

A change of heart

. . . . that's what many women who took part in IDASA's Transvaal women's conference experienced

By BARBARA KLUGMAN

WHAT IS it that makes people reconsider their attitudes to themselves and each other? What sort of experiences give people the opportunity to re-evaluate their beliefs and lifestyles?

These were among the questions debated by a group of women from different organisations who met to plan the Transvaal women's conference on women and democracy which was facilitated by IDASA in March. Two different forces brought these women together. Firstly, IDASA nationally had planned to have women's conferences in all major centres in the country. However, dynamics within extra-parliamentary anti-apartheid structures in the Transvaal made it imperative that the conference should be set up in consultation with other anti-apartheid organisations.

One trend emerged immediately when the group began its discussions: a sense that conferences based on input from "experts" though often fascinating in the information they offer, do not always challenge participants to re-evaluate their lives or views, since participants are often passive listeners. This view led us to consider how else we might address the question of democracy. The challenge to us became clear: we should attempt to offer an experience of democracy in action; not an input, not a lecture, but a practice.

And with this in mind, we decided to experiment with a new way of bringing people together; not to hear from experts, but to hear from each other, to talk to each other and to feel, personally, what it might be like to live in a society in which people of all races interact with each other, listen to each other, and communicate honestly with each other.

The "conference" became a weekend workshop based on small group interactions. Women from the business world, professionals, domestic workers, factory workers and anti-apartheid workers; unionists, community organisers and researchers all met, face to face in groups of 10 to 12 people. With two



"Living" non-racially at the Transvaal conference.

facilitators per group, they discussed their lives and their experiences.

Each group seemed almost to be a microcosm of the South African experience: at least the women's side of that experience. The women discussed their work, their families and their experiences of violence. The last day, Sunday, they discussed their visions of a future South Africa and the values that underpinned those visions. They also discussed and developed long term and short term goals for themselves as participants in the creation of that future South Africa.

At the beginning some women were

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disappointed by the group structure. They were expecting a conference and found themselves having to share themselves. Yet by the end of the conference, these very women were expressing delight. One woman who had begun with disdain but now, feeling warm and excited, said: "I've never had the chance to really talk to a black woman before." It offered a chance for women to step into each other's shoes and to imagine how it felt to wear them."

The intention of the groups, and the role of the facilitators, was to create a comfortable space in which women felt free to talk openly without judging each other, and thereby to explore new ways of being, to explore a more democratic way of relating.

Was it successful? Most of the women in their groups and in their evaluation forms, said that they had enjoyed the "conference". Most of them asked for more, for follow-up. Some groups arranged to meet each other again, some specifically to see to what extent women had been able to carry out the short term goals they had set themselves. Within the groups most women felt that they had developed a deeper self

understanding, and a deeper understanding of others. They had moved politically, not by joining a new organisation, or by taking on a new ideology, but by experiencing the positive effects of "living" non-racially, by acknowledging each other's experiences and views, and in the warmth and respect generated within the groups.

It needs to be said that not all women felt this way. Some still yearned to hear from the well-known women at the conference; some felt uncomfortable or angry about the group experience. Still, the conference seems to have been a great success and in response to participants' requests for follow-up the planning group is considering a number of possibilities, as well as the format of future workshop-conferences. In addition to the informal reunions arranged by groups in their own right, a general follow-up "in-put" conference is being planned by IDASA.

The experiences of a number of women capture the general value of the weekend. One woman who had arrived at the conference depressed, told how she felt physically and emotionally revitalised by the end of the weekend. Her sense of being "held" by her group, of being able to share her very painful personal experience of life under apartheid in an atmosphere of respect and of tremendous support, left her feeling at peace with herself and healthy!

Another woman who had begun by calling herself "just a domestic worker" felt pride at the tremendous respect the group members expressed towards her and about the struggle she is waging to improve the lives of the members of her community.

The conclusion of the facilitators and planning group was that the conference moved people on an attitudinal level rather than a cognitive one, and that, in our view, is after all where real communication begins: with the heart, not the head, in the process rather than the product.

□ Barbara Klugman was one of the group facilitators and a member of the conference planning committee.