



Ellen Kuzwayo

SPEAK spoke to well-known writer and community activist Ellen Kuzwayo just after her return from opening the International Feminist Book Fair in Holland. We asked her about the book fair and her views on the women's struggle

Writer, community leader, activist, teacher, social worker, grandmother and more - Ellen Kuzwayo is a woman of many talents. At 78 years of age 'Ma K', as she is affectionately known, does twice the amount of work of many young people. SPEAK went to visit her at her small home in Orlando West, Soweto. Whilst we were there the phone did not stop ringing with people who needed advice or wanted to set up meetings.

Ellen Kuzwayo is full of energy and ideas. She tells us she is busy writing her third book, which she hopes to complete by the end of this year. As national treasurer of the World Affiliated Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and Life President of the Black Consumer Union of South Africa, she has many duties to carry out. Kuzwayo is also actively involved in the Self-Help Movement (a group of women working for economic empowerment) and many other community projects. She recently gave the opening speech at the International Feminist Book Fair in Amsterdam, Holland. We asked her about this.

SPEAK: Can you tell us something about the International Feminist Book Fair?

Ellen Kuzwayo: About 150 women writers from all over the world were at the Book Fair. There were also publishers and journalists. There were very few men. It was wonderful to have women from all over the world come together in such a powerful display of their achievements. There were thousands of books in one huge building - big books, small books, books written in hundreds of different languages in colourful covers, loud colours, big striking images and small delicate images. Authors were signing their books, displaying paintings - and debating issues that affect women and women writers all over the world.

SPEAK: In Africa feminism has been seen as coming from Europe and North America. Some people still think feminism is "un-African" and call it Western feminism. What do you think about this?

Ellen Kuzwayo: This is because Western feminists have imposed their views on others. The first time I went to the International Feminist



"The Women's National Coalition is long overdue - it is a coalition which needs to be nursed"

Book Fair in 1984 women from Africa, South America and Asia were simply all called "third world women". The problems facing African women were not seen as issues which we as African women had to deal with - we were simply all "third world". The Western women seemed to think we African women allow ourselves to be doormats to our men. Western women failed to understand that African women will deal with the problems they face in their own way. These days women from all over the world are coming together and talking about the struggles in their countries. The issues discussed are no longer dictated by Western feminists. We should not associate the word "feminist" with Western feminism. It is a good word, whether it is applied in Africa, Asia or Europe.

SPEAK: What is your definition of feminism?

Ellen Kuzwayo: I consider feminists to be women who recognise they are oppressed as women and who are prepared to fight for basic rights, privileges and choices which women should have in a society.

SPEAK: What do you think of the Women's National Coalition's plan to draw up a women's charter?

Ellen Kuzwayo: I think it is long overdue. It is a coalition which needs to be nursed. We have women who are good leaders. Leadership positions must not be dominated by white women as has been the case in the past. Leaders must come from their own communities and women know their own communities best. If we have leaders who are trusted, committed and experienced, the Coalition will be of great benefit to the women of South Africa.

SPEAK: People respect you for your community work and do not see you as belonging to any political organisation. How do you manage to rise above party politics?

Ellen Kuzwayo: I have been a member of a political organisation for generations! But I do recognise we belong to communities where people have different political beliefs. We should not be divided by these differences. In my work in the community I never force my political views on anyone. We must work together as a community



"Women of the world need to share skills and ideas"

and be tolerant of each other. Every person has the right to her or his political beliefs.

SPEAK: You are both an international figure and a community figure. Do you find it difficult being part of two worlds?



Photos by Anus Zentinski

Ellen Kuzwayo: "We South Africans have to learn political tolerance"

Ellen Kuzwayo: Not at all. I am an international figure because of my work in the community. I started working on self-help projects with women as far back as 1979, long before I ever thought I'd be a writer. I had just left social work practice at the time, and also just come out of detention. It was the time a film was made about women of South Africa called "Awake from Mourning" - and I think that said it all. Women were beginning to awaken from the 1976 riots and the Self-Help Movement had begun to grow. Women started taking control of their own lives. The Self-Help Movement has always had contact with women overseas. I once went to a self-help centre for the wives of Turkish labourers in Denmark. Women were knitting and designing clothing. The idea came to start a similar centre at home. That is how Zamani Centre in Jabavu, Soweto started in 1984. That is what we need to do as women of the world - share skills and ideas. ●

Books written by Ellen Kuzwayo:
Call me Woman published by Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985
Sit Down and Listen published by David Phillip, Johannesburg, 1990