



Women at the 'Women Unite' Conference

Photo by: one of UWCO's media trainees

# A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN HER ORGANISATION

*This article was written for SPEAK by members of the United Women's Congress (UWCO) in the Western Cape. Members of UWCO's Education and Training, and Media sub-committees worked on the article. UWCO stands for a united, non-racial, non-sexist democratic South Africa. UWCO is the leading affiliate of the Western Cape Region of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). UWCO has 17 democratic branches in the Western Cape. Membership is open to women over 18 years of age.*

## **An Important Conference**

During the weekend of 11-13 August 1989, we had an important conference to build FEDSAW. The theme of the conference was: "Women

Unite for a Future South Africa." The aim of the conference was to reach out to as broad a group of women as possible, across class and racial barriers. "We have so much in common. We all want peace in our land. We are all concerned about the future of our children. We all share common experiences as women in South Africa. Come, let us talk of these things, let us talk of our problems and try and work out solutions. Let us talk of freedom." And the women came. There were about 300 delegates from 45 organisations, with many women working as organisers.

## **A Special Honour**

We were especially honoured to have two women from Namibia. One woman from the

South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) had recently returned to her homeland after many years in exile. The other woman was from the Namibian Council of Churches.

We also welcomed Thandi Modise from the Northern Cape. She was the first African National Congress (ANC) woman guerilla to be imprisoned. She was released last year after serving an eight-year sentence.

### **Many Organisations Came**

The organisations that came included affiliates or observers of FEDSAW Western Cape, such as UWCO, Black Sash Western Cape, Rape Crisis, Bellville Gemeenskap Organisasie, Mowbray Youth Congress, Women's Movement for Peace, Atlantis Women's Organisation, and Southern Cape women's organisations from George, Plettenberg Bay, Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn.

Civic women were there, our youth and students were there. Rural women, teacher organisations, religious, detainee support organisations, health organisations and service organisations were all represented - and many more!

### **A Big Victory for the Women**

An UWCO branch member said: "I think this conference was a big victory for the women. Even in planning it, we were all so united. So many members got involved, from catering to planning the programme. Just being together at the conference was a big step forward - never mind all the wonderful discussion."

On Friday night we had a social umjikelo to meet each other and raise funds. Early on Saturday the conference started. Delegates divided up into ten workshops, to give everyone a chance to participate. Delegates could choose which workshops they wanted to take part in.

### **There Were Many Workshops**

The workshops looked at issues which affect women in South Africa. The topics were: work and unemployment, housing, health, education, children and the family, law, violence against women, culture and media, repression, and religion. Each workshop was guided by a few

volunteers from our organisations. When we planned the conference, we had a training session for these facilitators to prepare them.

Women discussed the problems women face under each topic. The next day we spoke about our demands to solve the problems, and how we will fight for our demands. The reports from every workshop were presented to the whole conference. An UWCO branch member said: "Discussion was really brisk. In small groups, particularly, women felt free to open up their hearts and speak freely. Mealtimes were often forgotten in the need to explore fully all the issues which affect women so in South African society. Women spoke of their fears and hopes and dreams for this land."

On Saturday night, we all relaxed. We watched videos, sang songs, and printed t-shirts. On



Photo by: Eric Miller, Afrapix  
FEDSAW has so far been launched in the Cape. There are plans to launch FEDSAW nationally.

Sunday the conference was closed by one of our visitors from Namibia. After lunch, everyone joined in the National Women's Day rally. We had speakers from SWAPO and also one of the founder members of FEDSAW, 84-year old Helen Joseph. Women unite for a future S.A.!●