



## The Women's March

On 9 August 1956, twenty thousand women marched to the Union Buildings to protest against passes. It took two and a half hours for the women to file through the gardens of the Union Buildings and enter the amphitheatre. Women's contingents from all over the country arrived in Pretoria on the night before the march.

The women marched to the top of the Union Building. They were dressed for a festive occasion, many African women wearing their manyano uniforms, brightly coloured saris for the Indians, Sunday best for coloureds and whites and ANCWL uniforms for the Congressites.



*“We had our children on our backs during the March. Many women had their children with them during the March. Some were carrying the white children with them, those who were working for whites.”*

Rahaba Mahlakedi Mooketsi

*“We had never carried passes. We were all enthusiastic to get there and see this Boer baas and tell him that we are not going to carry those things.”* Dorothy Masenya

A commissionaire tried to refuse the delegation entry on the grounds that there were representatives of all races among them! “No apartheid!” cried Helen Joseph. Eventually five of them were let through.

When Lilian Ngoyi knocked on the appropriate door, a voice behind the door told her she had been sent a letter saying she was prohibited from coming there. Ngoyi responded:

*“The women of Africa are outside. They built this place and their husbands died for this.”*

The women forced their way into the office and drowned it in bundles of protest letters.





Wathint' abafazi, Strijdom! Wathint' imbokodo uzo kufa!  
Now you have touched the women, Strijdom!  
You have struck a rock. You have dislodged a boulder!  
You will be crushed!



The leaders of the march were (left to right) Sophia Williams de Bruyn,  
Rahima Moosa, Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi.





## The Women's March

“We were using trains for transport, to Pretoria. We walked to the Union Building we sat in the garden. Our leaders went inside the building to submit the memorandum to Strijdom but they did not find him. There was no one to receive and read the memorandum. Our leaders called us into the courtyard.” Caroline Motsaedi

What was Strijdom's role in the march? Strijdom, who had been notified about the women's march, chose not to be at the Union Buildings. The women on the march insisted that Strijdom was afraid of them and, therefore, refused to meet with them.

“Strijdom is too much of a coward to meet with us!”

Other observers believed that his decision reflected his disdain for the women. When the leaders returned outside to report to the assembled crowd that Strijdom had refused to meet with them, the women rose to their feet, thumbs up in the “Afrika” salute, to stand for a full thirty minutes in absolute silence as a protest.

“I shall never forget what I saw on 9 August 1956 ... twenty thousand women of all races standing in silence for a full thirty minutes, arms raised high in the clenched fist of the Congress salute ... The brilliant colours of African headscarves, the brightness of Indian saris and the emerald green of the blouses worn by Congress women were woven together by the very darkness of those thousands of faces.” Helen Joseph





## Conflict in Zeerust

### “Waar’s jou pas, kaffermeid?”

Pamphlet issued by FSAW and ANCWL, 27 October 1958

The government had been warned but it was not put off. Instead it put its plans into action piecemeal and covertly. The authorities used whatever means possible to institute passes. They started with small rural towns and in the reserves where African women were least organised, and most vulnerable.

Events among the Bahurutse chiefdoms in Zeerust, in today’s North-West Province, demonstrated the determination of the authorities. In 1950, the government had passed a new law turning chiefs into government puppets so that they could be made to enforce the new regulations.

The imposition of women’s passes only added to these burdens and cut off the option of flight to the towns. The women of Zeerust largely refused passes. When some Bahurutse chiefs expressed sympathy with the women, they were deposed by the government. This acted as a catalyst for an explosion of resistance in 1957, in which women were prominent. Eventually heavy-handed force compelled Zeerust’s women to accept passes.

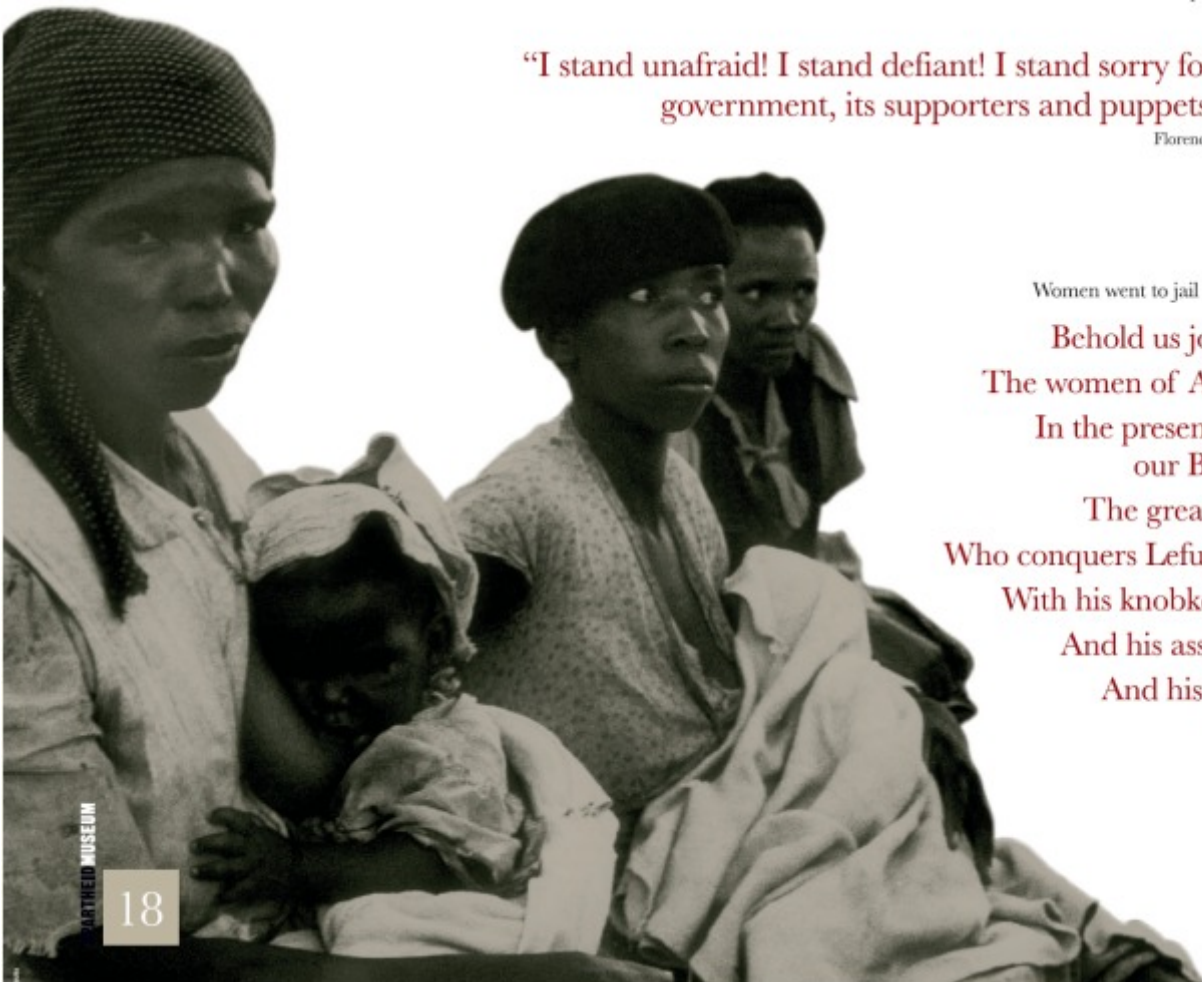


### “I stand unafraid! I stand defiant! I stand sorry for the government, its supporters and puppets...!”

Florence Mkhize

Women went to jail singing:

Behold us joyful,  
The women of Africa  
In the presence of  
our BAAS  
The great one  
Who conquers Lefurutse  
With his knobkerrie,  
And his assegai,  
And his gun.





## Passes come to Johannesburg

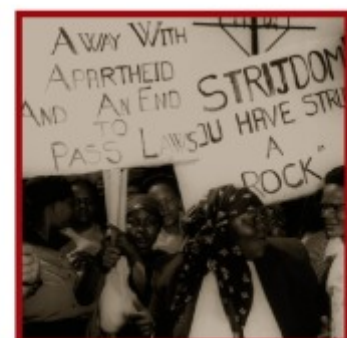
Throughout 1957 and 1958, the government pressed on with its piecemeal offensive, picking off individual areas and groups which it considered most vulnerable. Only in October 1958 did it finally venture into Johannesburg.

This effort was temporarily thwarted when local branches of the ANCWL, led by Sophiatown, undertook a campaign of civil disobedience, courting arrest. Within two weeks, two thousand Africans were crammed into Johannesburg's police cells, producing a crisis for the law-enforcement authorities.

“You would not have guessed this was a serious business of arrest for some breach of law. It looked like a great festival. The women sang, and danced and pranced, flailing their arms and poking out that defiant thumb.” *Drum*, December 1958

“Their attitude was they’re not going to accept passes. That’s when the first mass arrests took place. Within the space of a week there were two thousand women in jail. It was incredible. They left their children, left their husbands, left their homes, went to jail and simply would not pay the fines.” *Helen Joseph*

FSAW and the ANCWL gave whole-hearted support to the new grassroots campaign. The ANC leadership itself was concerned about the costs of legal defence and, indeed, about which body had the final authority to sanction such campaigns. The ANC consequently called off the campaign in its third week and announced a new phase of multi-racial demonstrations. That ended the women’s anti-pass campaigns.



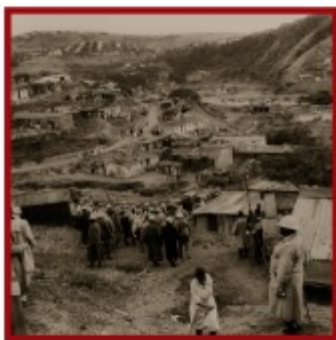


“Cato Manor, Cato Manor”





## Cato Manor Erupts



Nowhere in the country was the connection between passes, the construction of townships and the curbing of independence of African women clearer than in the Umkhumbane squatter camp on the ridges of Cato Manor just outside Durban. By the late 1950s, over a hundred thousand people lived in Umkhumbane – this constituted the bulk of Durban’s African population.

From 1958, the authorities began to implement plans to eradicate Cato Manor. By mid year, they started to issue passes to African women. Pressure built up and exploded when the authorities attempted to root out illegal beer brewing, the main source of these women’s income, and to redirect African men to the municipal beerhalls in the area.



**“We do not want our husbands to go and spend their money in the Corporation Beerhalls. The Corporation encourages them to do this and we women suffer.”** Gertrude Kweyana

The women organised mass action as a response. On 17 June 1959, hundreds of women invaded the Booth Road Beerhall. Armed with sticks, some two thousand women confronted the police.



The police responded violently, with a viciousness not seen before against women. The men of Umkhumbane responded with anger to the brutal treatment of the women. In early 1960, nine policemen were killed in a confrontation with the men of Umkhumbane.

All this foreshadowed the later massacre at Sharpeville on 21 March 1960, where police justified their shooting by claiming that the crowd was converging on the police station chanting, “Cato Manor, Cato Manor”.

“I had no choice. I had to take a pass because I feared a possibility of being killed by the government.” Sophie Serokane

“I detest the very idea. When I was eighteen, my mother was sent to gaol in Boksburg for three weeks because she couldn’t produce a pass. I demand respect.” Elsie Mloli

## Voices of Women

“I had to apply for a pass because it was going to be difficult for me to find jobs without a pass. Is there anyone who would be happy to stay at home, unemployed?” Nthana Mokale

“We have to carry passes which we abhor because we cannot have houses without them, we cannot work without them, we are endorsed out of towns without them, we cannot register births without them, we are not even expected to die without them.” Winnie Mandela

### ANNIE SILINGA

Annie Silinga was an ardent activist, and was at the forefront on the women’s anti-pass campaign. She took a lifelong decision never to carry a pass. When passes for women were introduced, Annie Silinga remained true to this belief, refusing to carry a pass till the day she died.

She paid a heavy price for this. She was banished to the Transkei, forced to leave her husband and children behind in Langa. She was subject to constant police harassment and endless arrests. And without a pass, she was unable to receive a pension in her later years. She died in 1984, after a life dedicated to resistance.



“I will never carry a pass!”

“I will carry a pass the day the Prime Minister’s wife does!”





## 1960 – 1970s

In the 1960s, the black population of South Africa and all those that resisted apartheid were brutally oppressed and disempowered. The Sharpeville Massacre and the banning of the ANC and PAC in March 1960 are usually seen as the start of this process.

However, the Cato Manor riots in 1959 and the suppression of black women's independence were equally significant. From that point on, black women were progressively stripped of their rights and of the relative independence that had so painfully won for themselves in the towns.

Passes for women and the consolidation of the townships greatly reduced the spaces of freedom for African women in the towns.

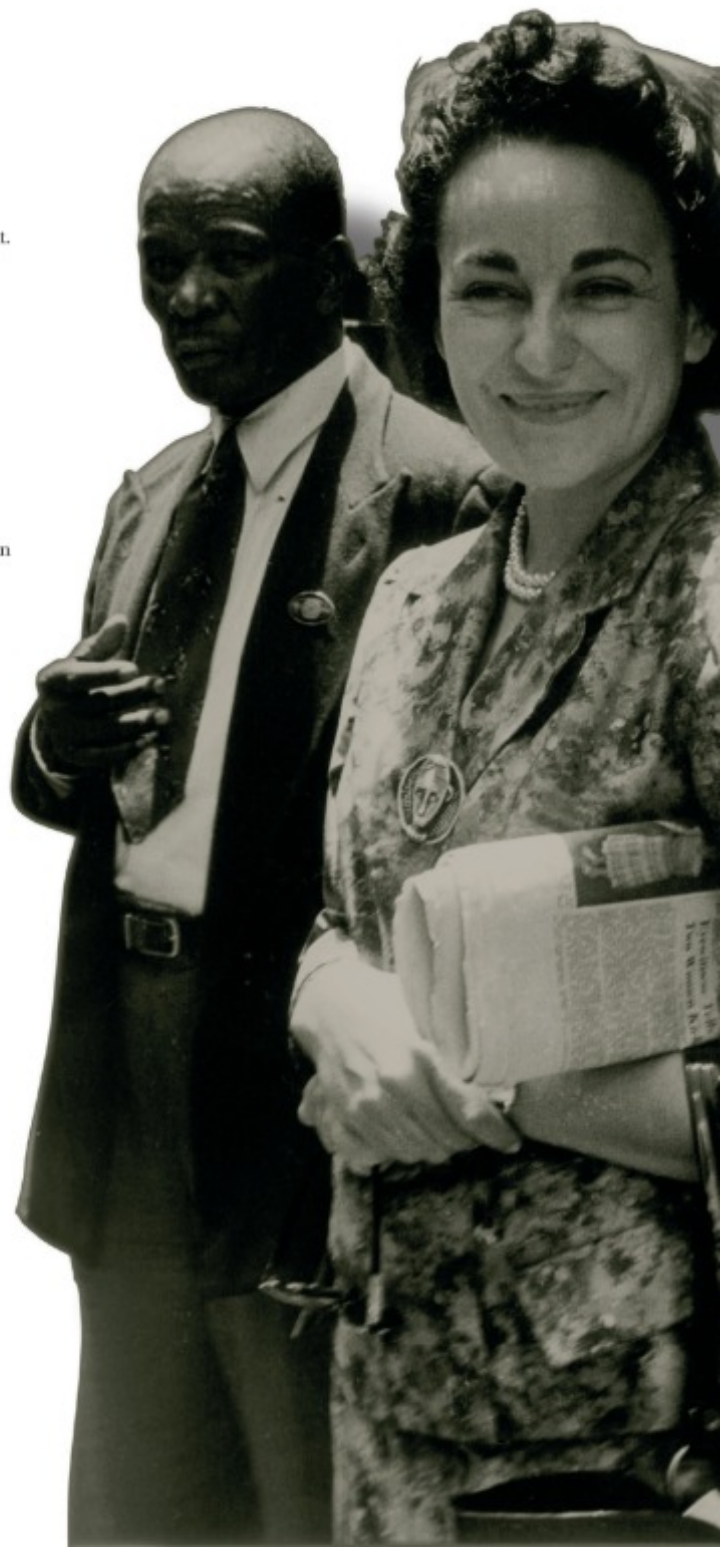
Some women rebelled against the new restrictions placed on them by refusing to obey or by going into exile. As the era of Black Consciousness dawned in the early 1970s, black women again asserted themselves and began to demand political and other freedoms.

### **Bannings, detention and exile**

After the banning of the ANC and the PAC in 1960, the Women's League entered a period of relative quiescence as the ANC moved its operations outside of South Africa. Although FSAW had not been banned, it was also thrown into disarray by the events of 1960. Its most prominent leaders, Lilian Ngoyi and Helen Joseph, were detained, and later banned.



One way of escaping these repressive conditions was to go into exile. Frene Ginwala and Ruth First were just two examples of the many women who left the country.





#### Women as victims of forced removals

From the 1960s onwards, millions of people were forcibly removed from their homes to the barren Bantustans. Under threat of removal, women formed residents associations and women's groups. These organisations empowered women to some extent, but in most cases, the government forces were too strong and whole communities were removed.

#### Black Consciousness takes hold

The ideology of Black Consciousness urged blacks to free themselves from the chains of oppression, and in particular, from the psychological chains of inferiority.



“Whatever we do in this country, be it on the economic, social or political level, it has to be by blacks, for blacks, period. It doesn't matter how well-meaning white people may be ... they can never deliver me from the hands of the Nationalists ...” *Thenjive Mtimso*



The Black Women's Federation (BWF), established by Fatima Meer in 1975, worked in both urban and rural areas trying to teach women to realise their own potential. Within a year, seven leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement, including Fatima Meer, were detained. And, in 1977, it was banned.

#### Banishment

Winnie Mandela was active in both FSAW and the ANC Women's League in the 1970s. In 1977, on account of her political activities, she was banished to the Free State town of Brandfort where she was forced to live with her children for the next eight years. Many other activists in the country faced a similar fate.



## 1980 – 1994

Throughout the 1980s women played an important role in the national liberation struggles, both within South Africa and in exile. These struggles took place within the context of mounting state repression and mass detentions.

Although the focus of women's struggles were linked to national liberation, there were attempts, on a number of university campuses, and in reading groups and in trade union workshops, to address the inequalities that women experienced in a predominantly patriarchal society.

However, at least in their communities, women were once again pushed to the political sidelines by the mainly male violence, which punctuated the decade from 1984 to 1994.

### Women and the trade union movement

It was in the late 1970s that new non-racial, as well as black trade unions were formed (FOSATU and CUSA in 1979, COSATU in 1985). These were in some instances led by fearless and indomitable black and white women leaders, such as June Rose-Nala, Mama Lydia, Chris Bonner and Jane Barret.

### Women in MK

Many men found it difficult to accept women's growing prominence in the political arena.

Thenjiwe Mtintso described how difficult it was for her, as a woman, to maintain discipline amongst her comrades, even though she was a senior commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in exile.



**ORGANISE, UNITE FOR PEOPLE'S POWER!**



### Women in the UDF

In the 1980s, women's organisations began to be re-established. These included the United Women's Organisation (UWO), which was committed to a new South Africa where women would not be second-class citizens, and the Federation of Transvaal Women (FED'TRAW). When the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983, these women's organisations affiliated themselves to this umbrella organisation.

As part of a broader development of grassroots social movements, women worked with other civic structures to address community struggles.



### Women in detention

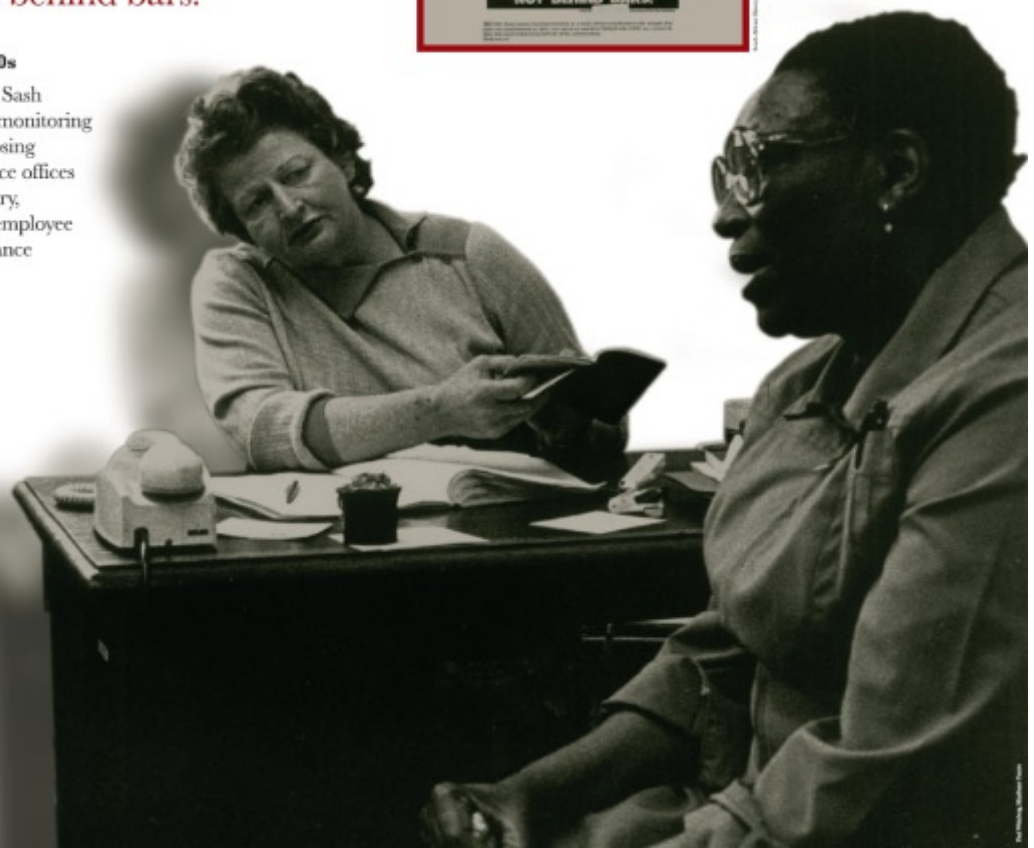
During the successive States of Emergency of the late 1980s, women were detained in large numbers. Twelve percent of the State of Emergency detainees in 1986/7 were women. This amounted to more than three thousand women and girls. Women were not excluded from extreme physical torture at the hands of security police because of their gender.

**“A woman's place is in the struggle not behind bars.”**



### The Black Sash in the 1980s

During the 1980s, the Black Sash played an important role in monitoring the pass law courts and exposing injustices. It established advice offices in various parts of the country, which dealt with employer/employee issues, unemployment insurance and pensions.





## Freedom at Last!

The struggle for national liberation brought freedom and democracy to South Africa. In the creation of a new society in the 1990s, the role played by women was recognised and rewarded. But the struggle for women's freedom is not yet completed.

### The National Women's Coalition

Soon after the unbanning of the ANC, the ANC Women's League lobbied all the women's organisations to set up a coalition. The National Women's Coalition drew up a women's charter. The demands of this Women's Charter were incorporated into the new Constitution and the Bill of Rights.



“This Charter gives expression to the visions and aspirations of South African women ... We call for respect and recognition of our human dignity and a change in our status and material conditions in a future South Africa.” The Women's Charter of 1994



“The state may not unfairly discriminate ... against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, **gender**, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.” Section 9 – the Equality Clause of the Constitution



In the first democratic elections in April 1994, the African National Congress called for one-third of its candidates to be women. Today women hold thirty percent of seats in parliament. However, the question still remains whether such representation has affected the lives of ordinary women throughout the country.

### Further enshrining women's rights

New legislation which protects women's rights includes:

- The Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996
- The Domestic Violence Act of 1998
- Maintenance Act of 1998
- Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998
- The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000



## Fifty Years Later

Today women find themselves at a crossroads. Educated women have claimed many new opportunities and rights, while poor and uneducated women are in a more ambiguous position.

Poor women benefit more from state welfare than before but they continue to experience unprecedented levels of violence and abuse in their daily lives.

**“As long as we do not stop women abuse, domestic violence, the rape of children, young and old women, we should know that we are still far from achieving the critical goal of the emancipation of women.”**

President Thabo Mbeki, Address at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Women's March, Union Buildings, 9 August 2006

### **The struggle continues**

Women in post-apartheid South Africa still have many battles to fight.

- Significantly more women than men are infected with HIV and AIDS.
- South Africa has one of the highest rape statistics in the world. Women activists say that one South African is raped every 26 seconds.
- Child rape is one of the most shocking horrors of our modern day society.
- Violence against women in South Africa is endemic. This takes the form of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and wife battery.

Eliminating violence against women and improving educational and job opportunities for women are almost universally supported goals in South Africa. Realising these goals is a struggle that South African society must take up as a whole. And one in which women should lead the way.

**“A society attempting to develop without the participation of women is like a bird trying to fly with only one wing. It is bound to go off course.”** *Aliya Caler*



## CREDITS

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### OTHER WEBSITES

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