

Women: stunning portrait

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WORKING WOMEN.

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(Sached Trust and Ravan Press)

THIS BOOK is a celebration of the resilience and strength of ordinary women; women who as blacks and as workers are denied access to power and resources, but who nurture life amidst the violence and social disintegration of contemporary South Africa.

A series of vivid interviews and stunning photographs provide a sensitive portrait of black women working and living in diverse situations. The common theme linking their experience is a sense of struggle for daily survival.

This is not a public, acknowledged struggle, but one conducted by women alone within the hidden isolated arena of the household. It is often a struggle of desperate dimensions. This sense of struggle comes through very clearly in the case of the majority of black South African women trapped in the rural areas by influx control.

Lack of employment opportunities means some women surviving by seasonal work for wages as low as 80c a day. For others, such as Rose living in Lebowa, land shortage and infertility means being caught in a vicious circle of poverty.

"Now we have no ploughing fields. We are dying of hunger. Once the agricultural officers called us together to teach us how to farm, but this never happened again. They told us to buy fertilizer, but it cost R7 or more a bag and us starving people, we have no money."

But even in these desperate circumstances an incredible level of resourcefulness, energy and determination emerges from interviews with women such as Ma Diomo Luigogo from Transkei who was struck by lightning and who sells bundles of grass for thatch at R20 a hundred.

By comparison the black women in the urban areas with Section 10 rights are fortunate. However, even among this group unemployment is high and the book shows



Portrait from the Lawson book ... women tend a garden in Gazankulu

how many women survive by exercising their initiative as hawkers, brewers or child minders, in a stressful and precarious existence.

Those women engaged in wage work are concentrated in the least skilled, lowest paid and most insecure jobs. Many of them experience considerable tension between their roles as mothers and as workers.

The shortage of creches often means a physical separation as young children are sent to rural areas to be cared for by stoic grandmothers. The pain this involves emerges from the interview with Mildred Mjekula who says, "My child does not remember that I am her mother ... she doesn't love me too much and this is difficult for me."

It is a pain which is compounded for many domestic servants. "Domestic workers worry a lot. Say for instance you are looking after somebody's children — but you don't even know what your own children are doing. You will worry about whether they have slept and if they are happy."

Childcare and low wages are not the only problems these black women face. Sexual harassment, varying from jokes and insults to acts of rape and jobs in exchange for sex, appear to be common. As Nomvula expresses it:

"The position of women workers is too heavy, with many things: The first thing: say

you are a woman and you are looking for a job. When you reach a factory, you find the induna there and you ask him. If you like the job the induna will tell you that you must sleep with him before you get that job.

"And you've got no choice. You want to work and your children are starving in Sow-eto. So, some women sleep with those men."

At the launch of the book, one of the women interviewed, Lydia Kompe, suggested that the repeal of the Immorality Act would increase the vulnerability of black women workers to sexual harassment.

Increasing numbers of women workers are challenging such practices as well as the division of labour within the home which defines cooking, shopping, cleaning and child care as "women's work".

A sense of irritation comes through many of the interviews: "I cook for my husband. He's tired from work, lifting up heavy boxes and iron. Sometimes we come in at the same time. He wants his tea. He'll sit down with the paper. You'll be the 'girl' again in the house. He is the boss reading the paper. And that makes you fed up."

Or: "All men know is that they leave us holding the babies in our arms. They run away from their responsibilities."

Sometimes this implies a rejection of the institution of marriage: "I don't want my

daughters to get married. Marriage ... I don't care for it. Men drink too much after they get married."

And again: "I don't like marriage. Because men are so hard when you get married. Men drink and they hit you. I see it everywhere."

The book shows how women's responsibility for domestic work inhibits their participation in trade unions. Their jobs and household work mean that women who become active in trade unions are taking on a third shift.

Yet organising trade unions is essential, not only for women workers to win maternity rights, better pay and working conditions, but to avoid the unorganised and low paid woman worker being used to undercut the male worker.

It is in this sense that the black working class as a whole stands to gain from women being well organised, active trade unionists.

Working Women raises important political questions. However the way in which these questions are grounded in real, lived experience gives it a freshness and immediacy which should have a very wide appeal. This quality, linked to an extremely lucid style, makes for compelling reading.

For many people, reading it will be both an inspiration and a shock.

Jacklyn Cook

had a somewhat different view of the Africans. At the beginning of the 16th