

**Women are demanding action against patriarchal ideology and practice with growing unanimity and confidence. SHIREEN BADAT reports on a pioneering initiative of the Women's National Coalition.**



*PREGS GOVENDER: Building a culture of support among women.*

**T**HE high incidence of violence against women in South Africa is a national scandal, the country's guilty secret, according to a report submitted to the Transitional Executive Council by the Women's National Coalition (WNC).

It is estimated, for example, that one out of every two South African women has suffered or will suffer the trauma of rape; and that one out of every four South African girls will have been sexually abused – most often by a family member – by the age of 16. Violence occurs across the board, damaging women of every race and class.

This undeclared war against women is one of the areas women from across the country see as most in need of attention from a new government, according to the WNC report.

The report notes that women are no longer prepared to be submissive, silent victims, and demands vigorous action from the government and the police against perpetrators of violence against women. It records the fact that women expect the media to help create greater awareness of the problem, so that social and community pressures can be brought to bear against men who abuse women.

The report rejects the contemptuously light sentences often passed on rapists, pointing out how this underscores the fact that the legal system serves men rather than all people. It also highlights the need for the legal system to discard the patriarchal idea that how a man treats his spouse is beyond the purview of the courts.

Other issues the report identifies as top priorities for attention are the inferior status accorded to women by religion, culture and customary law; sexism in the workplace; the social constraints placed on women; political awareness among women; and the nurturing of female leadership.

The WNC report is a summary of the findings of the WNC charter campaign, the most comprehensive research study of women's concerns yet undertaken in South Africa. The charter campaign was the major task the WNC set itself after 80 organisations, representing about two million women, decided to join forces in April 1992.

## **'Guilty secret' in SA**

The idea was to collect and collate data on the needs and priorities of women, with the long-term aim of developing a Charter for Women, by means of a massive national campaign involving workshops, interviews, questionnaires, seminars and rallies nation-wide.

The process envisaged was that the document formulated from this vast process of consultation would be discussed at regional conferences and finalised at a national conference scheduled for the end of February.

The report submitted to the TEC points out that the status of women has to be raised

if South Africa is to face up to pressing social problems like the population explosion and Aids. If women were treated as equal partners, such issues as contraception could be intelligently discussed, and unwanted births and Aids combated simultaneously.

On the issue of economic status, the report condemns the fact that women are still left out in the cold in terms of access to loans and subsidies. It calls for an urgent review of standard practice by businesses, government and institutions so that this kind of discrimination against women stops.

Another issue arousing increasing mili-

## Comings and goings in Idasa

tance among women is how traditions of authoritarianism and male dominance impinge on women's political rights. Often expected to toe the political line established by men, women are starting to say "no".

Women are also uniting around the idea that the only way to advance the cause of women is a massive influx of women into government structures at all levels. Women are increasingly sceptical of political parties which seem reluctant to take practical steps to advance women's rights, irrespective of how enlightened their policies may seem on paper.

### *'Many women believe that men use culture to protect their positions of privilege'*

Among other points made in the report are:

- Some 65 percent of rural women cannot read or write. Development projects such as voter education are complicated by this illiteracy and by the subservience to men forced on rural women.

- Many women believe that men use "culture" to protect their positions of privilege and dominance, and that "culture" – whether African or Western in derivation – is hostile to women.

- Women from all sectors are impatient with injustice in the workplace and demand equal pay for work of equal value. They also demand that appointments and promotions be based on qualifications, experience and aptitude, not gender, and that companies act firmly against sexual harassment in the workplace.

- Paid maternity leave should be a standard item in women's job packages and paternity leave should be considered.

- The provision of creches and health care facilities at the workplace should be considered seriously by companies and institutions.

The future of the WNC, up for discussion at the national conference at the end of February, was uncertain when *Democracy in Action* went to press. Whatever delegates decide, however, it is unlikely that women will easily surrender the co-operative network that has delivered some impressive results.

WNC National Project Manager Pregs Govender points out that the coalition does not exclude other initiatives. "One of the challenges of the process, as this work continues, is how to build a culture where women support one another. The question is how to engage with power in ways that aren't hierarchical and aren't competitive? How do we avoid falling into that pattern yet remain realistic enough to be able to take women's issues forward?"

**S**IMON Jabulani Ntombela has been appointed regional director of Idasa's Natal office. He replaces Steve Collins who, with regional co-ordinator Charles Talbot, left the organisation in December.

The office had to fill two regional co-ordinator posts; Simon's previous position and one other. The new appointees are



*Simon Ntombela, Natal regional director.*

George Hlungwane and Tiki Dumisani Phungula. George is currently working for a youth organisation based in Pietermaritzburg and he will join Idasa in March. He is a religious science graduate with an honours degree in theology and he has worked with students in political and religious bodies in various campus structures. He also has a strong interest in the youth.

Tiki has taught in township schools and worked in various cultural and civic organisations. His main interest is civil society and its development. He is also an artist and has had work shown at exhibitions and galleries.

The Democracy Training Centre in Johannesburg sadly bids farewell to tutor Lufuno Nevhotalu who has joined Information Services Management in Johannesburg. Idasa regrets losing his considerable training expertise.

The Pretoria office reports that it was a sad moment in Idasa Transvaal when Kerry Harris, employed for the last four years, left on Friday 11 February. Kerry's husband was transferred to Durban and the family has left to join him.

We thank Kerry for her special services over the past years. She will be sorely missed, not only in the Transvaal office but in Idasa as a whole.

The Port Elizabeth office will have to make do without Max Mamase for six months as he is on sabbatical until July. Receptionist Vivian Sontsonga is on sick leave following a taxi accident. Doctors have ordered a three-month recuperation period and Vuyiswa Matshaya will be taking over Vivian's responsibilities. Idasa wishes her a speedy recovery.

Cape Town head office welcomes Bryant Tindleni and Mandla Makubalo to the Radio Project. Mandla worked as an assistant producer at the SABC in Sea Point, Cape Town, as well as a credit controller for a local bank.

You might recognise Bryant from a popular television sitcom, and he still works as a freelance actor and director when he has the time.

We wish the media department's production editor, Ronel Sheffer, well as she leaves for a six-month sabbatical. Until her return in August, Moira Levy will be taking over her responsibilities co-ordinating the media department.



*Kerry Harris left Transvaal office.*

The Bloemfontein office has also seen a few changes. Regional director Henning Myburgh left at the end of the year to go into farming full-time. Kobus van Loggerenberg, who was the office project manager, has also left Idasa. He has joined a community newspaper in Bloemfontein.