

ANC Women: Their Strength in the Struggle

FRENE GINWALA, a senior member of the African National Congress active in the ANC Women's Section in London, recently spoke to WIP about women's emancipation and the issues confronting women in the national liberation struggle.

What is the history of the ANC Women's Section?

Before the ANC was banned, the ANC Women's League was active in South Africa. After its banning, a separate Women's Section was set up in the 1960s as part of the external mission. Like the ANC after 1969, this includes women of all races - every woman member of the ANC is also a member of the Women's Section. Women operate within the organisational structure on the same basis as other members, but also work within the Women's Section.

The Women's and Youth Sections are two major ANC departments. The Women's Section is responsible for organising South African women in the liberation struggle and organising international support for this struggle especially among women.

What do you regard as 'women's issues'?

We do not see these as isolated from national and social liberation. Too often they are taken to mean only the liberation of women. Some of us would argue it is equally necessary to liberate men: men with chauvinistic attitudes indicate political backwardness.

The responsibility of the liberation movement is to raise all members' political consciousness, so it must deal equally with men's and women's attitudes. In the liberation struggle, we see women's liberation as something for the whole organisation to deal with. The leadership explicitly recognises that this is the task of men and women - not something women alone can do.

In an official ANC publication it was stated that: 'We must start now (if we have not started) to free ourselves from "male chauvinism" and its counterpart, "feminism"'. Can you explain what this means?

This acknowledges what I have just said. It might be preferable to refer to Western feminism, rather than feminism in general. Unlike some Western interpretations of feminism, the ANC does not see women's liberation in isolation from other forms of oppression in society. If an entire society is oppressed, then to talk of women's liberation in isolation is negative.

In South Africa, the prime issue is apartheid and national liberation. So to argue that African women should concentrate on and form an isolated feminist movement, focusing on issues of women in their narrowest sense, implies African women must fight so that they can be equally oppressed with African men.

National liberation addresses many issues. What guarantees are there that the liberation of women, the question of male chauvinism as you put it, does not get lost or postponed in the struggle for national liberation?

There is no guarantee in the national liberation struggle. The only guarantee is for women to be involved and make sure their demands are forcefully raised and dealt with.

There will never be guarantees, even if clauses are written into constitutions. The danger exists that the issues will not be taken up. This

happens in every society. But one must look at organisations' stated policy and objectives.

In the liberation movement there is stated policy which encompasses the liberation of women. This is not just in the form of additions to other policies, or throw-away statements. For example, before the 1985 Nairobi Women's Conference, the ANC and SWAPO presidents pledged that they would not consider their objectives achieved, the task completed or the struggle at an end until the women of South Africa and Namibia are fully liberated.

over the world live in countries where there are excellent stated positions, yet they are still not represented in positions of leadership.

I believe that liberation can only be achieved by women themselves, by getting involved. They must use the stated positions of their organisations to move and pressure. Women's participation in the struggle will enable them to raise issues, put these on future agendas and bring about solutions. The strength of women's organisation will determine how and when women's emancipation takes place.



African National Congress women at the 1985 Nairobi conference to mark the end of the decade of women

Women's liberation is an integral part of the liberation struggle. It is not something that will be done after liberation, and it is recognised that the liberation process will not be finished until women are liberated.

This is an excellent stated position, but it is wrong to say all you need is this sort of declaration. Many women all

Turning to the Women's Section: how does it operate, and how is it linked to the ANC?

Women are members of the ANC and the Women's Section, and participate fully and equally in the various branches of the ANC. A full-time functionary in a particular department is part of it, but in addition gains strength from

belonging to an organised women's section. The head of the Women's Section is an elected member of the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC), but there are other women also elected to the NEC.

There are women representing the ANC in a number of countries. The first women in this capacity was the chief representative in Lusaka, Gertrude Shope, who is now head of the Women's Section. At present there are other women chief representatives in Sweden and France. A previous United Kingdom chief representative was a woman.

It would be false to say this reflects in any way the full potential or talent of women in the ANC. The point is this indicates what is possible.

Are the women on the NEC voted in by the Women's Section?

No, the national conference elects the entire NEC. The Women's Section has its own appointed secretariat which is responsible for issues that affect women, how women are to be organised and ways to develop women's skills. Each region has a women's section which includes all women ANC members in that region who elect the regional women's committee.

Does the Women's Section formulate policy?

Yes. It has had a few women's conferences and the policies formulated there feed into the national movement. But national conference and the NEC are the ultimate policy making organs.

What kinds of issues have come up most recently?

The Women's Section aims to get support for women as well as the whole liberation movement. For example we have given evidence to the United Nations Human Rights Commission on how apartheid affects the lives of African women; the condition of women political prisoners, torture etc. In addition we participated in the Nairobi Conference. In January there will be a conference in support of the ANC. It will be organised by the National Assembly of Women in the UK and supported by the Women's International Democratic Federation. The Women's Section liaises with women's groups, women's sections of political parties, and trade unions.

In the organisation itself we struggled to make sure there were always creches at meetings. This is now the case, and is policy. This may seem unimportant, but ANC women cadres in Western Europe do not have supportive family structures to help with childcare.

Was this a battle?

Not really - it was a question of pointing out its importance, then dealing with practical aspects. We have now established creches so that full-time ANC functionaries can be fully active. In Tanzania we have a creche where women cadres of the ANC can go to have children. They can stay there for up to two years, then can leave the child there while they go back to their duties. There are also creches in Lusaka, because it is not ideal for women to leave their children.

This has meant that as far as possible the organisation has taken on some responsibilities so that women can operate fully in the ANC.

What about other projects or programmes of concern to women?

The Women's Section pays particular attention to training opportunities. Whenever there are training opportunities or scholarships we try to ensure women are considered. The ANC gets a lot of support for training refugees, and we make sure women are chosen. We have also taken up the issue of birth control and family planning for young women.

Would the Women's Section run workshops on these issues?

Not workshops as such. We make sure there is education and advice available, but these issues are not dealt with separately. Family planning concerns men as well as women, and there are general discussions about this.

At what level do these issues come up?

They would be discussed at the Solomon Mahlangu ANC school at Morogoro for example, and wherever there is a concentration of ANC cadres.

Women need a more supportive structure in the general society. In environments where this is not available, it is

provided. We have also looked at questions of racism and sexism in the learning process, and go through some texts and rewrite others.

Has the question of sexism or chauvinism ever been debated or brought up within the ANC itself?

Yes, of course. Policy is clear and everyone agrees these questions must be considered. But how this gets worked out in practice and what it means must continually be impressed on members. It must be stressed both to men and women, because often women will say they are not oppressed.

Both women and men must be politically educated to realise that women's emancipation is part of the liberation process, that it cannot wait, and that women's emancipation will not develop automatically if apartheid is destroyed.

These debates are included in some of the official documents and publications. Some people say these issues should not be discussed publicly, and are quite critical. But we feel they must be raised.

How does the political education process take place?

These issues arise in political education classes and in discussion within the organisation. The ANC declared 1984 the Year of Women. There was a great deal published and the classes focused on these issues.

At the last National Conference there was a specific paper and discussion on women. Statements called for more attention to be focused on women's issues, and emphasised that the end of the United Nations Decade of Women, marked by the Nairobi Conference, did not mean the end of the struggle for women's emancipation. The struggle for the active and conscious involvement of women must continue.

But how do you ensure conscious involvement. Is it enough to just mobilise women?

This varies, depending on the number of members who are fully conscious and raise these issues. We include women's issues as part of any formalised political education taking place in the movement and in its schools. Outside formal educational structures issues are

raised by members themselves. We recognise you cannot effectively mobilise women into the national liberation struggle unless you address women's demands.

In one ANC publication it was argued that women have to be organised both generally and specifically. What does this mean?

While it is important that women are ordinary ANC members, there is a very specific women's element to oppression which will not just naturally work itself out through national liberation. It is something which must be focused on and this is recognised within the ANC. The Women's Section has the crucial responsibility of ensuring that women's views feed into all aspects of national policy and drawing the world's attention to South African women's issues.

Would you say that the separate organisation of the Women's Section enables it to play this role?

If you are organised as women you can work out issues and see them more clearly. It is one thing to know theoretically that women are oppressed, but it is another to comprehend how this oppression actually affects you in your day-to-day-life.

So it is necessary to formulate strategies to overcome that oppression and to relate this to national liberation. This is something women in organisations like the Women's Section have to do. Men can comprehend this oppression intellectually but because women experience it, it is different.

Women's liberation in South Africa cannot be achieved outside of the context of the liberation struggle. And the question of women's liberation will only be taken up to the extent that women are involved in national liberation. But a problem arises because there is a tendency to see the two as separate. We have struggled to make it clear that these are not two separate issues. They are different facets of the same issue and therefore at all stages have to be seen as a whole.

Now we do not kid ourselves and say that because we understand this, the problem is solved. It is an ongoing process to be dealt with at all times. If, for example, you talk about forced removals, you must ask what this means for women?

Have a younger generation of women in the ANC raised new issues?

To some extent their involvement has made the task easier. The issues were always somewhere on the agenda but the activity and participation of younger women has raised the debates very clearly.

If older women did not have an awareness and consciousness of women's issues a conflict situation between the generations may have emerged, but this has not happened. Women active in the 1950s worked out a highly articulate and relevant programme in the Women's Charter. These demands were integrated in the Freedom Charter.

What do you think is specific to women in South African society?

People often ask why pick on South Africa when there are so many other oppressive systems? But apartheid is unique in its oppression of women. It is one of the most institutionally-organised systems of oppression which has horrific consequences in terms of women's rights, health and social conditions.

South African women have a rich history of struggle. But this strength needs to be channeled. Women are not as much in the leadership as they need to be and this must change. And the liberation movement must stop pretending that women have the same opportunities as men. The organisation is confident enough of its policy to be able to say this publicly and address itself practically to the issue.

Women must also stop behaving as if

there is no place for them above certain types of work in the organisation.

But women are also oppressed by their own men, not just apartheid.

Yes, it is not only apartheid but questions usually focus on the oppression of women in black society. One must also ask how liberated white South African women are within their own social and cultural environment? Where is the writing on the oppression of white women in South Africa? We have not seen it.

People tend to focus on black society. White women should realise their liberation lies with the national liberation movement. For it is the only organisation in South Africa, black or white, which deals with the issue of women's liberation in its proper context.

What sort of South Africa do you envisage for women after liberation?

A lot depends on how we get there. When apartheid is destroyed and there is a government based on one-person-one-vote in a unitary state, this will not automatically mean that women are adequately represented at decision making levels, or that women's rights are fully achieved.

We have a long task ahead of us, but hopefully we can lay the foundations for women's emancipation and remove the institutional problems. After liberation we will still have the problems of education and attitudes among men of all races. That is part of the political education process which we have to continue.