

THE WOMEN'S MARCH

9 AUGUST 1956

... We are women from every part of South Africa. We are women of every race, we come from the cities and the towns, from the reserves and the villages. We come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes... In the name of women of South Africa, we say to you, each one of us, African, European, Indian, Coloured, that we are opposed to the pass system. We voters and voteless, call upon your Government not to issue passes to African women. We shall not rest until ALL pass laws and all forms of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished. We shall not rest until we have won for our children their fundamental rights of freedom, justice, and security.

- Taken from the Petition presented to the Prime Minister on 9 August 1956.

The 9th of August 1956 marks a watershed moment in the history of our country, when 20 000 women from all walks of life assembled on the lawns of the Union Buildings in Pretoria, united in protest.

These women, who risked their physical security by protesting against the government, came from various sections of society – Black, White, Indian and Coloured. Some of these women, carrying children, stood together to protest against the extension of the pass laws to include African women. This demonstration was the first mass action to be organised and participated in by women in the liberation struggle. Significantly, it demonstrated to the government of the day, as well as to agents of patriarchy that women, too, had the ability to become a formidable force

in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed in South Africa.

Led by heroines Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Raheeda Moosa, Sophie De Bruin and others, the women made a public declaration to the rest of South African society. The declaration conveyed their strong opposition to the pass laws – and in particular, its extension to incorporate African women. Excerpts of their vehement aversion to segregation today form part of the Women's March Monument, housed at the Union Buildings.

In proving that women were able to mobilise themselves into powerful organised protest groups, these women paved the way for others to participate



more actively in the liberation struggle. This single act of unity proved that women were, indeed, strong and had the capacity to fight injustice – a somewhat unusual view in the 1950s.

African women have suffered a double injustice. Under *apartheid*, they were discriminated against because of their race. But the injustices they faced went further in that they were again subjugated on the basis of their gender. Traditionally, women are regarded as a ‘weaker’ sex. If permitted to do work, such work would be of a menial nature and, therefore, low paying.

Patriarchal thinking holds that women are primarily care-givers and are only fit to handle activities related to homes. As such, they would only be expected to depend on men for financial income. Indeed, financial dominance by men naturally guaranteed their dominance in other spheres of life. This is precisely the kind of system the women of 1956 worked to dismantle.

In commemorating the Women’s March, located at the apex of Government, we in The Presidency, through our collective actions, work towards improving the status of women, children and other vulnerable groups in our society.

