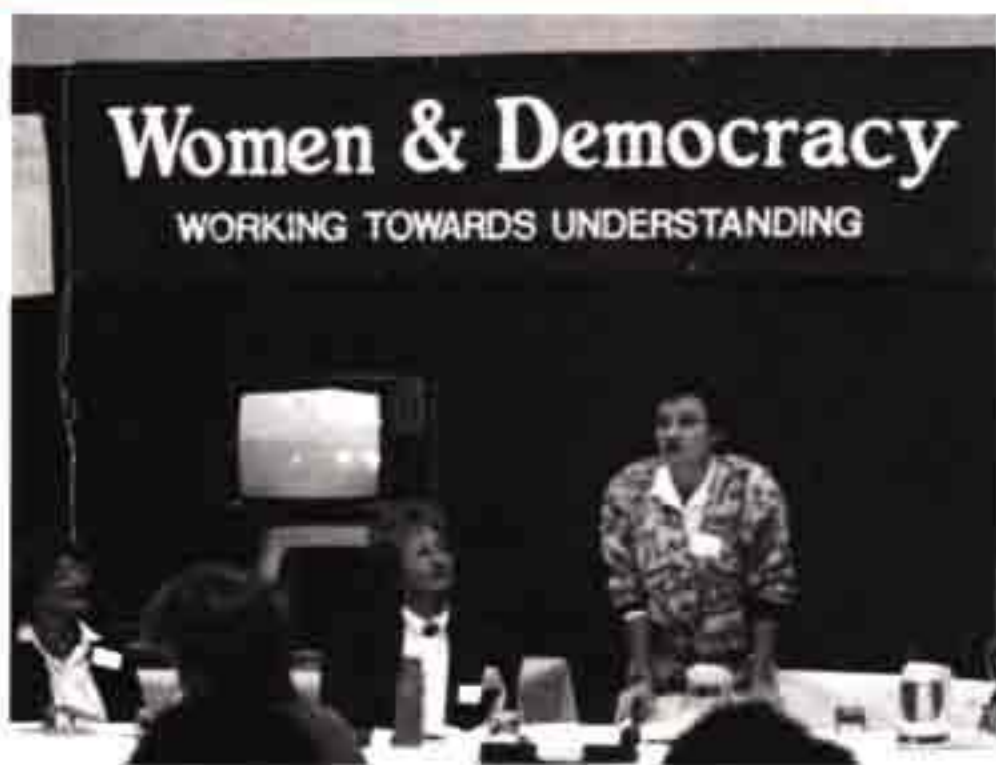


# DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

THE OFFICIAL NEWS BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR A DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE FOR SOUTH AFRICA

OCTOBER 1988



Speaking at the Women's conference are (left to right): Christine Antonissen, Dr Caroline White and Ruth Tomaselli.



Sister Bernard Ncube, who had enormous impact on the conference. She is president of the Federation of Transvaal Women (Fedtraw).

## “Your Children are our Children”

WHAT role can women play in working for change in South Africa? Women from very different backgrounds came together in Mossel Bay for a weekend conference from 2-4 September to address this question.

This was not a “tea-party” of ladies to talk about recipes and babyclothes. Women were confronted by a powerful range of speakers who presented, in no uncertain terms, the problems faced by women in South Africa today. The video, “Mama I’m Crying”, shown on the first evening, shocked women into realising how brutalised our society has become, and how black and white women are unaware of each other’s experiences. Amanda Kwadi of the Federation of Transvaal Women got the conference off to a rousing start by describing the crisis women in South Africa find themselves in. This was followed by a panel examining the experience of the majority of women in South Africa — women in rural areas, women workers, and women coping with urban violence. After this, another panel examined the ideological influences

### Conference on Women and Democracy

Janet Cherry

on women — how women are socialised into playing subordinate roles in society, how the media influences how we interpret events, and the moving testimony of a woman growing up in an Afrikaner nationalist environment. Then there was a panel on Southern Africa, militarisation and the psychological effects of war. Lively group discussions and a provocative “Cultural Evening” completed the first intensive day of the conference.

The second day looked at how women could respond to the situation: given all that had been heard and discussed, what could women do to build democracy in this country? An overview of the role that

women have played in resistance to apartheid was given, followed by a highly stimulating and provocative talk on women and the Church in South Africa. Another video, “The Ribbon”, showed how white women responded to the crisis of 1985-6 and tried to promote peace and understanding. More group discussions focused on what women could do, and report backs were given in the final session.

In the process of the conference, women from diverse backgrounds — from NGK dominee’s wives to leaders of township women’s organisations — met each other for the first time. Through an intensive process of talks, videos and group discussions, they learnt to know each other and understand each other’s experience and backgrounds. Arising from this was a commonly expressed concern by all the women: a concern for the future of their children, and a concern with how their children were becoming involved in violence and conflict. While black women described the violence that children were subjected to in the townships, white

Continued on Page 2





*One of the groups dramatises an exercise.*



*African delegates at the conference.*



*Some of the IDASA staff — after a meal.*

# Conference on Women and Democracy

**Continued from Page 1**

women explained the dilemma faced by their sons who are conscripted into the army. One of the most moving moments in the conference was when a black woman stood up in response to one of the white mothers outlining her dilemma — and said **“This is not only your problem. Your children are our children”**. Another subject of intensive discussion was the situation of domestic workers — many of the delegates to the conference being either employers of domestic workers, or domestic workers themselves. Despite difficulties with language — many delegates being confident in Xhosa or Afrikaans, their home language — it was extraordinary how much of a spirit of empathy and unity developed amongst the women present. From initial caution and shyness, by the end of the weekend women were relating in a relaxed and open way, and there was a tangible feeling of joy at the prospect of being able to find a way forward together.

The conference proposed various concrete ways in which women could take forward the spirit of the meeting, including arranging meetings between women's organisations across the spectrum, and establishing support groups for mothers.

Hopefully this exciting initiative will be followed by similar conferences in other regions, as well as a follow-up process of bringing many more women together to explore ways of working for democracy, peace and non-racialism in South Africa.