



Life Narratives of Crossroads Women

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Life Narratives of Crossroads Women

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Mama Jane Yanta, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi Dlaba & Mrs. Mene, May 26, 2005, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa

Nomangezi Muriel Mbobosi, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi Dlaba, May 11 2005, Khayelitsha, Cape Town, South Africa

Adelaide Mene, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, April 15 2005, New Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Daisy Bara, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, April 26 2005, New Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Mama Makhondweni, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, April 25 2005, New Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Sam Ndimba, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi Dlaba, May 18 & 25 2005, Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Selena Dasi, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, May 17 & 25 2005, Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Sogo-Hamse, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, Sept 9 2005, Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Queen Hanoria-Shugu Tynto, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, October 10, 2005, Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

Sylvia Ngozi, interviewed by Koni Benson, translation Nomakhwezi, May 23, 2005, Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa

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Introduction

This collection consists of 10 oral narratives that document the life history of South African squatter women involved in movements for urban survival (in particular, housing) over the last 40 years by linking and comparing two moments of collective organising by African women in the shack and township settlements of Crossroads in Cape Town. The role, power, and subsequent demise of African women's leadership in Cape Town's informal settlements is a central theme in these interviews.

The first case study, represented here by the narratives of Mama Yanta, Mbobosi, Mene, Bara, Makhondweni, and Dasi, looks at the first generation of squatter women leaders who, among many strategies for resisting forced removals, created and performed *Imfuduso* (*Exodus*), a theatrical production about their struggle to remain in Cape Town instead of on State prescribed Bantustans (Transkei and Ciskei) in the 1970s. Refusing to leave their shacks in town and returning illegally time and again after being violently 'removed' by the state, they spearheaded

a struggle for tenure rights in the Western Cape that continues today. The second case study takes a look at the Women's Power Group, as depicted in the life histories of Mama Ngozi and Shugu. These women had lived in Crossroads since apartheid and, along with about 300 women squatters, came together in the late 1990s to demand government accountability of funds for undelivered housing. In both these cases of collective organising, there were serious punitive repercussions for the women leaders and their families. The 1970s theatrical production and 1990s prolonged sit-in are important windows into the gendered and generational dynamics of labour migration, displacement, poverty, and housing over time, as well as a needed view into the central role of women in apartheid resistance and squatter struggles today.

During the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid restructuring policies resulted in the categorisation of more than 100 000 African people in the Western Cape as 'illegals'. These people were then forcibly removed from their homes by way of raids and violence, leaving them with basically two choices: they could move to overcrowded Bantustans or become 'squatters' in informal and vulnerable settlements far from town. Without passes or formal employment, women were the primary victims of these policies.

In general, housing rights were linked to the influx control policies first introduced under the 1952 Native (Urban) Areas Act, which drastically reduced the rights of Africans to live in or even visit urban areas and limited their access to 'approved' accommodation, allowing only a minority to qualify for permanent residence. Failure to find accommodation meant removal out of urban areas. As early as 1948, however, housing policy became a tool for implementing the nationalist government's social development strategy. Couched within the Group Areas Act of 1950, the Native Laws Amendment Act of 1952, and the Bantu Homelands Citizens Act of 1970, this legislation effectively denied 'nonwhite' people the right to reside in urban areas by tying access to accommodation with rights to reside in cities. In the Western Cape, Coloured Labour Preference Policy (CCPP) perpetuated the relationship between access to accommodation and permanent employment in order to safeguard employment for the Cape "coloured" people.

Located just south of the Cape Town airport, Crossroads is one of the oldest squatter camps in South Africa. It is most well known for its resistance to forced removals under apartheid. In both the 1970s and the 1990s, women who lived in shacks in Crossroads organised all-women mass actions for housing in Crossroads.

The Crossroads struggle and the role women played in it lies at the centre and heart of African history in the city. It was the first African informal settlement to collectively resist being forcibly removed by the then apartheid regime, mainly due to the successful organising of women who joined negotiations with the government in the late 1970s for the right to stay on the land where they had built their shacks. In 1976, Crossroads residents won legal status as an Emergency Camp, and by 1978, it was the only squatter camp that had not been completely destroyed by the state. Women established schools in the camp and achieved international solidarity in their resistance to forced removals. The play *Imfuduso* was crucial in mobilising support for the women's negotiations and served as a vehicle for women to discuss their own resistance to the migrant labour system, to Influx Control policies, to black working-class struggle, and to patriarchy in their own community. Recollections of the play are a window into a history of gender and forced removals that has been sidelined in both the official documentation of the anti-apartheid struggle and in that record's relationship to gender and housing issues today.

The unity and success of the late 1970s was fragmented and destroyed in the mid 1980s. Power struggles, stoked by the apartheid government, to control gains made, increased social stratification, and tensions—portrayed as ‘faction fights’ in the media—were heightened. Women and youth were slowly politically marginalised when a new leadership was consolidated in the hands of a few corrupt men who, by the mid 1980s, aligned with state special police units and emerged as *witdoeke* (vigilantes) to destroy neighbouring squatter communities and force residents into government-run site-and-service resettlement areas such as Khayelitsha. Mr. Sam Ndima’s life narrative is included in this collection because he was one of the most loyal headman and self-identified *witdoeke*. After more than a decade of its residents resisting removal and relocation, in the mid 1980s over 70,000 squatters were displaced as Crossroads was burned to the ground by government-backed *witdoeke*.

How has the nature of struggle changed from the peak of apartheid to a decade into democracy where over 260 000 families are still living in shacks in and around the city? In the late 1990s, exhausted by their attempts to resolve issues of development resources going missing, approximately 300 women from various parts of Crossroads formed the Women’s Power Group (WPG) and occupied Council offices demanding accountability and voicing suggestions for alternative housing development processes and products. Many of these women had been in Crossroads since the 1970s. The sit-in lasted four months and sparked a wave of shack burnings and shootings that left many women on the run, family members dead, and hundreds homeless. In the subsequent government Commission of Enquiry, the WPG’s organising and actions are overshadowed by an emphasis on local male ‘shacklord’ authority and male violence in the area. Despite being somewhat fragmented, the life histories of WPG members tell a very different story about what women were thinking and doing in this turbulent period.

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