

## August 9: South Africa Women's Day

*Wathint' abafazi, wayithint' imbolodo uzokufa*

Now you have touched the women  
You have struck a rock,  
You have dislodged a boulder,  
You will be crushed.

-Women's Anti-Pass Campaign Song, 1956

On August 9, 1956 more than twenty thousand women from all over South Africa and from all types of racial and social backgrounds assembled in Pretoria to protest the apartheid regime's extension of the hated pass laws to regulate the movement of black women. Among the women's demands was an audience with the regime's Prime Minister during which they could air their grievances. Since all processions in Pretoria had been banned that day the women walked to the Prime Minister's office in the Union Buildings in groups of three or less and asked to see him. In pursuance of the regime's policy of ignoring all representations from Africans the Prime Minister, of course, was not available to see them. The leaders of the protest then went back to the Prime Minister's office and submitted petitions with hundreds of thousands of signatures. Afterwards they stood in perfect silence outside for thirty minutes and then sang songs of protest: *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* and *Morena Boroka*. As they finally dispersed a new freedom song burst from their lips: "*Wathint' abafazi, wayithint' imbolodo uzokufa*"—"Now you have touched the women—you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed."

Until 1952 only South African black men had to carry passbooks that regulated their movements and were consequently both the symbol and the reality of their oppression under the apartheid regime. Then, in 1952, Parliament passed the Natives Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents Act which, ironically, only extended the pass laws and now required all blacks to carry the passes. Protest began immediately and formed part of the Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws. Among the major leaders of this campaign was Florence Matomela. In spite of these protests, in 1955, the Minister of Native Affairs announced that the new Act would be enforced without change and that black women would be issued with passes from January 1956. The protests then became more organized and the first major protest by women occurred in October 1955 when two thousand women, mainly Africans, converged upon Pretoria. The women's movement grew and activists like Florence Mkhize from Natal, Ida Mntwana from Transvaal and the legendary trade unionist Lilian Masediba Ngoyi from Pretoria emerged as the leaders. The series of protests culminated in the massive August 9 demonstration in 1956 and that day has since been observed throughout the world as South Africa Women's Day.

Southern Africa Network / Third World Political Forum, Ida Noyes Hall, University of Chicago

**PROTEST AGAINST APARTHEID: STOP THE DEATHS**

**AUGUST 24: MARCH AND RALLY DOWNTOWN – ASSEMBLE AT THE FEDERAL BUILDING AT NOON  
RALLY AT GRANT PARK BANDSTAND – 2:00 P.M.**