

# thinking constitutionally

So how does the small group of women who have access to this perspective share it with others?

It was decided (surprise, surprise) that we had to meet again to consider the question further. But a number of ideas are forming. Those of us in organisations are to agitate and entice our comrades into this discourse while those less wary of accusations of individualism are looking for funds and for cronies.

More concretely, there is an embryonic 'information package' consisting of papers presented to the initial conference - including a brilliant analysis by UCT's Dorothy Driver of the 'critical silences' of the ANC Constitutional Guidelines - that will in time and with the blessing of 'people's organisations' emerge in useful forms.

In addition, it was suggested that delegates ask their organisations to consider hosting further conferences and workshops with the aim of popularising a concern about women's rights. The goal is to make a sexist constitution as unthinkable as one that is racist when the representatives of 'the people' get round the negotiation table.

As to who 'the people' are, I would like to suggest that we exist dimly and in the usual danger of handing over our destinies to a small group of bosses. To become real as 'the people' we - all the millions of us - must find the frightening and thrilling place from which we can speak truly to each other. Then we can act together without fear and without permission from leaders, bureaucrats, apparatchiks or mythical entities.

'If we are to survive', says the American writer Starhawk, 'the question becomes: do we overthrow, not those presently in power, but the principle of power-over? How do we shape a society based on the principle of power-from-within?' □

*Women raised their voices around constitutional issues when the Federation of South African Women (Western Cape region) hosted a regional conference, attended by more than 300 representatives from 48 organisations, in mid-August. Karin Chubb reports.*

A special feature of the FEDSAW (Western Cape) conference to consider constitutional proposals was the presence of guests, notably Thandi Modise and two women from SWAPO, Ellen Musialela and Foibe Jacob. The latter outlined the role that women have played in the liberation struggle in Namibia and stressed the need to create networks of mutual support among women in political organisations and liberation movements.

Perhaps unintentionally, her speech also placed the proceedings of the conference within the context of tensions that seem common in political women's organisations. There is almost always a sense of unease when women's issues are raised, as these are often seen as a pursuit at the expense of immediate political tasks. Women are clearly valued as workers in the political struggle - as long as they do not constitute a threat to the patriarchal order.

Underpinning the discussions were the constitutional proposals of the ANC. Compared with the IDASA conference on the previous weekend, there was not the close analysis of constitutional issues, of language and discourse which gave clarity and direction to the IDASA discussions. At the FEDSAW conference there



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*Left to right: Rhoda Kadalie, Sarah Christie and Karin Chubb at the IDASA Women's Constitutional Conference.*

was little attempt at rigorous critique of the ANC proposals from a feminist perspective. In fact, many if not most of the participants would have been suspicious of the term 'feminist'.

Clearly the discussion of women's oppression moves at a different pace and within different parameters in a mass-based movement which regards gender oppression as a factor of class and race oppression and therefore does not generally address women's liberation as a concern in its own right. My heart sank when, in a workshop session, a bright-eyed SANSCO student earnestly tried to convince me that, seeing that there was no oppression of women under socialism, it only required the overthrow of the present capitalist order for women to be liberated from oppression! Clearly there is a great need for women in South Africa to be educated about the situation and experiences of women elsewhere, particularly in post-colonial countries. It should be the task of the women's organisations to help meet this need with educational programmes.

As an exercise in grassroots consciousness-raising the workshops were very successful indeed. A striking feature was the 'speaking bitterness' of women who, in a supportive environment, felt free to voice their fears and disappointments, their frustrations and their anger - and who stated their demands very clearly. They addressed oppression not only in state structures but also in religion, in the

family and in customs and cultural practices. Traditions which entrench the subordination of women were challenged, particularly in the church where women were encouraged to support feminist theologians and to promote a feminist reading of the Bible. In the family, women called for equal parenting and a non-sexist approach to child rearing. To challenge gender stereotypes effectively, the education of men around gender issues was seen to be crucial.

The demands which were formulated at the end of the sessions, and which are to inform the constitutional debate, centred around the empowerment and the protection of women in the public as well as in the private sphere - posing a direct challenge to established laws and customs. Women demand access to and equality before the law, they want autonomy in decisions regarding their health and fertility, protection against all forms of violence, equal access to education and employment, the right to own land and the scrapping of all discriminatory legislation and practices. Affirmative action was called for to help eradicate present injustices.

Daunting as the task may seem, the weekend's conference gave hope and confidence to all of us who experienced there the tremendous enthusiasm and energy with which women can work collectively: WOMANDLA! □



*Right: A scene from the cultural evening at the FEDSAW Conference. Proceedings included the singing of tributes accompanied by dancing*