

Women relive Pretoria march

"Then we went up into the place there in front of the buildings, what they call the amphitheatre. It took a long time, maybe nearly two hours or more for all the women to walk up the steps to that place. Some of us had been chosen . . . we took all the petitions that had been signed, piles and piles of them, and we marched up to Strijdom's office to give them to him. The secretary told us that Strijdom was not there and that we were not allowed in anyway because we were black and white together. They said he was not there, just like that. But we knew that he was just too scared to see us! We walked past the secretary and into his office and we put those pamphlets on his desk, and on the floor and the room was full of them. All the women were quiet - 20 000 women standing there, some with their babies on their backs, and so quiet, no noise at all, just waiting. What a sight, so quiet, and so much colour, many women in green, gold and black, and the Indian women in their bright saris!"

— Frances Baard, founder member of the Federation of South African Women, describing the march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956.

On 13 September women from Pretoria relived the great women's march of 1956 when Helen Joseph came to speak at a meeting organised by Idasa's Pretoria office. Frances Baard, who herself had become a legend in South African politics through her involvement in women's organisations and trade unions, welcomed Mrs Joseph on behalf of the women of Pretoria. Mrs Joseph told the audience about the weeks of planning and organising, of the eventual thrill of seeing 20 000 women of all races climbing the steps of the Union Buildings and of the feeling afterwards: that of dignity and pride.

The protest march in 1956 was against a whole spectrum of unjust laws. The women protested against ghetto housing and forced removals. They protested against passes, against Bantu education, black poverty and about racial segregation in general. The petition read as follows:

"We speak from our hearts as mothers, and women. Life cannot be stopped. We must love and marry and find a home. We must bear children in hope and pain. We must love them as part of ourselves. We must help them to grow, we must endure all the sufferings and longings of motherhood. Because of this we are made strong to come here, to speak for our children, to strive for their future. We, the voters and the voteless, call upon you, the ministers responsible for these acts, and upon the government and the electorate of South Africa to hearken unto us."

Helen Joseph was the first person in South Africa to be placed under house arrest. Now as an 85-year old she can't be quoted. But what Frances Baard said about herself and about the ANC, can also be applied to Helen Joseph: "You know, even though they ban me, and they ban the ANC, my spirit is still there talking, talking, that I want to be free. I still say that I want to be free. So, by banning the ANC, to me is a waste of time because the spirit of the people is still there."



Old friends meet again . . . Frances Baard and Helen Joseph.



Participants share a joke after Joseph's moving speech.