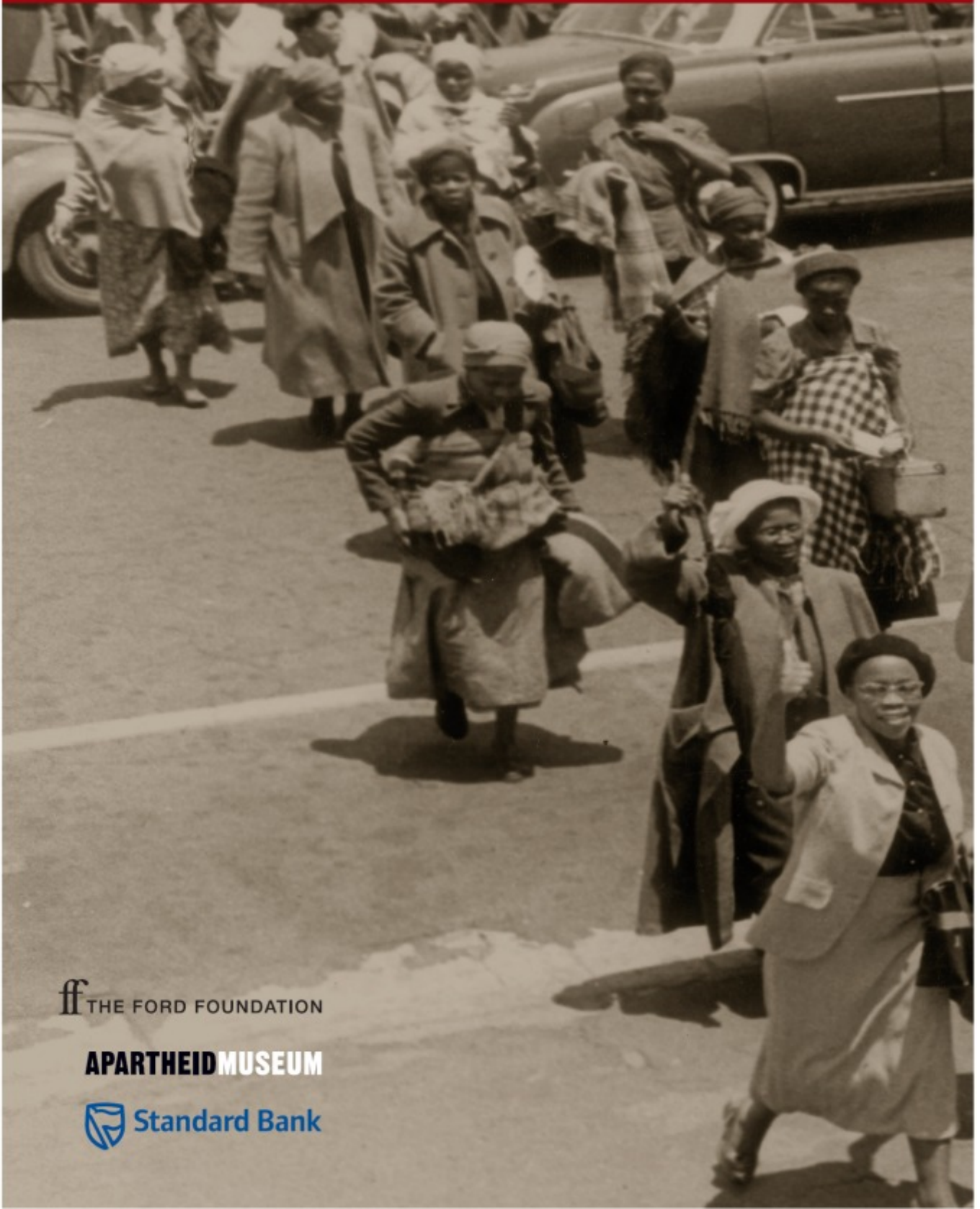


Women's struggles in 20th century South Africa



ff THE FORD FOUNDATION

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Our Triumphs and Our Tears







“The tip of the iceberg”

The pivotal role that women played in the struggle for democracy, particularly until the 1960s, has only recently been recognised. The best known of these episodes, the Women's March on the Union Buildings in 1956, was just the tip of the iceberg.

For the most part, women's struggles were not separate from those facing men. Both faced the oppression of racial discrimination and the harsh actions of a repressive regime.

But being at the forefront of resistance began to influence how women felt about their role in society and in the home. Their continued defiance in the face of persecution and hardship destroyed the myth of female subservience.

1900 - 1960

Over the last century, repeated efforts have been made to restrict the rights and freedoms of black women in South Africa.

Before white colonisation, African women could own property and possessed legal rights. These rights were lost mainly as a result of conquest and land dispossession, and African women found themselves more and more subordinate to African men, and to white colonial rule.

From the outset, they refused to accept their inferior status. Many asserted their independence by moving to the towns where they tried to create a better life for themselves. From the 1920s to the 1950s, black women were at the forefront of resistance in South Africa's main towns, squatter camps and informal settlements.

To restrict black women's access to the towns and to establish more effective controls on them when they were there, the government imposed passes on them in 1956. Urban authorities also attempted to close down squatter camps and informal settlements around the main towns. Women were forced either into controlled townships or back into the rural reserves.



Rural and Urban Women

Rural Women

Life became more difficult in the rural reserves in the early decades of the 20th century as men left to become migrant workers in the towns and cities. Women were forced to take on more agricultural work, as well as maintaining and caring for their children and the homestead. Their situation became more precarious as land became scarce.

Worse still, their legal rights to own property were reduced or removed. A law of 1927 declared them legal minors, lacking independent rights in the eyes of the law.



“Sometimes when the husband is dead or when the husband is working in Johannesburg, the women handle the cattle ...”

Quoted in B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*

Urban Women

The presence of women in towns is vital for the growth and consolidation of a permanently settled urban population.

African women played a crucial role in the process of urbanisation in South Africa. They also made an important contribution to the development and growth of a popular culture in the towns.

Women demonstrated an independence and assertiveness that often contrasted sharply with their positions in rural society. Unlike many men who worked as migrant labourers, women were more likely to make a permanent break from the rural areas. While they continued to send money back to their families on the farms and reserves, many embraced urban life with vigour.





Women in the City

“Going to Johannesburg or any of these towns was like a means to an end. There was a sense of freedom about staying on your own, and things like furniture we had seen others bring as fruits of their work in the towns urged us to follow suit.” *Naomi Setshedi*

“I wanted to leave the slavery of the farm forever.”

Quoted in M. Friedman and B. Bozzoli, Fight where we Stand

A growing number of black women came to the urban areas in search of their husbands who had migrated to seek work. Once there, they found that their husbands had often started relationships with other women or had disappeared. It was this group of women – single, independent and determined – that the urban authorities found most threatening, and sought to control.

“I had friends, who were already working in Pretoria. It was they who advised me to go there and they met me at the station when I arrived. They had also found a job for me.” *Josephine Mokotedi*

Despite the hardships they faced in the city, these women carved out new lives for themselves and often gained greater personal and economic independence. Many become domestic workers. Others become involved in informal sector activities, such as beer brewing, prostitution, washing and hawking.

Washerwomen

Many women took in laundry from white households. They would wash it, and then return it. When Africans were moved out of the centre of town into townships, their transport costs increased sharply. Although washing laundry became less attractive, it allowed women greater freedom as they worked from home, where they were able to take care of their children.





Beer brewers

Beer brewing, although illegal in the urban areas, was a common way for women to make a living. Many women achieved a large measure of economic independence through this trade. On the weekends, shebeens organised regular weekend parties where large quantities of liquor were consumed. Music and dance was the life-blood of these parties.

“You cannot sit at home and have other people work for you; stand up and do the white man’s washing and sell beer. Look at us, we do not sit and look up to our husbands or fathers to work alone; we have sent our children to school with money from beer selling ...” E. Mphahlele, *Doon Second Avenue*

Domestic workers

Until the mid-1930s, men did most of the domestic work. However, after 1936, domestic service was a common point of entry for rural women into the labour market. The majority of domestic workers looked after the children of their white employers, often developing strong bonds with these children.

However, they were deprived of the possibility of bringing up their own children, many of whom remained with their mothers in the rural areas. A common complaint of such workers was their isolation and loneliness.

Prostitutes

For some single women, who were economically vulnerable, transacting sexual services offered a source of income and a certain freedom of action.





Prejudice against Women

White urban authorities were extremely prejudiced against black women living in towns. They perceived them as exceptionally unruly and disorderly. They believed that these women were at the root of a variety of social ills.

“The great majority of the native female population appear to earn their livelihood by prostitution and illicit liquor ... the majority are not only a menace to health but a burden to the community by reason of their filthy, lazy, drunken and immoral habits.”

A Johannesburg sanitary inspector, 1928

Attempts to Control Women

From 1910 until the mid 1940s, the municipalities made various attempts to control the movement of African women in the towns:

- They tried to impose passes on women. This provoked fierce resistance in the Orange Free State in 1913, and in Johannesburg in 1919. These efforts were then mostly abandoned until the imposition of passes for women in 1956.
- They imposed permits on lodgers sub-letting rooms in location houses for which the registered tenant had to pay the fee. This was designed to discourage sub-letting and deter new immigration into the location.
- They banned the brewing and selling of African beer by African women in the locations.
- They closed down squatter camps and informal settlements around the main towns, forcing African women either back into the rural areas or into the new townships, where only African men could rent a house.

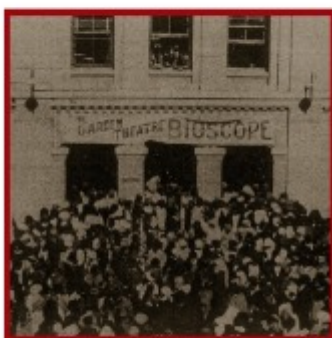
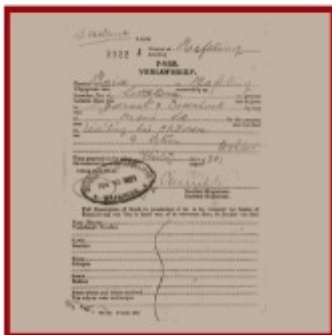




Early Resistance by Women

In the first half of the 20th century, there were many examples of resistance by black women to attempts by the authorities to control them. In both the towns and countryside in the 1920s and 1930s, women frequently played a more active role in resisting than men did.

“Women were on the march, demanding their rights. These events have been neglected, along with the independent, resourceful, self-confident, belligerent women’s leaders of these years.” Philip Bonner



The 1913 anti-pass campaign in Bloemfontein

Because most Africans in the Orange Free State were farm labourers and had no land of their own, it is not surprising that the earliest and most permanent urbanisation of African families took place here. Africans moving to Bloemfontein settled in Waaihoek Location, which had been established in 1891.

Restrictions on women

The everyday lives of women in Waaihoek were tightly restricted by permits imposed by the local authorities. All persons over the age of sixteen had to carry a residential permit, which had to be bought at the cost of one shilling a month.

In 1913, Bloemfontein municipal authorities insisted that passes for women were necessary to combat illegal brewing and prostitution.

Women of Waaihoek resist

On 28 May 1913, a mass meeting of women in Waaihoek decided to adopt a passive resistance stance. They would refuse to carry residential permits. Two hundred angry women, led by Charlotte Maxeke, marched into town to see the mayor. When he was eventually cornered, he claimed that his hands were tied.

The women promptly tore up their passes, shouted remarks at the policemen and generally provoked the authorities into arresting them. Eighty women were arrested. The women shouted at the police:

“We have done with pleading, we now demand!”

Ultimately the permit requirement was withdrawn. Women had succeeded in making their voices heard. This would be an important inspiration for the future.

campaign which lasted until early 1914, spreading to other towns in the Orange Free State. During this time the women organised polite petitions, met cabinet ministers, tore up their residential permits, marched singing and shouting through the streets of quiet towns, brawled with policemen, campaigned for support through the press and lobbied the all-white parliament.

For this they were whipped with sjamboks, hauled into court as common criminals and imprisoned during severe winter conditions. Many suffered serious health

problems – not once but over and over again.

What made the women take matters so boldly into their own hands? What effect did their spectacular actions have? This booklet gives the background to the women's anti-pass campaign of 1913, and brings to life some of the people in the unusual events of that year. It links the women's protests with broader developments inside and outside South Africa. The last chapter traces women's struggles around passes until 1960, and examines the historical significance of the 1913 campaign.



Background to the campaign

1890–1913



Women protesting outside the Bloemfontein Town Hall, May 1913

A new kind of politics

The Orange Free State women's angry outburst was not an isolated event. The years 1912 to 1914 were a time of great turmoil throughout South Africa. Against a background of severe drought and deepening economic depression, many different groups of people challenged the policies of the newly created, white-controlled Union of South Africa.

A number of prominent African leaders in the four provinces united in 1912 to form the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), to oppose the Bill which became the 1913 Land Act. In 1913 Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi began a major passive resistance campaign. It started as a protest against a £3 tax on Indian workers and laws which prevented Indians from moving between the provinces without a pass. Indians working in the Natal coal mines were among those who joined the movement bringing the coal industry to a standstill.

Militant strikes by mine and railway workers on the Reef in 1913 and early 1914 were effectively crushed



Cleashes during the Indian passive resistance campaign and strikes, September – November 1913

CHARLOTTE MAXEKE

Charlotte Manye Maxeke was one of the most accomplished and celebrated African women of her day. She toured North America as a chorister in the 1890s and helped introduce the influential Episcopal Methodist Church into South Africa.

She was a key leader in the march against passes in Bloemfontein in 1913. In 1918, she played a central role in founding the Bantu Women's League of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), forerunner to the ANC.

As leader of this organisation, she led a delegation to meet with Prime Minister Louis Botha in 1918, and urged him not to include women in the enforcement of new night pass regulations in the Transvaal. The first anti-pass campaign on the Witwatersrand followed in March 1919.

She participated in the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Worker's Union (ICU) in the same year. Maxeke was often honoured as 'Mother of Black Freedom in South Africa', and had an ANC nursery school named after her in Tanzania. She died in 1939.



Other Examples of Early Women's Resistance



1925 Bloemfontein

In 1925, the first of a string of urban riots erupted in Bloemfontein, triggered by Basotho women who staged a passive resistance style sit-in against police raiding for liquor.

Late 1920s Germiston

African women in Germiston formed the Women's League of Justice, which included practically every adult African and coloured woman in the location. They staged a protest against the imposition of lodgers' permits.

1928 - 1930 Potchefstroom

In Potchefstroom in the late 1920s, permits prompted conflict between the location African women and the municipal authorities. For over two years, the women, led and inspired by Josie Palmer, protested against the municipal authorities. In 1930, the fee for lodgers' permits was revoked.



JOSIE PALMER

Josie Palmer was born in Potchefstroom in 1903. She was the first black woman to play a leading role in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). She was also a leader of the early women's movement in South Africa.

She was an active campaigner against passes throughout the 1930s and 1940s. She was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) and President of the Transvaal Branch. She was banned in 1955 before the Pretoria women's demonstrations, and was prevented from participating in the anti-pass campaigns of those years.

1937 Vereeniging

Gigantic riots erupted in Vereeniging, and in various East Rand towns against police raiding for liquor. Again, women played the central role.

1918 - 1939 Afrikaner women in the towns

A huge tide of Afrikaner women also flowed into the urban areas in the years between the world wars to escape the poverty of the countryside.

By the early 1930s, more Afrikaner women than Afrikaner men were in wage employment in the Witwatersrand cities. These women not only often lived in multi-racial slums and claimed new sexual freedoms, but also became major leaders in trade unions, like the Garment Workers Union (GWU).





Poor young Afrikaans women, faced exploitation both as women and as inexperienced workers. Inspired by Solly Sachs, the General Secretary of the GWU, these women were unionised. The union grew and was eventually powerful enough to change the clothing industry itself.

1940s James Mpanza

In the 1940s, a massive influx of Africans to Johannesburg took place. As a result, the urban African population faced a severe housing shortage. In 1944, James Mpanza, a popular leader in the community, along with a number of powerful local women, organised a large squatter movement.

Thousands of people moved from Orlando Township to a piece of open land, which became known as 'Shantytown'. Mpanza's aim was to force the Johannesburg Council to build houses for the people. Eventually the council gave in and began the building of modern Soweto.

“And, in the evening, when our husbands came back from work, they asked the owners of the house, ‘Where are our wives?’ and the owners of the house said, ‘Your wife has gone to build a house for herself.’” Violet Khanyeza

1946 Indian Passive Resistance

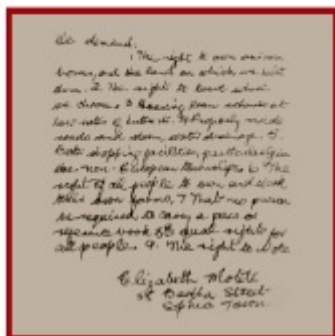
As a result of the mass movement of Indians from the Natal countryside to the towns, the ‘Ghetto’ Act was passed in 1946. Indians in Natal were only allowed to live and trade in certain restricted areas. In response, the Indian community launched a passive resistance campaign.

It lasted two years, during which time thousands were arrested. Of these, over 300 were women. Many other women actively supported the campaign by door-to-door fundraising, collecting food and offering childcare support.





Women organise Nationally



The formation of the ANC Women's League

In 1943, the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) was formed. By 1951, it had become highly active, playing a leading role in the Defiance Campaign of 1952. Throughout the 1950s, women's struggles were closely tied to the broader anti-apartheid struggles, led by the ANC.

RAY ALEXANDER

Ray Alexander, a white member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), laid the foundation for the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) through her work with black women in the Food and Canning Workers Union. She had joined the Soviet-aligned Women's International Democratic Federation, an organisation formed after World War 2, to promote the unity of women world-wide in the campaign for world peace.

She believed that an organisation of South African women, which transcended race and class differences, would be able to work together to bring about peace and justice. Ray was elected as the first Secretary of FSAW, with stalwart Dora Tamana as the first President.

The Federation of South African Women

The Federation of South African Women (FSAW) was formed in 1954 to address women's issues more directly.

FSAW played an important part in drawing up the Freedom Charter. They tried to reach women from all walks of life in order to tap their ideas for the creation of a democratic South Africa. At the Congress of the People in 1955, both Josie Palmer and Helen Joseph spoke, delivering the demands of women.

In 1955, the newly formed Black Sash, an organisation of white women, staged a march at the Union Buildings in protest against the proposed amendments to the Constitution. Inspired by this march, FSAW decided to hold a similar march against the impending pass laws for women.

“There is no power on earth that can prevent the mothers of South Africa, and of the world, from achieving justice for their children, if women organise together with their men, on the march to freedom.”

FSAW, Letter to First National Conference of ANC Women's League, 14 December 1955



The Women's Charter



At the launch of the Federation of South African Women, a special women's charter was adopted.

Extracts from the Women's Charter

Adopted at the Founding Conference of the Federation of South African Women

Johannesburg, 17 April 1954

Preamble: We, the women of South Africa ... African, Indians, European and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women ...

A Single Society: We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress.

Women's Lot: We women share with our menfolk the cares and anxieties imposed by poverty and its evils. As wives and mothers, it falls upon us to make small wages stretch a long way. It is we who feel the cries of our children when they are hungry and sick. It is our lot to keep and care for the homes that are too small, broken and dirty to be kept clean. We know the burden of looking after children and land when our husbands are away in the mines, on the farms, and in the towns earning our daily bread.

Our Aims

1. The right to vote and to be elected to all State bodies, without restriction or discrimination.
2. The right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work.
3. Equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights.
4. For the development of every child through free compulsory education for all; for the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, creches and nursery schools; through proper homes for all, and through the provision of water, light, transport, sanitation ...
5. For the removal of all laws that restrict free movement, that prevent or hinder the right of free association and activity in democratic organisations ...
6. To build and strengthen women's sections in the National Liberatory movements, the organisation of women in trade unions, and through the peoples' varied organisations ...





The Imposition of Passes

The Afrikaner Nationalist government that came to power in 1948 was forced to recognise the reality of permanently settled African communities in the towns. It was also repeatedly confronted with the growing militancy of African women in the towns.

As a first step to control both processes, they passed a law which imposed passes on women in 1952 (the Abolition of Passes and Coordination Act). As a second step, they built houses for African urban residents in the townships, in which only men could be recognised as registered tenants and which turned all African women into dependents of African men.

Concerned about probable resistance to the new law, the government only began to implement it in 1956.

“The issue of pass books to African women will impose no restrictions on their existing rights ... The people realise what is beneficial to them. How can reference books be an oppressive measure to African women?”

Statement issued by the Native Affairs Department, December 1955

“Passes mean prison;
passes mean broken homes;
passes mean suffering and
misery for every African family
in our country; passes are just
another way in which the
government makes slaves of the
Africans; passes mean hunger
and unemployment;
passed are an insult ...”

A call-to-action flyers of the ANCWL and FSAW





Prelude to the 1956 March

From 1955 onwards, women from all centres in South Africa took up the call against passes. In the face of police intimidation, harassment from employers and often at enormous personal cost to themselves, African women took to the streets to demonstrate against the imposition of passes.

“We will never carry passes under any conditions!” Durban



“Oh what a law! We are refusing totally!” East London

“Even if the passes are printed in real gold we do not want them.” Germiston



“If you force us to take passes, we shall burn them!” Klerksdorp

Tricked in Winburg

In the Free State town of Winburg, women were tricked into taking passes. They were brought in by their employers to the pass office. They had no idea what was happening.

They were told that the reference books were not passes, but permits that would allow them to travel freely anywhere.

Once they realised what had happened, hundreds of Winburg women marched silently to the Magistrate's Court, and burned their new pass books. The events in Winburg were followed by country-wide protests.

