

# Freedom Charter, Women's Charter, Memories, and (Un)freedoms

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## Abstract

More than 60 years ago, South African women declared their aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminated against women and that deprived them in any way of their inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offered to any one section of the population. Women do not form a society separate from men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. Against this backdrop, after 60 years, and with a Women's Charter and Freedom Charter in place, there are many issues that still need to be addressed, highlighted and referred to. On the agenda is the investigation of unresolved women's issues so as to pave the way for emancipation from the (un)freedoms that still prevail. On August 9, 1956, more than 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the extension of women's pass laws. This march, organised by the Federation of South African Women, has been recorded as one of the largest demonstrations staged in this country's history. Women have played an important role in building a better South Africa. They should be protected against abuse, violence and discrimination, and they must be valued and respected in order to uphold the vision of building a non-racist, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa. Against this background, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter and 25 years of freedom indicates that change should have taken place over the last six decades. However, the liberation, education and management of South African women within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges need to be investigated and documented.

**Keywords:** Women's Charter; freedom; liberation struggle; education management; economic; legal



## **Foreword**

This article is an oral-literate perspective on the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter and 25 years of freedom, and on the liberation, education and management of South African women within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges.

## **Methodology**

Traditional research methodologies were not used for my study. Instead, I relied completely on my observations, oral interviews and critical analysis, coupled with interpersonal interaction with the participants. This does not alter the trajectory of my article nor does it dilute the realities confronting South African women on a daily basis. An oral-literate approach was utilised to ensure that authentic experiences were captured. Oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. Unfortunately, I did not record the interviews that I conducted with a number of older women (i.e., women over 50 years of age). The interviews were summarised and then stored in written format. These summaries may be used in further research.

In terms of oral history methodology, interviewers should get to know their clients even before the first interview by thoroughly researching clients' past, mapping their place in a greater historical context and talking to key players who have institutional memory. It is imperative to work with clients to understand goals, stories and audiences. Interviewers are expected to determine what the scope of the project should be, how many interviews are necessary, and the order in which they should be conducted. Further to this, interviewers should develop themes for the project, and refine a direction for each individual interview. Every interview should be focused but flexible, and it should be viewed as an open-ended exploration guided by a well-informed interviewer. Interviewers must work with clients to determine the most effective way to use their interviews to preserve their legacy. I tried to comply with these guidelines as far as possible; however, the limitation that presented itself was that I did not get to know my clients by researching their past, mapping their place in a greater historical context and talking to other key players who have institutional memory.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Since oral history is about making contact with people, especially the elders in our community, this research has been undertaken to capture the stories of women, specifically their recollection of the events surrounding the Freedom Charter and the Women's Charter.

An organic intellectual is described as someone who evaluates a situation and then develops a personal way of responding to it without letting this response get affected by how others react to the situation. The elders of most societies are the organic intellectuals of these societies and thus are the custodians of our primary culture, our heritage and our untold stories. My interviews were an endeavour to capture the elderly women's stories so that they could be treasured for our collective future. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, the participants' informed consent was obtained, and they were assured that no harm would come to them because of their participation in the research. I upheld the best practices of oral history research by ensuring that exceptional quality, trust and confidentiality were at the core of what I did. Whether I am compiling an article for a journal publication, producing a personal biography or creating a book, I value and protect participants' privacy.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The conclusions and recommendations of my research are dispersed throughout the narrative and the discussion; therefore there is no specific section in this article on the conclusions reached and the recommendations made. This is an obvious and apparent reality of an article of this nature. Throughout the narrative I mention some of my conclusions and recommendations in terms of the analytical depth of the article as a whole. In this sense the article puts forward the realities of the struggle that South African women still face 60 years after the Women's Charter and 21 years after democracy. It is hoped that the criticism and concerns raised in this article will be appreciated by the readers and by all role players and stakeholders involved in empowering South African women. The findings of this research, with its many limitations and shortcomings, are mentioned in the course of reporting on the interviews.

### **Introduction**

In 2014, South Africa celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter, but due to varying circumstances there was a limited approach to acknowledging the contribution of women to the liberation struggle. In light of this, this research makes an attempt to research life in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa and to comment on the situation in contemporary society. The focus is on women and their freedom. The focal points are the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter and 21 years (1994 to 2015) of freedom in the context of the liberation, education and management of South African women within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges. This research was based on an oral-literate perspective.

## **The Women's Charter**

According to Kimble and Unterhalter (1982), the oppressed people of South Africa have an outstanding record of courageous struggle and sacrifice, and a striking role has been played by women of all races, African, Coloured, Indian, as well as a small number of progressive whites. More than 60 years ago, South African women declared their aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminated against them. They fought against the laws that deprived them in any way of their inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offered to any one section of the population. As stated in the Women's Charter, women do not form a society separate from men; there is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. Against this backdrop, after 60 years and a Women's Charter in place, there are many issues that still need to be addressed, highlighted and referred to. The agenda is that unresolved women's issues should be investigated so as to pave the way for emancipation from the (un)freedoms that still prevail. The Women's Charter was signed in 1954, even before the Freedom Charter in 1955. On August 9, 1956, more than 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the extension of women's pass laws. This march has been recorded as one of the largest demonstrations staged in this country's history and was organised by the Federation of South African Women. The Federation famously challenged the idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen, declaring it instead to be everywhere. Women have played an important role in building a better South Africa; therefore they should be protected against abuse, violence and discrimination, and they must be valued and respected in order to uphold the vision of building a non-racist, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa. Against this background, the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter and 21 years of freedom indicate that change should have taken place over the last six decades. The liberation, education and management of South African women within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges need to be investigated and documented.

An oral-literate approach was utilised in this research study to ensure that authentic experiences were captured. Since oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through interviews, these interviews should be recorded. Unfortunately, the interviews I conducted with women for this project were not audio recorded, which means that they were not transcribed, or indexed. If that had been done, they could have been used for future research. Nevertheless, I summarised these interviews in written format and stored these summaries for future use. Since oral history is about making contact with people, especially the elders in our community, this research captures the stories of women and their recollection of the events surrounding their fight for freedom.

## **Organic Intellectuals**

The elders, especially the women, are the organic intellectuals who are the custodians of our primary culture, our heritage, and our untold stories. Before it is too late, every endeavour should be made to capture their stories and let them be treasured for our collective future. An organic intellectual is the opposite of a yuppie—they are not upwardly mobile and their concern is for the conditions of their class as a whole, not for themselves.

On August 9, 1956, more than 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings to protest against the extension of women’s pass laws. In 2014, Women’s Month was commemorated under the theme “Celebrating the 60th Anniversary of the Women’s Charter and 20 Years of Freedom: Together Moving a Non-racial, Non-sexist South Africa Forward!”

## **Pre-2015**

In 2015, the questions that needed to be answered were: “How much of this has been achieved one year later?” “Why did the women march back then?” The women did this to rise up against the legislation that required black South Africans to carry “passes.” These passes were special identification documents that were used to limit black people’s freedom of movement during the apartheid era. We need to be reminded that approximately 20 000 women from all over the country took to the streets of Pretoria—many carrying the children of their white bosses on their backs—to stage a peaceful march to the Union Buildings. After dropping off bundles of petitions containing more than 100 000 signatures at the offices of the then prime minister, J. G. Strijdom, they stood in silence for 30 minutes. For 30 minutes, 20 000 women stood in silence! They would have been tired; they would have been thirsty; they would have been hungry. Many carried children; many might have had ill-health issues. But, they moved on with their objectives and aims to achieve a better life for all. They put aside their personal struggles, challenges and doubts for that day in order to help change the historical and political landscape of South Africa.

South Africa has benefited from the sacrifices made by many women. South Africans have their freedom because of sacrifices made by many men and women. As citizens of this beautiful country, there is a need to leave behind a legacy. Our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren need building blocks to move forward and build a non-sexist society. The question is: “What are we leaving behind for our people?” As a country, we have been through changing times, where the call was for liberation before education, for conquering through standing united and for not failing through being divided.

As an inspiring display of political strength, female solidarity and inner fortitude, the march on August 9, 1956 is both a reminder of the great women who helped mould South Africa and the trailblazing women who continue to lead the country forward. South Africa is now (in 2019) 25 years into democracy and, yes, the country has its freedom, the people are protected by the Constitution, but the question that should be asked is: “What is the quality of our lives?” There is a need to consider gender inequality when trying to answer this question. Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their gender. In researching the 60th anniversary of the Women’s Charter and 21 years of freedom from the perspective of liberation, education and management of South African women within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges, I used the oral-literate perspective. My literature review was based on what was available from printed and electronic sources.

## **Personal Experiences**

In doing my research I interviewed and interacted with women. I engaged the services of three colleagues who assisted me: a white male professor who was seventy years of age who spoke to his wife (of Swahili heritage) who grew up in Botswana and moved to this country in 1992; an assistant who spoke to her Zulu-speaking mother-in-law; and a young Muslim female colleague who spoke to her mother who was a 67-year-old teacher. All of my colleagues were happy to be interviewed as they realised the value of the study given the time limitations. This approach gave me greater access to women from different races and ethnic groups.

In the next sections I report on the interviews I conducted with the participants who related their personal experiences.

### **South African Indian Women**

I spoke with two South African women of Indian heritage, one aged 82 and the other aged 85, who were both married before 1950, but could not remember the exact date, but mentioned that it was a long time ago. As they spoke, they recalled their wedding days, early years of marriage, births of their children and the passage of time as their families grew and they themselves aged. I spoke to them during the 2015 Week of the Aged at a cultural evening that was arranged for senior citizens in a small community on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. As I walked into the venue (a hall with a capacity to accommodate 500 people) where this function was being held, I saw many grey-haired, tired-eyed, droopy-shouldered individuals with walking sticks sitting in front of me. I could have spoken to any of them. They represented the organic intellectuals that need to be cherished because they hold, deep in their hearts, stories from the past. This group of old people, many of them over 60 years of age, provided an opportunity to gain insight into past decades. The women far outnumbered the men.

On this day, one of the executive members of the frail care centre gave me permission to speak to the two Indian ladies I referred to earlier. The executive member explained to these ladies who I was and why I wanted to speak to them. An element of trust was imperative as oral history interviews need to reflect a sense of complete trust to be valid. In order to conduct an oral history interview, one does not need any formal qualifications but what is needed is to be a “people person” who loves to meet people and help them make the most of their time together and the visit. An interviewer needs excellent customer service and communication skills and excellent spoken English skills. However, sadly, once I commenced with the interviews, it dawned on me that the participants were not in a position to answer my questions regarding the Women’s Charter and the Freedom Charter because they had led very sheltered lives. They had been protected throughout their lives, not from the harshness of their immediate families (husbands, mothers-in-law, and so forth), but from the broader community. Even though I was clear and concise in my questioning and patient and tolerant in my attitude, these interviews proved to be difficult. An element of trust was established between me and the participants. However, for them, once the interview process began, sharing of information was not completely easy as they had to delve into their past and they had to reflect on and rethink the events of previous decades.

The participants stated that their education had consisted of going to primary school for two to three years, after which they had stayed at home. Both of them recalled having to walk more than 10 km to and from school. There was the tale of crossing the river. Whilst in their parents’ care, they learnt to cook, clean, wash and keep house and they were prepared for married life without any form of independence. So, for them, formal education was limited. There was no need for them to even consider fighting the shackles of apartheid as they led sheltered lives.

There was no concept of liberation for them. In their households, they did not even get a glimpse of liberation. In a sense they were representative of women from the Indian community who were not aware of the struggle. I have often deliberated on how inconsequential the lack of freedom must have been to members of the Indian community as India is infamous for its caste system. After all, they formed part of a group that had a totally different ideology as far as liberation, freedom and human rights were concerned.

In terms of how young women were managed, they simply stayed at home and took instructions from their mothers. Their fathers seldom interacted with them, because men went to work, worked long hours, came home to bath, eat and sleep. The next day they were off to work again. Generally, it was a very small percentage of Indian women, especially mothers, who left home to enter the industrialised world of work in the period

under review. These women remembered that they had kept problems to themselves. “We faced the problems,” was how one of them put it.

The second participant recalled very clearly that there had been unity between black Africans and Indians on the farm where she had grown up. From this I gathered that in South Africa, in many communities, non-whites from different races were able to live and work in harmony even though there was a racial divide. However, there were undertones that there was a separateness that quietly existed. These participants were not able to say anything in the interview about the 1956 women’s march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria and the consequent historic battles. It was not a conscious part of their psyche. They were busy with home-making, raising children and fending for themselves within the confines of their small wood-and-corrugated-iron homes, with no electricity, no running water and poor ablution facilities. They were pre-occupied with ensuring that their sons were educated, that their daughters got married and that their grandchildren were taken care of, thus ensuring they continued living in their son’s home. They were not independent and were at the mercy of their children (especially male children) to look after them. So, it may be assumed that in the South African Indian community, especially for ladies in their twenties during the early 1950s, being politically aware, being aware of your rights as a person, and being consciously informed was not an individual prerogative. However, this hypothesis still needs to be postulated and thoroughly investigated in light of the fact that Rahima Moosa, a South African Indian woman of Muslim heritage, was one of the leaders of the 1956 women’s march.

### **Xhosa Grandmother**

I spoke with a Xhosa grandmother who had grown up in the Eastern Cape and had trained as a nurse. At the time of the interview she was 78 years of age. Even though she and her husband left South Africa with their five children in the 1970s to go into exile and only returned in 1990 when the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned, personally, whilst growing up, she was apolitical. She went to the Holy Cross school and then went on to study nursing. She told me that as a young girl her mother expected them to be indoors before sunset. She grew up in Khanyayo, near Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape. She confessed that she had not known about the Women’ Charter at that time.

As a youngster she was oblivious to the liberation struggle. She trained as a nurse and worked as a nurse so that together with her husband they were able to support their children. She remembered it had been a difficult time. In terms of how South African women were managed, in her mother’s house, it was the father who was in charge. In her marital home, it was her husband who made the decisions. When she went into exile,



her task was to be in charge of the children while her husband worked and financially supported the family. In her role as mother, she transported the children to school, did the shopping, cleaning and managing of the home. She also received guests as, being in exile, she and her husband were part of the struggle from outside the borders and boundaries of South Africa. It was difficult to be away from family, friends and a home that they had created in South Africa. However, even though she was apolitical as a young girl and as a trained nurse, the period in exile, post 1970s, thrust her into a political sphere.

Whilst in exile, she was able to ensure that her five children (four daughters and a son) received good quality education in Europe. All her children, once they had completed secondary schooling, pursued tertiary education, and all of them obtained master's degrees or a higher qualification. When the family returned in 1990 under the ANC Returnees Programme, they created a new life in South Africa. Even though this participant mentioned that she had not been politically active at the time of the 1956 women's march, she emerged as part of the foreign deployment that made an impact to change the face, soul and heart of South Africa. It was the sacrifices that women like her made that ensured that the ideals of the 1956 women's march were upheld and its objectives were finally achieved after 1994. Legal, economic and social impacts were felt by families because women with their families moved away from the shores of South Africa. When these families were overseas, their legal status was yet again compromised in their new homes away from South Africa in foreign lands with different laws and a foreign legal system.

They added to the economy of their adopted land while waiting to return home. In terms of social impact, they learned new languages in order to fit in with their new surroundings. Their food and dress tastes had to blend in with those of the foreign country that was now home to them. There were numerous sacrifices that needed to be made, especially in terms of language, culture, extra-mural activities and recreation. Their religion and tradition were questioned, thus this participant, being a mother, found herself challenging and being challenged in terms of the new and different status quo. Clearly, South African women, through the decades, even though they may have been apolitical in their youth, have emerged as frontrunners in the face of adversity by impacting their daughters and sons in such a manner that their children could play an impactful and holistic role in the South African landscape.

### **Zulu-Speaking Mother-In-Law**

Next I enlisted the assistance of a work colleague who interviewed her 67-year-old Zulu-speaking mother-in-law. The mother-in-law could not remember much about life in the 1950s as she was very young at the time. School was basic and not like it is today.

She remembered that Nelson Mandela had been in jail. She shared that people would talk about it in hushed tones. She mentioned that she had not understood what was special about him. Neither she nor her family were involved in politics. This lady, who now lives in Umlazi, went on to say that women had no real independence. If you were unmarried you could not own important things like property. They were only aware of basic jobs like teaching and nursing. It may be contested that teaching and nursing are not basic jobs as these jobs impact the future leaders and the future of the country. Health is significant to growth and development, and nursing plays a crucial role in the well-being of a nation. Women were automatically paid less even for doing the same work as men. The participant did not remember any challenges because by the time she became a woman she could enjoy more freedom. After her divorce, she was able to own a house and continue working. She had no real recollection of the Women's Charter and only understood the significance of it as she became more mature.

### **Growing Up in Botswana**

Another participant who grew up in Botswana remembered that her father had been chased by the police. She was at an apartheid school and so there was no mixing with other races. As far as her recollection of the Women's Charter and the Freedom Charter was concerned, she remembered that the boers were repressing everybody. She said that "Nothing was easy for anyone who was black."

### **Muslim (South African Indian) Mother**

The next participant spoke to her daughter who is an attorney and lecturer and shared an office with me. The 67-year-old mother remembered that life in South Africa in the 1950s had been peaceful, whereas she now lives in an aggressive society. However, there were apartheid issues that proved to be difficult. She was not involved in politics. She enjoyed a good level of schooling—she went to high school. For her, school provided the opportunity to interact with her peers and to learn new things. The school environment was also safer than it is nowadays. When I asked her about how women were managed in our country and I explained that she could speak about political, legal, social or economic issues or from a working perspective where exchange of labour for remuneration was accepted, she said that women and men were not regarded as equal. Women had to fight to be heard, but in the 1960s she saw a change with the start of women's movements and with the emergence of women such as Fathima Meer who fought for the rights of women.

When asked what the most difficult challenges were that she experienced as a woman in this country, she responded by saying: "not being treated equally as men. If you got a job, you would work as hard as a man but with a lower salary." She also mentioned segregation in the local community, parks, beaches and schools. When she was asked

to comment on the Freedom Charter or the Women's Charter, especially about her recollections of the fight for freedom during the 1950s, she said: "I remember Fathima Meer who was a freedom fighter and was a shining example of the struggle. She fought for women's rights and was somebody that I respected and admired." Like the participant, Fathima Meer was a member of the Muslim community.

### **60-Year-Old White Afrikaner Female**

Finally, I had an opportunity to conduct an interview with a 60-year-old Afrikaner female who is a theologian and professor at a leading South African University. She was candid about her youth, saying that she grew up in a patriarchal society where it was a woman's pride if she could say that she did not need to go to work. As a six-year-old she also believed that she did not want to work. The Calvinistic culture that underpinned apartheid maintained that every group should stick to its geographical and ethnic community. The Afrikaner male was the head of the household, and she was adamant that that was sexist. Afrikaner males believed that women should not leave home to work. This belief system was entrenched, and women in that community were managed in accordance with that system.

Generally, white Afrikaner women were not economically, socially or legally free. They were "well kept because their husbands provided for them." This participant, together with about 100 other girls, matriculated from her school in 1973. She was one of two girls who went to university after school. In reflecting on one of the sub-themes of this article, namely the way women were managed within the paradigm of political, legal, economic and social challenges, it became abundantly clear to me that during the apartheid years, even though two charters (the Freedom Charter and the Women's Charter) had been adopted, women were managed through implementing the law and National Party value systems. Through paternalism, the female mind was bombarded with information that forced women to believe that that was how it was meant to be. After women were married, their housing subsidies and medical aid fell away. It was the law. You could not keep your maiden name, so, in a manner of speaking, you lost your identity, especially if you wanted to keep your maiden name.

### **Change in the 1990s**

With time came some changes. Yes, women in the 1990s could buy property and have it registered in their names, they could keep their surnames and they could belong to a medical aid fund. So, in the public domain they were able to enjoy freedom in taking some decisions. However, there was a sphere in which women were not free, and that was the domestic sphere: husbands or other male figures dominated or wanted to dominate. I believe this is still the case. This domination is expressed in violence, verbal

abuse and other forms of harassment. The law protects women in public; however, it has limitations in the private space.

## **The Way Forward**

When the National Party came into power in 1948 and introduced the policy of apartheid, discrimination and oppression against black people intensified. Women began to take up a more active political role and opposed the government. According to Budlender, Meintjes, and Schreiner (1983), the change gained momentum in 1913 when opposition to the imposition of pass laws on women in the Free State was led by women. In the 1940s and 1950s, a number of women's organisations came into being, all of which linked up with the broader anti-apartheid struggles that were taking place. The Women's Charter was adopted at the launch of the Federation of South African Women in 1954. This charter was drawn up to unite women against political, social, legal and economic injustices. However, now, 60 years later, it is not just black women who suffer: women of all races, religions and ethnic groups still suffer countless [un]freedoms. It is time to do something about the situation because even though we are able to celebrate the Women's Charter and the Freedom Charter, women still face social challenges even though political, legal and economic regulations grant them some protection.

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