



WOMEN SPEAK

"Kulumani Makhosikazi/ Buang Basadi / Women Speak" was the theme of the conference organised by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), Transvaal Region.

The conference was held over three days in November 1988 in Johannesburg. It was an exciting conference. Women writers spoke about their work. Both women and men from the audience gave their views about women's oppression and the difficulties facing women.

COSAW says that they decided to have a conference on women and writing because "it seems as though there are times when the issue of the oppression of women is pushed to one side in the battle against the apartheid government. But it is an issue we have to deal with if we hope to achieve true liberation in South Africa. We need to understand why there are so few women in leadership positions in trade unions and the democratic movement as a whole in South Africa. We need to understand why there are so few

black women writers, actresses, musicians and artists in South Africa. And when we understand these things, we need to find ways of changing them so that women play an equal role in the development of South Africa."

The conference opened with a talk by Amanda Kwadi of the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), followed by poems and prose by women writers. All sessions looked at the difficulties women experience as women. Three women writers - Nise Malange, Rozalin Napo and Itumeleng Mofokeng spoke about their experiences as women writers.

Another session looked at the very big problem which is that most women in this country have never had the chance to learn how to read and write. Women from the English Literacy Project (ELP) and Use, Speak and Write English (USWE) talked about this problem. It was felt that teaching people to read and write was an important part of our struggle for liberation in South Africa. SPEAK

Collective talked about our magazine and the difficulties of reaching women as readers and writers. The session on images of women in literature looked at how women are shown in writing. The point was made that women are often shown as sex symbols, or as mothers, but very seldom as people with a life, dreams and feelings of their own.

The feeling was strong that women's position in society must change so that women are free to participate in society as a whole. It was agreed that problems like women's involvement in organisation, women's literacy and the way women are seen, are all problems that must be taken up by organisations fighting for a new South Africa.

Unfortunately even though the focus was women, most of the audience was men. One speaker from the audience said to the men, "Next time you all come to a meeting ask the women you know to accompany you."

The audience had a lot to say about many of the things discussed. And many people came up to the front to read their poems. One speaker from the audience told people to take these problems about women's lives seriously. He said, "Very often women stand up at meetings and say they want freedom. But they do nothing to challenge their oppression in their own homes. And there are men who do the same. They say a lot at meetings about women's oppression but then go home to be big oppressors themselves."

The conference was a beginning. It raised problems faced by women in writing. We hope COSAW will continue to have such discussion and that they are able to take some action to ensure that women speak in many more voices throughout South Africa. Of the members of COSAW in the Transvaal very few are Black women. This must change so that women are seen and heard in greater numbers in COSAW and all progressive organisations in South Africa. ●



Mpoetsi from ELP and Shamim from SPEAK talk at the COSAW Conference.

Photographs by KOBIE FOURIE, SPEAK