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With National Women's Day being celebrated in August it seems appropriate to look at the part women have played in the struggle for democracy, both in South Africa and elsewhere.

Women's Suffrage

The struggle for equality has its roots way back in the 1300s, when Christine de Pizan wrote about the oppression of women in her poetry and prose. As early as 1785, the first scientific society for women was founded and scientific journals for women gained popularity. In the 19th century Feminism became an organised movement as more and more women began to protest against their unfair treatment.

The late 19th and early 20th century gave rise to the Suffrage Movement. At the beginning of the 20th century, women were limited to working as cooks, domestic workers, teachers or nurses. Few women had the opportunity to acquire higher learning. The first woman doctor, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, had to face huge obstacles in her profession. It was not until 1919 that the legal profession was opened to women in Britain and it was another three years before the first female barrister was appointed.

Britain

Millicent Fawcett founded the National Union of Women's Suffrage in 1897. She believed in peaceful protest and used patience and logical argument to try and persuade Parliament to give women the vote. Progress was very slow, which did not suit the more militant women in the movement.

In 1903, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) was formed in the United Kingdom. Emmeline Pankhurst's patience had run out and she called for more militant action. Action came in the form of protests in Parliament, shouting down the ministers; protests on the streets; women chained themselves to the railings outside the Prime Minister's front door; property was damaged and policemen assaulted. Arrests followed with the suffragettes choosing to spend time in prison rather than pay fines. Many of the women were placed in solitary confinement and continued their protest in detention by going on hunger strikes.

At the start of the First World War, Emmeline Pankhurst suspended all militant actions and encouraged her followers to contribute to the war effort. Women streamed into the factories to manufacture

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arms and ammunition. They took over the jobs vacated by the men who had been mobilised to fight in the war. Women joined the Women's Land Army to work on the farms. They even worked as mechanics in the Women's Royal Air Force.

The part played by women was vital to Britain's war effort. As a result Parliament could no longer ignore women as being inferior to men. Finally in January 1918, the Representation of the People Act gave property owning women over the age of 30, the right to vote. Ten years later, in 1928, women over 21 were given the right to vote.

America

On the other side of the Atlantic, during the early part of the 19th century, American suffragists had worked mainly through the abolitionist and temperance movements. It was at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, that the American Suffrage Movement had its real beginning. Notable women in this movement are Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony and Lucretia Mott.

Women's colleges sprang up, which enrolled mainly white middle-class women. By 1890, the movement had acquired more respectability, due to the significant number of college-educated women and women's organisations, which supported it.

Disagreement over strategy came to a head in 1869, which created a split in the movement. In that year two women's organisations were formed - the National Woman Suffrage Association, led by Stanton and Anthony; and the American Woman Suffrage Association, led by Lucy Stone. These associations would merge in 1890 to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association. The Association took a moderate approach in their campaign.

In 1914, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, who had participated in suffragette demonstrations in Britain, returned to America, where they formed the Congressional Union. This organisation was to use the same militant tactics as their British counterparts - picketing the White House amongst other protest

activities. Many of their members were arrested and jailed.

These organisations' efforts were rewarded in 1919, when an amendment for suffrage was passed in both houses of Congress. However, it was not until 1920 that all the States ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women in America the right to vote.

Suffrage in other countries

New Zealand was the first nation to give the vote to women in 1893. White South African women acquired the vote in 1930. There are still countries where women have no vote:

Bhutan - one vote per house

Brunei - no suffrage for women

Lebanon - proof of education required for women, but not for men

Saudi Arabia - no suffrage for women

United Arab Emirates - no suffrage for women

Vatican City - no suffrage for women.

Web sites

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffragette>

<http://home.infionline.net/~ddisse/christin.html>

<http://www.cjbooks.demon.co.uk/suffrage.htm>

http://uk.encyarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_781530943/Suffragette_Movement.html

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eleonor/peopleevents/pand09.html>

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/women%201900_1945.htm

<http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/woman/main.html>

<http://www.suffragist.com/timeline.htm>

<http://womenhistory.about.com/od/suffrage1900/>

<http://www.suffragist.com/timeline.htm>

<http://womenhistory.about.com/od/suffrage1900/>

<http://www.suffragist.com/timeline.htm>

<http://womenhistory.about.com/od/suffrage1900/>

Women's rights in South Africa

The struggle for women's rights goes hand in hand with the national liberation struggle for democracy in South Africa.

The ANC Women's League

When the African National Congress (ANC) was formed in 1912, women were not accepted as members. In 1918 the government threatened to reintroduce pass laws for women. This led to the formation of the Bantu Women's League (BWL) as a branch of the ANC. The BWL carried out a campaign of passive resistance and opposed the introduction of passes for Black women.

The constitution of the ANC of 1919 granted women the right to become auxiliary members without voting rights. It was not until the Congress of 1943 that a resolution was passed to grant women full

membership and the ANC Women's League was set up with Madie Hall-Xuma as its president.

The role of the ANC Women's League was to encourage women in the struggle for freedom and equality and to spread propaganda against apartheid and discriminatory laws among African women. They played an active role in the Defiance Campaign of 1952, with many of their members being arrested.

They assisted the Congress Alliance to organise the Congress of the People in 1955, where the Freedom Charter was adopted. On 9 August 1956, under the auspices of the Federation of South African Women, women marched on Pretoria to present the Prime Minister JG Strydom with a petition against pass laws.

The banning of the ANC in 1960 resulted in many of its members going underground or fleeing into exile. The women in exile organised themselves into the ANC Women's Section, which mobilised international support. After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, the ANC Women's League lobbied for the formation of the National Women's Coalition. The task of the Coalition was to research and draw up the Women's Charter, which was completed in 1994 and has been incorporated into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. As a result of the work done by women, South Africa has the most progressive constitution in the world today.

The first democratic election, in which all citizens of South Africa over the age of 18 were permitted to vote, took place on 27 April 1994.

Web sites

<http://www.anc.org.za/wl/>
<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/women/>

The Black Sash

The organisation, which came to be known as the Black Sash, was formed in 1955. The founding members, Jean Sinclair, Ruth Foley, Elizabeth McLaren, Tertia Pybus, Jean Bosazza and Helen Newton-Thompson, were opposed to the Senate Bill to remove coloured people from the common voters role.

Many liberal women joined the organisation to oppose government policies. Marches, demonstrations and vigils were organised. The symbol of

the organisation was a constitution draped in a black sash and the media nicknamed the organisation the 'Black Sash'.

The objective of the organisation was to monitor the enforcing of Pass Laws to expose injustices. Advice offices were set up in various part of the country, where problems regarding work compensation, unemployment insurance, pensions and various other employer/employee problems were addressed.

Since 1994 the focus of the organisation has changed to one which makes submissions to government in shaping legislation and advising on welfare.

Web sites

<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/special-projects/womens-struggle/orgs-black-sash.htm>

The Federation of South African Women

The Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) was launched in Johannesburg in 1954. It was the first attempt to establish a broad-based women's organisation, which pledged its support to the Congress Alliance. The steering committee comprised Ray Simons, Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi and Amina Cachalia.

FEDSAW was primarily composed of affiliated women's groups from all sectors of the population and included many trade unions. The objective of the federation was 'to secure equality for all women regardless

of race, colour or creed; to remove social and legal and economic disabilities; to work for the protection of the women and children'.

At their first conference, the Women's Charter was written. It called for:

- ✘ the enfranchisement of men and women of all races
- ✘ equality of opportunity in employment: equal pay for equal work
- ✘ equal rights in relation to property, marriage and children
- ✘ the removal of all laws and customs that denied women such equality
- ✘ paid maternity leave
- ✘ childcare for working mothers
- ✘ free compulsory education for all South African children.

These demands were later incorporated into the Freedom Charter, which was adopted by the Congress of the People in June 1955.

Together with the ANC Women's League, the Federation organised protests and demonstrations outside government offices throughout the country. On 27 October 1955, 2 000 women of all races marched on the Union Buildings, where they planned to meet with the ministers responsible for the administration of apartheid laws. Dr Verwoerd, the then Minister of Native Affairs, refused to receive a multiracial delegation. This did not deter them. On 9 August 1956, 20 000 women from all parts of the country staged a march on the Union Buildings. This was one of the largest

crowds ever to have gathered at the Union Buildings. Although Prime Minister Strijdom was not there to receive them, the march indicated the determination of women and enhanced their standing within the Congress Alliance.

During the Treason Trial, which went on for four and a half years, the women of FEDSAW organised support for the treason trialists and their families.

To commemorate the march on the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 and the part played by women in the struggle for democracy, this day is celebrated as National Women's Day each year.

Web sites

<http://sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/womens-struggle/orgs-fedsaw.htm>
<http://sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/womens-struggle/frameset.htm>



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