

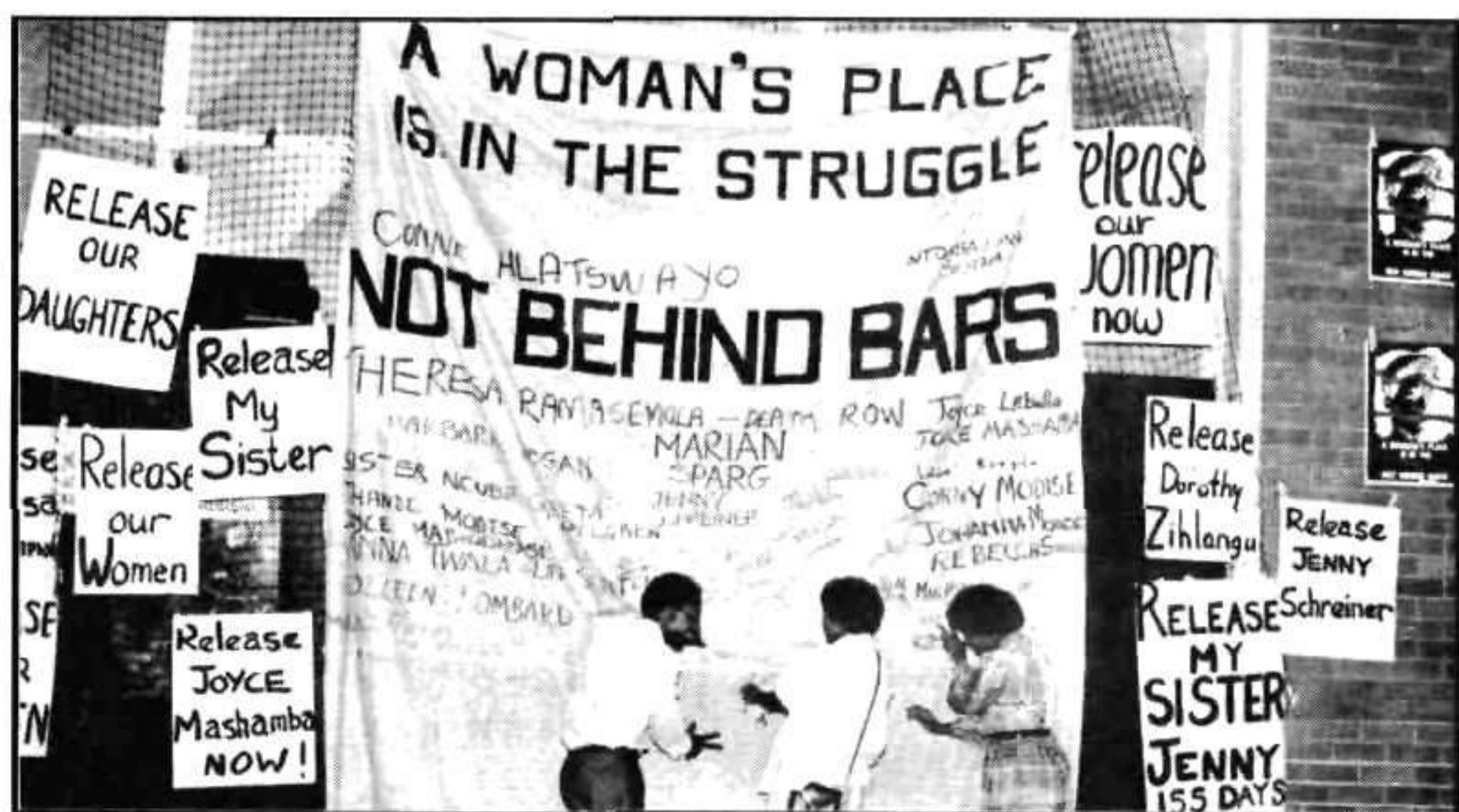
Women and detention

Women have played an integral part in the mass struggles against racial and economic oppression. They have mobilised against mass eviction and forced removals, against poor working conditions and inferior education, pass laws and influx control. They have supported consumer and rent boycotts and have campaigned alongside men for an end to military conscription.

Information is difficult to obtain from the police and the prison service as to how many women have been detained in South Africa. A conservative estimate of 25 000 people detained between June 1986 and June 1987 has been made and is thought to include at least 3 050 (12%) women. It is important to note that this low percentage is most probably explained by the fact that few women rise to leadership positions in popular organisations and are therefore less likely to be detained. (This incomplete representation has been challenged and acknowledged by these organisations.)

Black women of South Africa are often single mothers or have spouses who are unemployed and, therefore, are often the wage earners of the family. Others have been forced into this position by the detention of a husband, boyfriend or father.

While most of the problems experienced by detainees are common to both men and women, there are certain aspects of detention that are specifically related to women. A brief outline of these areas is discussed below.



Approximately 3050 women were detained between 1986 - 1987

Menstruation

Women detainees have complained that no sanitary towels are provided during their menstrual periods. Sometimes only three towels are provided, per woman, for each period. This situation appears to vary according to the different prisons. Sanitary towels may be purchased from some of the prison shops but money is often scarce and is usually used to supplement a poor prison diet.

Pregnancy

The prison diet may not provide pregnant mothers with sufficient nutrition and antenatal care, if received at all, may be inadequate. Allegations have been made of pregnant women being beaten and tortured. This may account for those women who have allegedly miscarried while in detention, especially when this is added to the possible lack of medical care or the stress of detention. Women who do not miscarry



Released after 7 months in detention - prison diet does not always provide pregnant mothers with sufficient nutrition



Richard Geelbooi, 2, spent 8 months in detention with his mother, Selina

must continue their pregnancy to term, often under unhygienic, intolerable conditions. Women have had to give birth while in police custody. Their new born babies may have been kept with them; subjected to the same poor conditions. For many women, this was their first experience of childbirth. They had to cope with this experience alone, without the support of the child's father, their family or friends.

For those women with children already, being detained means a separation from their children, often without knowing who is caring for them. Children, in turn, are especially traumatised by the detention of the person who is usually their primary carer. A special trauma is often experienced by breastfeeding mothers when they are removed from their children.

Sexual assault

Most women are afraid to talk about these experiences. Body searches and vaginal examinations are allegedly performed on women who have perceived them as being done for no apparent reason other than harassment and humiliation. Many women express a fear of sexual assault arising from the knowledge that male wardens may have access to their prisons. Families who have female relatives in detention worry about the possibility of such assaults.