



'The Pretoria demonstration showed that we women can do something about our oppression and suffering — we can get up and work together' — a woman who took part in the march.

Taking the march forward

AUGUST NINTH is the day 20,000 women marched on the Pretoria Union Buildings to protest against the extension of passes to African women.

The spirit of unity and defiance these women showed is celebrated every year by thousands of South Africans as National Women's Day, a highpoint in the people's struggle against apartheid.

Yet, today, 26 years later, black women are still the most exploited and oppressed section of the population.

They bear the burden of a triple oppression. Their sex, class and race together make them the lowest paid workers, the most vulnerable to dismissal, retrenchment and unemployment. They also fill the worst jobs — domestic service and farm labour — those offering the least protection to the employee.

As wives, mothers and head of households, they bear the brunt of poverty caused by high inflation and a skyrocketing cost-of-living. It is women who have to deal with sick and malnourished children, inadequate health care and overcrowding.

In addition to these burdens, women are also oppressed by their men, who are themselves exploited and humiliated by the yoke of oppression. Much of women's ill-treatment by their men results from old tribal values which say men are superior to women.

For many years, women have carried this bitter burden in silence. But recently, women's organisations, committed to involving women as equals in the struggle, have once again emerged. The promise of that great march to Pretoria so many years ago, is now being taken forward by organisations like the United Women's Organisation in Cape Town and the Federation of South African Women in the Transvaal together with those organising women in unions.

This is not to say that any great victories have been won yet, or the way forward is without problems. But there is an increasing recognition and understanding of the role women have to play. As organisation proceeds, there is a clearer understanding of the specific problems that women face.



Bread-and-butter struggles are drawing more women into collective action.

In the trade union movement organisers daily confront the effects of women's bargaining position: they are paid less than men; they are retrenched first; they are vulnerable to sexual harassment by foremen and supervisors and they are often forced to have dangerous contraceptive injections (Depo-pravera) or risk losing their jobs.

The most common problem amongst working class women is having to work a double-day. On top of their 8-hour day in the factories, they also have to feed, clothe and care for their families. This leaves little time for union or community matters especially when husbands or fathers are not yet convinced that 'their' women need to be involved in the struggle.

'It makes me so irritated when I come home and find my husband

lying on the bed reading the paper, knowing how hard I work — and he still expects me to do everything for him and the house.' These are the words of one trade unionist but it is a common experience amongst women.

In the communities there are also problems. Women are scared to stand up and be involved. Their daily experience of being at the very bottom of the heap has made many feel unconfident, scared and inadequate. This is all besides the fact that women have so little time for anything besides their jobs and their household labours.

This situation has led to the idea of a 'family union' being raised by one woman trade unionist. 'Men will be disciplined to share resources and not only salary. The burden of babies and housework must also be



Women labour at work and at home. There is little time left for other activities.

shared.' She suggests that the way to start pushing for such changes is through discussion with 'our husbands and brothers. Without discussing it I don't think we will ever get anywhere. We will just have to keep the burden on our shoulders.'

Women organisers, whether in trade unions or in communities, also have specific problems. Often, they find they are not taken seriously because of their sex.

One woman trade unionist described a problem of organising: 'When I started work it embarrassed me when I approached the men in the metal industries. They weren't interested in what I was there for they were just interested in me.'

Recently-established women's organisations are keenly aware of these problems. Through a commitment to grassroots organising they hope to mobilise women around the issues most immediate to them: those of health, childcare, food prices and housing amongst others.

They also see the need for ongoing education programmes and for discussion so women can teach themselves to regain the pride and independence that has been beaten out of them through constant

humiliation by bosses, officials and their own men.

Democracy is a cornerstone of these organisations. As a member of one of them has said, 'control of our own organisations is a step towards taking control of our own lives.'

Democracy for these women means a full and active involvement in their organisations so that they can regain a sense of their own worth.

'Of course things do not always run smoothly. We are learning through our own efforts and mistakes. Taking decisions together means that A.I.I. our members must know what the implications of a particular decision will be... this method may seem slow and clumsy, but since we are all learning, we have sometimes had to sacrifice short-term efficiency for long-term understanding.'

Women throughout this country have realised that only through united and collective action will they be able to struggle towards solutions to their problems, be able to participate fully and equally in all organisations of the oppressed and begin to be able to imagine for themselves what a free society would be like.