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WOMEN AGAINST APARTHEID

" . . . Learn how to use an AK-47 and go back and fight."

*Text of address by Mankikola Mahlengu
to the Third Annual African Activist
Association Conference, May 1981*

I am going to talk about the women in South Africa and the apartheid system, their roles and again what they are doing against apartheid. I won't go much deeper into all the details but I will try to highlight some of the things so that I can in the end call for or stimulate discussion because this is how mostly I like people to do--I believe in a two-way traffic. I just want to touch there so that I stimulate you for discussion

Women in South Africa these days, we see ourselves as being double oppressed or double exploited. We are oppressed, which is obvious on the basis of the phrase and the colonialism which we are in and secondly we are still discriminated against because of our sex, but we have tried to say that we are going to fight with men to gain our roles. It is not an important issue at the moment. The important issue is that we do not have a land and we do not have a decision-making as black people or as oppressed and that is the main issue. To join with our men and while we are in that process we can as well try to fit ourselves against the discrimination on the basis of sex.

I am going to deal with various points. The first one is the role of women and apartheid. When you look into South Africa the family life is zero or next to zero. You look at women in the rural areas, their situation is pathetic because they do not stay with their husbands. Their husbands are labour tools or are made labour tools so that they go into the urban areas and work there. They go there on yearly contracts so that they leave for the whole year so the poor women are left at the reserves all alone and the only time men can come home and properly enjoy with their wives is probably for two or three weeks in a year. So it means in the whole 52 weeks, when you subtract these three weeks, you get 49 weeks. For 49 weeks she is all by herself and this is always problematic. When the woman is far away from her husband, the husband is getting meagre wages and that husband is supposed to share that meagre wage with the family at home. Usually, the husband is staying at a hostel, he is supposed to pay the rent for the hostel, and he is supposed to commute if he is in the urban areas to work and all these things cost money and he is supposed to share that money. For himself and the woman and usually you find that the woman, because she is away, suffers more.

Sometimes the money comes, sometimes it does not come and again the man is faced with this problem which we do not know how to solve. What do you expect a man, a married man, to do when he stays for eleven months away from his wife. Meantime, when he is moving around in the city, he brushes against other women and you find that sometimes men strike relationships with other women which brings about problems. He has to seek satisfaction from the other women in the city and the poor women in the rural areas suffer. So, you find that the rural woman is in a very difficult situation and that is why, sometimes, she is forced to work in the areas around. And that is where the farmers and some of the white people around, and even in the homelands, are expecting more.

And you find again, when you look into the urban women as far as the family life is concerned, that she too, she does not play her role as she is supposed to because, in the morning at about four o'clock she is up, on the train, when the children are still asleep, and she comes back late in the evening when the children are again asleep. In other words, she does not have time for her own children because of work. In the urban areas you find children looking after the younger children and again you find that you are not used to your mother; you are more used to your sister than your mother because you do not see your mother often.

So that we find that the family life, which is supposed to be a basic important issue is in such a pathetic situation. I will come to the second point on education, more especially on the women. Because of the education system in which we find ourselves in South Africa, it is impossible for most of the women to be educated. Point number one: the philosophy of apartheid says that blacks should be trained or educated in such a way that they remain perpetual slaves while whites are educated in such a way that they remain perpetual masters. At this very moment the government is spending R700 per capita per year to a white child and R17 per year to a black child. In the rural areas, it spends R45 which is a bit more. So as we grew up, our parents were paying for the schools where we went.

Due to the meagre wages of the parent, some of the children find it difficult to continue going to school so they drop from school very early and that encourages child labour. With the type of education which is geared on us, women fall into nursing and teaching careers. There are some particular careers for whites and certain particular careers for blacks in South Africa. Engineering as a whole, for example, is reserved for whites. They say blacks do not have minds to do engineering. It is just recently that they have been trying to do something about it. The career you want to do as a woman, more especially as a black woman, you cannot do because of this Job Reservation Act. So

you find that most of the black women who are supposed to be educated, most of them are nurses and some are teachers and a few are social workers. It is rare to get a black woman who is a doctor. In my knowledge, I know of only three women who are doctors in the whole of South Africa and we are so many women in South Africa. And still in their profession, they are discriminated because of their color and sex. Most of the women are domestic servants and some are washer-women, you know, doing laundry and some are working in the industries. So, you find that when you look at the black women in South Africa, most of them are doing subservient jobs.

What made me surprised, which I want to share with you, is in South Africa the white woman cannot do duties in her own house she is trained in that way. She is trained to have a servant and the servant is a black woman in most cases. So it is rare to find a white woman washing dishes for herself or even washing clothes for herself. That does not mean that you have got money or do not have money. Because again, the domestic servants are not protected in South Africa. There is nothing which says you should pay so much. She pays the wage she wants to pay and in such cases you find that most black women are very much exploited. I would like to give you an example of what happened when I worked as a nurse. A white nurse asked me to get for her a woman to help her at her house. I asked her what is the woman going to do? She said, "She would do laundry, clean the house, look after the baby, and cook. She would start work at about six o'clock in the morning because she should serve breakfast before we leave for work and she would complete the work at about eight o'clock in the evening after supper and washing the dishes and everything. This lady is to get one day off which is on Thursday. On Sundays, she would alternate in the afternoons." And I said, "How much are you going to pay her?" And she replied that she was going to pay her R25 a month. Honestly, I was sure that this woman was getting R500 per month for her work at the hospital and she was expecting a woman who was doing literally everything for her in her house to get R25 a month. What are you going to do with R25 a month?

And it is not only this woman who is doing this. Most of the white women behave like this. You find that economically we are very much far away from them. There cannot be in all fairness a competition between somebody who is getting R500 and another with R25 a month. What is she going to do with R25 because she is supposed to help her husband, pay the school fees, rent and food, and all these things. And I told the white nurse that I was not going to do that. I am not going to subject my own people to such exploitation. And we find again that the women, too, as far as education is concerned, most of them are struggling very hard. In the earlier days, our parents did not want women to study because they thought why we are studying and

all that. But as the situation grows and in South Africa mostly we are from the working class, we find that a woman cannot stay at home and not work. The husband is not able to support the whole family with that meagre wage he is getting.

And on the labour question, as I have touched a little bit about the domestic servants, we find that the women, especially in the urban areas, are working in the industries and they are definitely exploited like any other person working in the industry. Sometimes they are laid off and then they try to unionize, only to find that their unions are somehow destroyed because of the whole labour system of South Africa.

Again, I will try to explain our role as far as health is concerned. Apartheid itself is a very unhealthy system. This is what I have been saying because to me health is not absence of disease but pertains to your mind, your social aspect as well as your physical aspect. So you find that most of the people are not quite healthy, more especially the women because they are subjected to hard work and again with malnutrition, poor feeding, etc. When I was working as a nutritionist, that was the most frustrating time, because I was supposed to talk to the women, tell them how to feed their children and sometimes you find women who do not have enough to eat. How are you going to tell these women to eat those types of food--proteins, eggs, etc., when they hardly manage some other things which they can do? And to me all these things are being seen from the political side. For us to eat very well, we must have the land and the labour and then we can cultivate. As long as we do not have the land on our own, it still takes us bad about what to do. Because, I will give you an example. As a nutrition educator, you tell the women, give the child eggs, give the child milk. You know, this is the type of education we have learned we have to tell the people. And these women are very clever; they grasp it. And the next time she comes with a malnourished child and the doctor's nurse asks her how is she feeding the baby. If she feeds the child well, why is the child like this?

You find that the whole education, because it is not well done, it is something you tell people, you do not communicate with them and find out what is the thing which makes them unable to feed the children. It is only after we ask the women "how much are you getting? How much does your husband get? How do you work?" that we can know why these children are malnourished. Most children who are not well-fed are subject to malnutrition. This is the very thing which is now rife and is the concern of every woman as well as the men, about what we are going to do because what we have seen is that the research which has been conducted was that children who are getting malnourished in their first or second years usually, if they can recover from that, they are going to have mental problems at school and

they will repeat every standard and that is the thing which now we are looking for. To every 1,000 children born in South Africa 240 of the black children die of malnutrition, 50 percent of the remainder suffer from malnutrition. What race are we going to have of the black people? It means that we are born mentally retarded or with mental difficulties, what should we do about this thing? And this again affects us. As far as health again is concerned, since we do not have enough facilities about health, I am professionally a nurse, and I have seen that our health is definitely corrupted.

You find that in an area like Soweto, where I grew up, we are 1.5 million. We are more or less like Namibia, but we are only in Soweto. We are 1.5 million and we have got one hospital and when I was working there, you find that we could not meet most of the people because...where are we going to place them? And sometimes we were embarrassed and as blacks we found ourselves in a difficult position. When the doctor discharges somebody because there is no bed, and when that person is at the gate, without even reaching where he/she is going, he dies. And it has, you know, left us with a guilt.

And you find that, more especially the ANC, that is the Anti-Natal Clinic which women are supposed to go, you find that they do not have the good facilities or may be at the moment, because of trying to divide us, if you have more money, they can admit you in one of the nursing homes in town and that is where you can even have a good labour. What we see inside South Africa to go through labour, if you are a black woman you go in the natural way but if you are white, you go under anesthesia so that you should not get much of the pain. But we have seen that we do not mind going naturally because they would prove who we are but it should not be done in the way that some should not have to do it. It sounds that it is oppressive. Why should we be subjected to that? Why do we have to go through the natural way and when it comes to some other races, anesthesia is introduced? So this has the discrimination and all the oppressive things which we are fighting. I am just leaving it that way so that you should hang, you should ask me more about it.

You know, we can talk much about what we are subjected to and what our roles are but we have come to the point that it is no proper point for us to complain that we are living in this way or living that way. We must do something against what we are trying to do. And I would like to quote Herald Tipan because I like what she said. She said, "There was one or two things I have right to: liberty or death. If I could not have one I would have the other, for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted." And again, I like what Florence, in the ANC Women's Section--she is our leader--said, "If you want freedom, we must fight

for it."

So with all these things which we are subjected to, we find that it is no point for us to put our hands up for heaven and say "Oh, we are suffering." We should do something about it. And that is why again women are fighting apartheid. What should we do under such conditions? Should we just leave that or not? And that is why women have organized themselves to fight as individuals and as well as in an organized manner to fight all these injustices and we find that women of today are having more protests and striking at the labour unions: though there are some who are trying to work against us. I think some of you have heard about Lusimboein who is a trade unionist and who unfortunately the regime has recruited and sent against us. And we are just surprised how she got. She received a doctorate and it is said that she is the best woman who can fight communism. Now, we are saying that when we are worried about apartheid and colonialism and imperialism, if somebody is fighting something which is not even there; jumping what is there and even having an honorary doctorate about that, about how these people are trying to do us we found that we cannot be discouraged by that. And the women who are fighting against apartheid, you know, we do it in various ways: protest and striking. But unfortunately, we do not have much room to strike or to do something, because imprisonment in South Africa is there. So, most women are detained and put in solitary confinement of which I was subjected to in 1978.

I was detained and when you are detained, you are a communist in their sense because in South Africa when you are against the system, they would say you are a communist. So when I was in detention, the police treated me, they told me that they were not going to treat me like a woman because I am doing what men are doing. When they came at midnight to face me, eleven heavily armed policemen coming to take a woman, I felt proud about it. But what I am going to say is that most women who are against apartheid are imprisoned. We have a woman who is doing the longest prison term in the whole of South Africa. She is doing sixteen years for participation in the struggle, and she was sentenced in 1964. We have many women who are doing between five and eight years for participating in the struggle and we have got many who are banned, who cannot be with more than two people at a time. One of them I just want to mention is Daph. She is banned. She was going to celebrate her marriage. She applied to the ministry of justice to get married, to relax the banning order on her wedding day. As usual, they left it until Friday night, the wedding was to be on Saturday. On Friday night, the ministry of justice said, "No we cannot relax your banning order." She was to get married; everything was prepared. When we went to the meeting, Daph was sitting in the bedroom alone; the husband was not there. We have to

queue so that we may see him one by one and this woman was subject not to be happy in her own wedding ceremony because of the stand she took. And some are banished. You know of Mrs. Sisulu who has been banished from 1964 to today. You know she cannot say "hello." When we visited the children at her home, she usually moves away, because she cannot say hello. Immediately she says hello, she is breaking her banishing order and she can be imprisoned.

So these are the women who definitely worked hard against the system and are repressed now. And we find that it is too much because we can't work much at home because of all these restrictions and repressions. So some of the women have gone out to join the armed struggle and we have got women who found that there is nothing which we can do except to learn how to use an AK-47 and go back and fight. This is the thing which some of the women are trying to do: they are in the army and some who are outside are representatives of the organisation working hand in hand with their husbands. I have got that which I would like to read for you. It is my poem. I always try to tell the people about it. It is on the revolutionary lament of the black South African women:

*I am not like other women in the world.
I cannot marry
Why should I marry*

*When my husband is going to be imprisoned for life
For responding to the cry of repression,
When my husband is going to be imprisoned for life
For fighting apartheid.*

*When he is going to be banned,
Silenced for a bitter period of five years?
When he will be swallowed by the mines and industries,
And I only see him for 14 days in 365 days?
What about the other 351 days?
What about the other 351 days?*

*Yes, I am not like other women in the world.
I must not bear children.
Why should I bear children*

*If my children are going to be victims
Of detention without trial, torture, banishment,
even executions.*

*Do you remember June '76, all because
My brave children said "no" to apartheid, oppression,
My children to die at the age of one month,
or two years,
Of hunger in a land of gold boom.
Shame, Shame, Shame gold and diamond.*

*Yes, I am not like other women in the world.
The black color which Xhameta gave me
Is used by the racist against me.
I am black and able,
And I can be silenced and imprisoned.
I am black and able,
So I have stuck out my neck and shouted:
"You have struck me, you have struck a rock!"*

*Yes, I am not like other women in the world.
I give my strength and my sweat and I get zero.
I cannot feed or cloth my offspring,
Or cover them from the blows of the apartheid monster.
But the time has now come.
Yes, now! Yes, now!
Now, I want to be like other women in the world,
No longer lamenting I am going to die.
I am going to fight, die if necessary,
To free Mandela, our men and children,
Fight to free my country, to kill apartheid,
Fight until I am like other women.*