.'

Women's problems - such as abortion, safe contraception and childcare - will have to be addressed only after a new constitution is in place, she says: 'I can't see any way that negotiations will break down because some people are against abortion.'

Within the Democratic Party I found a greater commitment to the need for women to participate in negotiations but little hope that DP women would in fact be there.

The only way women will be represented at the negotiating table, says Dr Anita Worrall of the DP Women's Forum, is if they come together across political parties to lobby strongly for such representation. Now, she says, the Women's Forum is reaching out to women from other groups so that such a lobby will be a reality.

As within the National Party, the debate among women in the DP is more about general constitutional matters than about specific female issues, according to the only female member of the DP's national executive, Dr Esther Lategan. 'The concern is that the constitution should make provision not to discriminate against women,' she said.

Dr Worrall, however, says that DP women have gone so far as to study the '58 United Nations convention on the elimination of discrimination and hope to pressure the government - present or future - to become a signatory to this convention. 'That convention is very important in that it acts as a bill of rights for women,' she says. 'We believe we must create awareness amongst women about the problems they have.'

Affirmative action - promoting competent women at every opportunity - is the answer for George city councillor, DP member and former head of the women's military college in George, Hilda Burnett. 'I think it's very important that the constitution should make provision for women and if

necessary, some affirmative action should be taken to entrench women's rights. If we don't do it now, I don't know when it will be possible,' she says.

Surprisingly, the only woman member of parliament for many years and veteran human rights campaigner, Helen Suzman, does not believe it to be particularly important that women be present at the negotiating table. She places her hopes on a bill of rights. 'I don't think there is a special niche required for women as long as there is a bill of rights which safeguards the civil rights of every individual. There could not then be any special disabilities because a Bill of Rights would surely include a clause which would militate against any discrimination against women,' she says.

The white women I interviewed were, on the whole, very distant from the problems confronting the majority of South African women. Issues such as birth control and wife-battering seem not to feature prominently on their agendas.

Their easy acceptance of the fact that they were not likely to be at the negotiating table was not something that I had expected to find.

Within my own organisation I had so often despaired, believing that so much still had to be done to ensure women their rightful place. Now our position does not appear quite so bleak. We represent a much stronger lobby within our organisation than white women represent in theirs. How adequately we will be represented at the negotiating table, however, will be an important indicator of how strong we really are.

Despite the enormous difficulties confronting women in whichever political organisation they may find themselves, the fact that they are moving towards forming themselves into organised lobbies to make their voices heard represents a major step forward for the women of our country.

Their efforts, however disparate, will challenge the fundamentals and help carve out a place of greater meaning for women in a New South Africa - a South Africa where no woman will stand defenceless as I did, against as group of men determined to enforce a system of racism and sexism that distorted so many of our lives.

■ **Organising Women** is one of the issues that'll be discussed at the University of Natal Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa. The conference runs from 30 January to 2 February. At the University of the Witwatersrand conference on women last November, attended by 400 activists, including Namibian Cabinet Minister Dr Libertine Amathila and Mrs Frene Ginwala of the ANC's London office, and representing more than 70 organisations, Mrs Ruth Mompoti of the ANC's national executive stressed, 'The time for action is now... if we wait, we'll be left out again.' ☺