

REVIEW: Black Working Class Women in South African Society

L Lawson & H Perold, Working Women: a portrait of South Africa's black women workers, Sached/Ravan, 1985, R9.95 (discount available to trade union members); F Meer, Factory and Family: the divided lives of South Africa's women workers, Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1985, R5.00 (worker price 50c); J Barrett, A Dawber, B Klugman, I Obery, J Shindler, J Yawitch, Vukani Makhosikazi: South African women speak, Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1985, R.500.

Three books have recently been published in South Africa, dealing with black working class women in South African society. They deal with women's oppression in the workplace, family and society generally. This is definitely an event in South African history.

All three books portray a horrific picture of the daily lives of black working class women in South Africa. A desperate struggle for survival against immeasurable odds, where all forces are pitched against them. Yet at the launch of the book Working Women, the women present sang and danced, a spirit of joy and hope prevailed and as was said there, hopefully the book would be used by women as a reference book - a working book.

To quote from Vukani Makhosikazi: "But above all, the mood of these women is a mood of determination and endurance," and "Men won't change the problems that face women, that's a fact of life. Until women deal with them they will continue." These books offer no direct solutions but the definite theme running through all of them is that the problem of women's oppression must be dealt with. All 3 books have interviewed women, they are factual stories, they have now been recorded.

It does seem a strange irony though, that all three books have been researched and written by academics. That the books have authenticity is not in doubt, all have interviews and research done with and amongst working class women. Certain

questions - of an organisational nature - remain unanswered. The women interviewed and many others that share very similar experiences are going to read about their own lives - where to after that, one wonders? Nevertheless these books should contribute in placing women's issues on the agenda. This is an event to be celebrated.

In all 3 books the workplace has been used as a point of departure, basically showing how women have been brought into the economy where they occupy the lowest places. They then go on to include the home, family, society and involvement in other activities.

What seems to come to light on the question of familial structures in all three books - although to a lesser extent in Factory and Family - is the extent to which traditional structures are being broken down; with many women choosing to remain single and single parents because of men's non-participation in household chores, their drinking habits etc. In the case of African women, alot of them are indeed the sole breadwinners or have to survive without their husbands because of state legislation.

Factory and Family is a result of a survey done by the Institute for Black Research and edited by Fatima Meer. 992 women were interviewed. Women were questioned about their lives and the results written up in a very accessible manner with pictures. Page 7 of the book aptly describes what the book is about:

The book is an articulation of their situation and demands expressed by the 992 women interviewed - it is the results of the survey. The book does not deal with anything outside of that.

In other words, there is no suggestion of the way in which these problems can be dealt with. In fact, the book reads quite harshly at times: for example p49, on the question of involvement in community organisation:

We don't have time for meetings. We would like to belong to clubs and to work with organisations that do good work. We think that there is a need for women to get together and to improve their situation. We would like to join such a group but we do not know where to find the time. This view is somewhat modified by the picture on the same

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page of women members of SAAWU (South African Allied Workers Union).

And on p50, under the heading, "The men in our lives":

The men in our lives are our fathers, brothers, husbands or boyfriends. These are the people who control us and whom we must obey. We live in a man's world and men are superior to women...Men are the breadwinners they need jobs more than women do...

But perhaps the situation speaks for itself, it is an indication of just how deeply women are exploited and how deeply the problem is internalised. Interviews in this book were with African, Indian and "coloured" women and reminds us of the fact that there is a large working class population among those classified coloureds and Indian.

Unfortunately there are a lot of spelling errors in Factory and Family and it is just generally badly put together.

Both Working Women, with photos and text by Leslie Lawson and edited by Helene Perold, and Vukani Makhosikazi which was workshopped by a Johannesburg women's group and edited by Ingrid Obery deal with the situation of African women. They show how African women have been brought into the workforce, as the most lowly paid workers, with the most menial jobs. Vukhuni Makhosikazi has a section (pp45-51) that effectively shows how African women have been brought into industry and the conditions they work under. Both books deal with the sectors within the economy where African women are mostly concentrated, eg in agriculture and domestic service and industry. They also deal with issues to be fought for at the workplace (eg Working Women pp54-70).

Vukani Makhosikazi has a very well researched section on women in the rural areas (pp177-211). Although women in the rural areas are in a desperate situation they have started to get together to do something about their situation: for example the Mgwali Women's Group and the Magopa Women's Group. The book also has a section on community organisations such as UWO (United Women's Organisation) and FSAW (Federation of South African Women) which is part of a tradition that continues from the Women's Charter which was originally drawn up on 17 April 1954 by the FSAW (pp238-40).

Both books have sections on trade unionism. Reproduced on p141 of Working Women is a paper that was presented to the management of AECI by women members of NAAWU (National Automobile and Allied Workers Union) listing demands for women workers.

All of the books in their own way deal very comprehensively with most of the issues that affect working class women's lives in South Africa: from living so far from the workplace to the double shift. Vukani Makhosikazi even deals with women political prisoners in South African jails. And the pictures in Working women by Leslie Lawson are compelling. The sections on women in domestic service and farm labour are particularly shocking.

Even now things have not improved much for African women; in fact with the tightening up of influx control laws conditions have worsened. To quote from Working Women (p37): "Domestic work! You earn peanuts - even when you do a part-time job as well," says Elsie. Women in industry are not much better off. To quote a floor manager at the Knitmore factory: "Last year we were pressing 1,000 pieces a day. I wanted 2,500 pieces and I couldn't get it. One day, suddenly after months of seeing no-one at the door looking for jobs, there were five. So I took them all on. I trained them without firing anyone, but those who didn't pull up their socks I eventually fired. I now have double the production." (Vukani Makhosikazi p50)

Despite the absolutely appalling conditions, as was said earlier, a spirit of hope prevails, there is a way out! To quote Mam' Lydia (branch secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union on pp136-137 of Working Women) "I think it's time for women to come together and see that this thing is a major problem for us. So that eventually we achieve the same rights. And we must think of many ways of doing it. It's a problem that will go ahead from one generation to another if we don't actually work on it now." And from Thandi Dyosi, of the Mgwali women's group, discussing forced removals:

When we meet as women, we discuss about our rejection of going away from Mgwali, because Mgwali is our home, our place of birth. We want to be united in what we do, because if there is a gap between us, they, our enemies, will find a way to defeat us.

(Penny Narsoo, July 1985)