

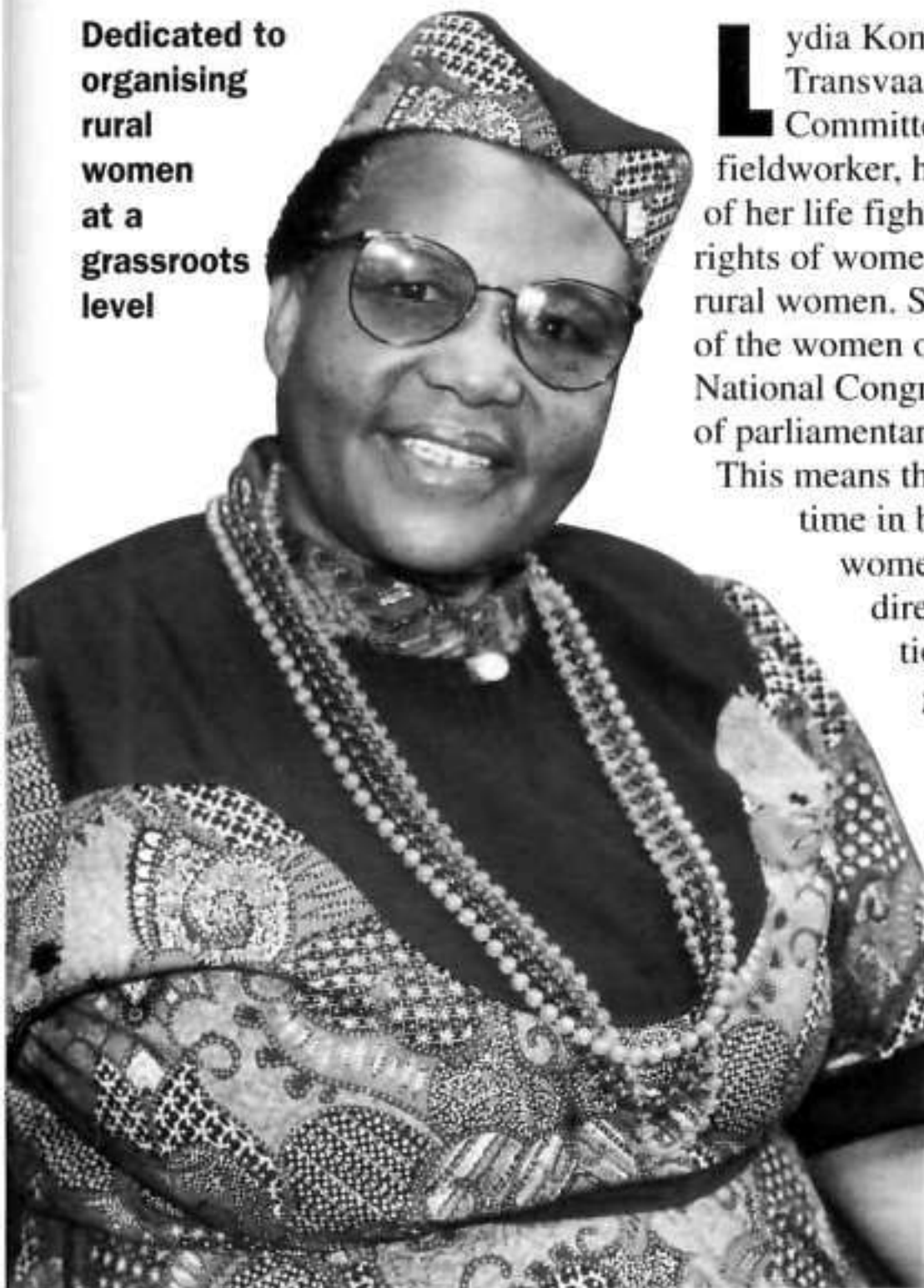
For nearly 20 years, Lydia Kompe has devoted her life to organising, first in trade unions and, for the past eight years, among rural women. She was a key figure in helping to

form the Rural Women's Movement and, as one of the ANC's election candidates, could become rural women's first representative in a new parliament.

Lydia Kompe

Fighting for rural rights

Dedicated to organising rural women at a grassroots level



L ydia Kompe, veteran Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC) fieldworker, has spent most of her life fighting for the rights of women, especially rural women. She is also one of the women on the African National Congress (ANC) list of parliamentary candidates.

This means that, for the first time in history, rural women could have direct representation in the new government.

Mam'Lydia has been a leading force in starting the Rural Women's Movement (RWM), a women's organisation based in Transvaal rural commu-

nities. She first joined TRAC as a fieldworker in 1986, dealing with victims of forced removals. It was then that she became more involved in working with women.

Mam'Lydia says rural women are worst affected by apartheid. They are often left with no money and with children to care for. Her first step was to organise them into groups.

"The Rural Women's Movement organises women through helping them form structures in their communities and empowering them to seek ways of exposing their problems," says Mam'Lydia.

She moves back and forth between hard-hit rural communities, working with women's groups, mainly in Northern Transvaal areas such as Moutse and Nebo.

H er African name is "Makwena", or mother of the crocodile, and when she is representing rural women's demands and fighting for their basic rights, she lives up to her name. But, to the rural women and their families, she is simply known as Mam'Lydia, the woman who knows their daily hardship and struggle because she has been there herself.

Born in 1935 in Matlala, near Pietersburg, Mam'Lydia says, unlike many rural children whose fathers left home to

work on the mines, she was lucky because she grew up with both parents at home. Her father was a small-scale farmer who kept livestock. But, she says, when the government's betterment scheme was introduced in 1950, everything they had was taken away.

"It was a disgrace," she said. It was one of the Nationalist Party government's ways of enforcing the migrant labour system.

"Our fathers had to hide in the hills, hunted by police for alleged political activities, and we were forced to leave school early to find jobs."

Left with no means of survival for her and her family in the rural areas, Mam'Lydia, like thousands of others, went to Johannesburg to work.

Her first job was as a domestic worker in Hyde Park. Later she found work as a factory worker and after many factory jobs over the years, she joined the trade union movement, one of the first women to do so.

"When I joined the Metal and Allied Workers Union in 1974, women were not seen as equal to men," she says. "It was interesting to see how, even then, men always used tradition and custom to control women. The only time we had support from them was when improved maternity leave conditions and paternity leave for them became a possibility. This was because they knew that, in our custom, men do not look after small babies and they would have a holiday and a rest from work instead.

Twenty years later, some of



Photo: Elmond Jiyane

Mam'Lydia (right) with women in Moutse during a march to demand better water supplies

the issues remain the same.

"Even now, rural women in the RWM are saying custom and tradition must not be used to exploit us at any level".

After being dismissed from her job in 1977 because of her union activities following strike action, Mam'Lydia became a full-time union employee.

The highlight of many years' work in the trade unions came when the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was formed in late 1985. "I felt as if my dream came true, but I now wanted to leave the young ones to carry the fight forward. I was also looking forward to going back to my roots."

In 1986 Mam'Lydia did just that, and since then, she has spent most of her time living among the rural women back

in the communities where she grew up.

"I was struck by how isolated women were in these rural communities. As a rural woman myself, I thought, how long are we going to be left out of important things happening around us because we are women left on our own?"

She began questioning why rural women were not part of the movement for change and bringing about a better future.

After a first meeting in Mathopetad, attended by nine groups, the RWM continued helping rural women organise themselves into groups until it was formally launched in 1990.

The RWM has successfully mobilised women around issues which affect them directly, such as a critical

shortage of health facilities, inadequate water supplies and the right to own land.

Mam'Lydia feels strongly about the right of women — whether they are married or not — to own land. She says the RWM is now negotiating about the issue of owning land with the government, farmers and village elders who enforce customary law.

Married many years ago, Mam'Lydia has three grown-up children, one a teacher and two who are completing their teachers' training.

Ever humble, Mam'Lydia prefers not to speak about herself. If she becomes the first woman to represent the rights of rural women in parliament, she says, it will be these women who helped put her there.

"I still feel a bitterness towards the oppressive laws of apartheid in the history of this country, which is why I couldn't further my education like others on the list of nominees. And, even though we can forgive these injustices, it's very hard to forget them".

"Work among the rural communities is very hard and can sometimes be frustrating", says Mam'Lydia. She has not yet decided if she will accept a seat in parliament, but she knows she has the support of the rural women.

Whatever she decides to do, she will never forget her roots. "I belong to the grassroots," she says. "I am needed most among the people, helping women win their daily struggles. ☼"

Demands for a new South Africa

Adopted by the Rural Women's Movement, November 1992

1. HEALTH

- there must be a clinic in every village with a 24-hour service
- there should be full-time staff at the clinic
- there should be more doctors provided
- the roads to the clinics must be upgraded
- the conditions in rural hospitals must be improved
- transport must be provided for expectant mothers, blind people, accident victims and old age patients.
- children should be trained as health workers.

2. EDUCATION

- more schools and creches must be provided

3. JOBS

- jobs should be created in rural areas

4. PENSIONS

- ID books must be corrected
- the payout points must be monitored for corruption

5. BEERHALLS

- beerhalls should be closed — we should be able to sell our own beer.

6. OUR BODIES AND CHILDBEARING

- women should be able to decide how many children they want
- women should have choices about the kind of pregnancy prevention they want to use

7. MARRIAGE

- lobola must not be seen as an exchange of women as objects — we should return to the traditional meaning of the system
- there must be protection of rural wives' access to benefits gained via marriage
- customary marriage must be given the same legal status as civil marriage
- polygamy should be abolished

8. AT HOME

- men and women should share domestic work

9. TRADITIONS

- promote the traditional ways of preparing food which are healthy

10. DECISION-MAKING

- women should be allowed to make decisions about livestock
- women should be part of kgotlas (traditional village decision-making structures), local government, regional government and national government structures

11. WATER

- there must be adequate water supply to rural areas

12. LAND

- women should have rights to land — married or unmarried
- land should be registered in women's names
- women should be able to farm and produce own food crops
- women should have access to land for grazing and cattle posts

13. TELEPHONES

- there must be automatic telephone exchanges in rural areas

14. ELECTRICITY

- electricity must be provided to all rural houses