



For centuries, South Africa has been ruled by a white, male-dominated minority. Now the first non-racial, democratic elections are coming up. What does this mean? Why should women vote in the coming elections?

Unemployed worker Sibongile Maluka from Kwa-Ndebele says she plans to vote for a party which will see to the needs of people at grassroots level. She thinks women are excluded from politics because they are told their place is in the kitchen. "This must change. Women have got to get involved if change is going to be meaningful," she stresses.

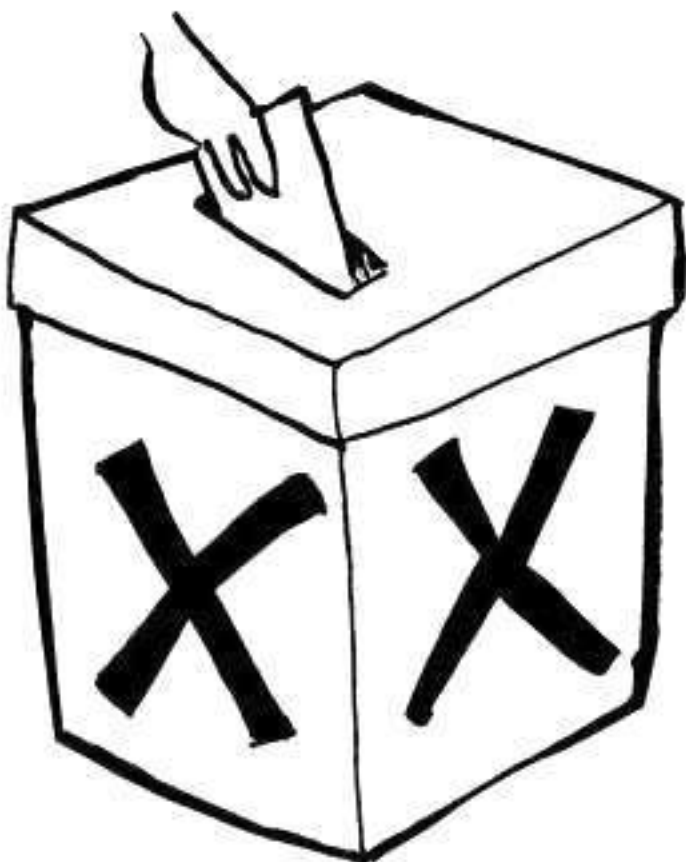
Apartheid caused misery and suffering for millions of black people, but most of all for black women.

Women must vote - not just to get rid of apartheid - but to make sure a truly democratic society is put in its place. For women, that means voting to make sure their rights are protected and they have a say in choosing the government they want.

The law in this country at the moment treats women as minors - as if they are children who cannot make independent decisions without the consent of a father, brother or husband.

In many areas women cannot own the land they work on. Although women are often the breadwinners in their families, their right to housing is not recognised.

Most of the millions of unemployed people in this country are women. Few chances for education or training are available for women. Paid maternity leave is not a right. Women are often the last to be hired and the first to be fired. The work women do is often seen as "not important" and doesn't get paid the same as men.



Women do a double shift. When they come back from work, they have to do all the housework.

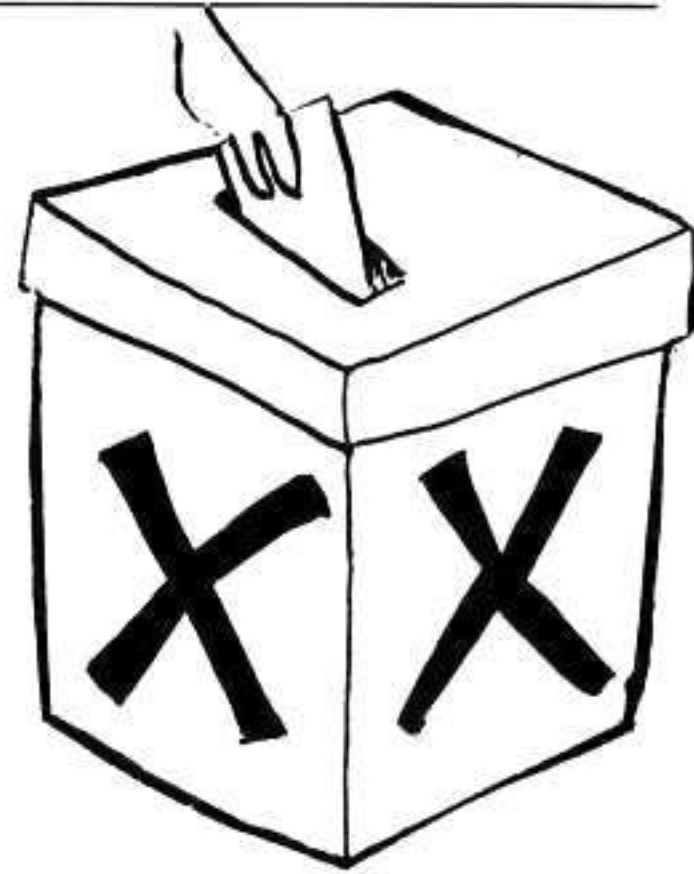
Violence against women is increasing everywhere - in the home and on the streets. What freedom of movement do women have if going out means risking rape or murder?

Now at last women have a chance to vote for changing all that. These elections mean women have some power: they can vote. Women make up slightly more than half of the voters.

"The vote will be secret. No one will know who you're voting for, not even your partner. It is one time where men cannot force us to do things we don't want to do. One of those few times where we can really make an independent decision."

If women don't use their voting power, there is a danger that after elections the main change will be black men instead of white men making all the decisions in this country!

In the past many people boycotted elections, saying they would be voting for puppet bodies without real power. This time, every woman and man must be encouraged to vote because these elections will decide the kind of democratic



society we are going to build and who will govern the country.

The new constitution and government must improve conditions for women. Women must also be part of the government. The party voted into power must be accountable to the people, especially to women.

The elections must be free and fair so everyone can vote - without fear - for the party of their choice.

Durban activist Hersheela Narsee has been involved in the struggle for women's rights for many years. She says: "The vote will be secret. No one will know who you're voting for, not even your partner. It is one time where men cannot force us to do things we don't want to do. One of those few times where we can really make an independent decision."

For the first time, all South Africans have a chance to take part in deciding what happens in our own country. We can't afford to miss this chance. Let's make sure that women's voices count when the new democratic South Africa is being built! ◉