



Photo: Peter McKenzie

What the election means for women



About 18 million black South Africans will vote for the first time in the April election. Over nine million of these new voters are women who have worked very hard to bring South Africa to this historic moment. As preparations for the elections gather momentum, many women are asking what the "new South Africa" will hold for them.

A major task facing all organisations is voter education. For the first time, the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the National Party and 20 other political parties will fight it out at the elections. Many organisations are conducting voter education to help people prepare for the elections. These include church bodies, trade unions, political parties, the media and non-

After three years of negotiations, South Africa's major political parties finally agreed on April 26-28 1994 as the dates for the country's first national, democratic elections. A 400-seat Constituent Assembly will be set up. This will draw up the South African constitution and serve as the interim government of national unity. Rachel Kagan looks at what it means for women

governmental organisations (NGOs).

The largest voter education body in the country is Matla Trust, a non-partisan (does not favour any political party) group.

A Matla Trust study says women have contributed as much as men to the country's social, economic and political

development. However, women's issues are not taken seriously. Women have suffered because of political and economic hardships and poverty. Most women still live in areas with no water, proper sanitation, transport, child care facilities and so on.

The study concludes: "Unless there is an effort to do something about the negative

aspects created by tradition, apartheid and lack of basic needs, women will be left out and robbed of their right to make good choices on voting.”

The majority of women have little to lose and a lot to change by voting. Unemployment and illiteracy is rife and 7,5 million urban blacks (more than the entire white population) live in shanties and tents without electricity or running water. The majority of black women live in rural areas, where unemployment, illiteracy and poverty are even worse.

The social and economic hardships of apartheid, combined with the complete lack of political rights for black South Africans, make voter education an enormous task.

One initiative women have taken is the campaign for a Women’s Charter. The charter outlines women’s rights to be included in the new constitution. The Women’s National Coalition (WNC), a broad-based alliance of women, launched the charter campaign in March last year. Pregs Govender of the WNC described the project: “Women know the issues they face on a daily basis and need to be involved in the campaign. This is about South African women taking the opportunity to begin changing society and their lives.”

- Among the demands women have put forward are:
- More participation of men in domestic duties;
 - Equal pay for equal work;
 - Inclusion in the political process;
 - Easier access to health

facilities;

- Equal property rights; and
- More schools.

WNC members believe that a Women’s Charter will ensure that not only men benefit from the transition to a new government.

Who will be in government? Since the elections will be based on proportional representation, people will vote for parties, not individual candidates. Each party will submit a list of names of people to stand for election. The number of those who serve will be determined by the percentage of the vote the party receives.

Women must therefore make sure that the names of the people they want to represent them are at the top of the list of the political parties they support.

They must also make sure that those women high up on the lists are people who will fight for women’s rights and gender equality.

Political violence, which has killed more than 10 000 people since February 1990, remains the biggest threat to free and fair elections.

It has taken us three years to reach the point we are at today. The decades of struggle before that must not be in vain.

Women and men have a responsibility to go to the polling stations on April 27 and vote for the party they believe represents their interest.✪

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