

## Women at the forefront of social change

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On 9 August each year, we celebrate Women's Day to pay tribute to the 20 000 women of different races, languages and ethnicities who marched to the Union Buildings on this day in 1956 in protest against the pass laws. The internal passports that all 'black' (according to apartheid categories) South Africans had to carry regulated their labour and movement in their country of birth and alienated them from their civil rights.

The protest march is known for the song '*Wathint'Abafazi Wathint'imbokodo!*' ('now that you have touched the women, you have struck a rock') and for the crowd's discipline and dignity. The fifties were the first time since 1913 that the government attempted to subject women to pass laws. In 1913, the Orange Free State government determined that women in the urban areas had to buy new entry permits every month. For several years, the 'black' women of the province sent delegations to the government, drew up petitions with thousands of signatures and held mass protests to oppose the permit requirement. Unrest occurred throughout the province and hundreds of women were imprisoned. Eventually they succeeded in getting the legislation repealed.

The Women's National Coalition (WNC), which was founded in the early 1990s, aimed to represent women's interests during the political transition and the writing of the new Constitution. Once again, women from across the political spectrum and all the population groups came together – in the end approximately two million women were mobilised. The most important matters on the agenda were women's legal status; their access to land, water and other resources; violence against women; health; and work.

Although we therefore have a proud tradition of South African women's political, non-violent and non-racial activism, it would appear that the current generation has begun to neglect that tradition. The discussions on Women's Day these days focus more on the ways in which women are made victims than on how women can fight back against the brutal oppression they experience in the new dispensation. Of course, we must continue to raise issues such as violence against women for as long as it is necessary. But, as South African women, we must also appropriate our foremothers' strength, courage and organisational ability for ourselves and start working on new forms of contemporary activism.

There are many young, inspiring women leaders in the country right now, such as Nonhle Mbuthuma, spokesperson of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, and Simamkele Dlakavu, one of the young women who reminded us in 2016 with their posters at former president Zuma's election speech to commemorate 'Kwezi'. But it is of key importance that women again mobilise physically in large numbers to make a powerful political voice heard, across class, race, language and other boundaries. Sustained, long-term, strategic and mass action can force those in power to prioritise, for example, sexual violence.

Erica Chenoweth, an American political scientist and professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, pioneered the field of civil resistance. In 2011 they (the professor identifies as non-binary) published the book *Why Civil Resistance Works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict* in which they showed that between 1900 and 2006 non-violent campaigns were twice as effective as violent ones. Effectiveness was measured here over the long and short term. Short-term effectiveness was measured by whether a campaign achieved its objective within a year from the peak of mobilisation. An aim could be, for example, to bring about a regime change. Long-term effectiveness was measured by the level of implementation of human rights five years after the success was achieved.

Chenoweth's research thereby confirms the intuition of figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, namely that non-violent social resistance and change is not only morally better, but indeed practically and politically preferable to violent resistance. Additionally, Gandhi discovered and refined his strategy for non-violent change called *Satyagraha* (meaning the power of truth/love) in South Africa, achieving his first major success here with his September 1913 campaign in Natal and the Transvaal.

Women played a central role in the success of this campaign. Many served prison terms, and in 1914 the South African government had to negotiate with Gandhi under pressure from Delhi and London. All the major demands of the *Satyagrahi* were conceded. Not only did Gandhi subsequently change his views on women in *Satyagraha* (they were henceforth to take the lead in many of the actions), but the example of the 1913 success had a long-lasting influence on the ANC's policy of non-violence. Gandhi and John Dube, first president of the ANC (initially the South African Native National Congress), were neighbours in Phoenix in Natal.

In a more recent work, *Women on the Frontlines of Revolution*, Chenoweth takes their research further, and focuses on the role of women on the physical frontlines of resistance movements. Women from all over the world report that their front work is being forgotten, misrepresented or erased. Women take part in all revolutions, but their presence makes a particularly big difference if they are visible as at least half of the activists on the front lines. Once women participate in such large numbers, resistance movements begin to achieve disproportionate successes. For example, if people can see that women are equally represented in a movement, the participant numbers typically grow more than sevenfold. Both the broad support enjoyed by the campaign and its non-violent nature are underlined by women's mass participation. A significant presence of women helps prevent violent factions from arising within the organisation. Violent splinter groups cause the opposition to become more united and potential allies become alienated from the campaign.

In contrast, a principled non-violent movement often causes the opposition to break up, and for example members of the security forces to desert and join the resistance. Large-scale defection occurs especially when many women are visible in an activist group, because women's typically wide horizontal networks of friendship and family mean that soldiers more easily start to think that someone they know might be in the resistance group, and therefore, for example, an order to shoot, will be disregarded. Such apostasy or defection is a clear sign that the resistance movement is succeeding. Both Gandhi and King and others understood the value of broad alliances.

In addition, argues Chenoweth, women usually bring a particularly strategic knowledge of which levers in society are sensitive to pressure exerted on them. When women withdraw their services, labour and practical skills and refuse to do their everyday work of maintaining community systems, such systems usually collapse. Women's work is often invisible, unpaid and undervalued, but nevertheless indispensable for any order.

Reading the latest research from scientists like Chenoweth alongside the long history of women's activism in our country can serve as renewed motivation to organise for change as women, in solidarity with each other and with supportive men who accept our leadership. We need to think strategically together, like Lysistrata and her allies of old with their sex boycott, about where to apply non-violent, but nevertheless sustained and carefully targeted pressure, in order to compel key figures and organisations to join us as a central interest group to account.

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