

South Africa

Black women head resistance against apartheid

By Samantha Brennan and Mary Howard

Jane Parpart looked up from her notes and started to talk about her experiences with South African women.

"You'd think they'd all be depressing stories," she said, "but they're not. You come away with a tremendous amount of respect for the energy and the vitality of black South African women. Black women have been a spearhead in the resistance against white rule."

Parpart, a visiting assistant professor of history at Dalhousie University, spoke in Halifax on March 1 about the role of South African women in the resistance movement. Her talk was followed by a screening of the film *You Have Struck a*

Rock.

"The most important thing to remember is that South African black women face a double burden," said Parpart, explaining that the women are not only oppressed racially by the whites, but also by the patriarchal attitudes within their own culture.

In her introduction to the film, Parpart outlined the oppressive policies of the South African government toward black women.

She told of a migrant labour system that sent men off to work in the mines, leaving women alone to maintain a home.

"The South African government evolved a system of encouraging, and eventually forcing, women and children to



Ray Jones, 1984

remain in the rural areas while the men went off to work," said Parpart.

The few black women who are allowed in the cities are employed by white families as "nannies." In these cases they are still separated from their husbands and remain responsible for their children.

In the opening scenes of the film, a black South African woman describes life in the migrant labour system.

"Our husbands must leave to find work and sometimes stay away all year," she

says. Adding that often the men aren't able to send money, leaving the women to provide for their children.

The film goes on to show how women are forced to sneak into the city to look for their husbands. The film viewer sees buses of women travelling to the city where they face arrest if caught without a pass. The South African police regularly raid the men's barracks at 3 and 4 in the morning to look for these women.

One South African woman explains how black women occupy the lowest rung on the ladder in South African society.

"Our men are seen as units of labour, appendages of the economic system—black women are seen as appendages of the men," she says bitterly.

Parpart briefly detailed the history of women's participation in the resistance movement. In order to join the organized battle against racism, they first had to confront sexism.

In 1912 the African National Congress (ANC) was formed to organize opposition to the apartheid government. Women, however, were not included in the original congress.

"Being men of their generation and time, women were going to serve coffee, if they were going to do anything at all," said Parpart.

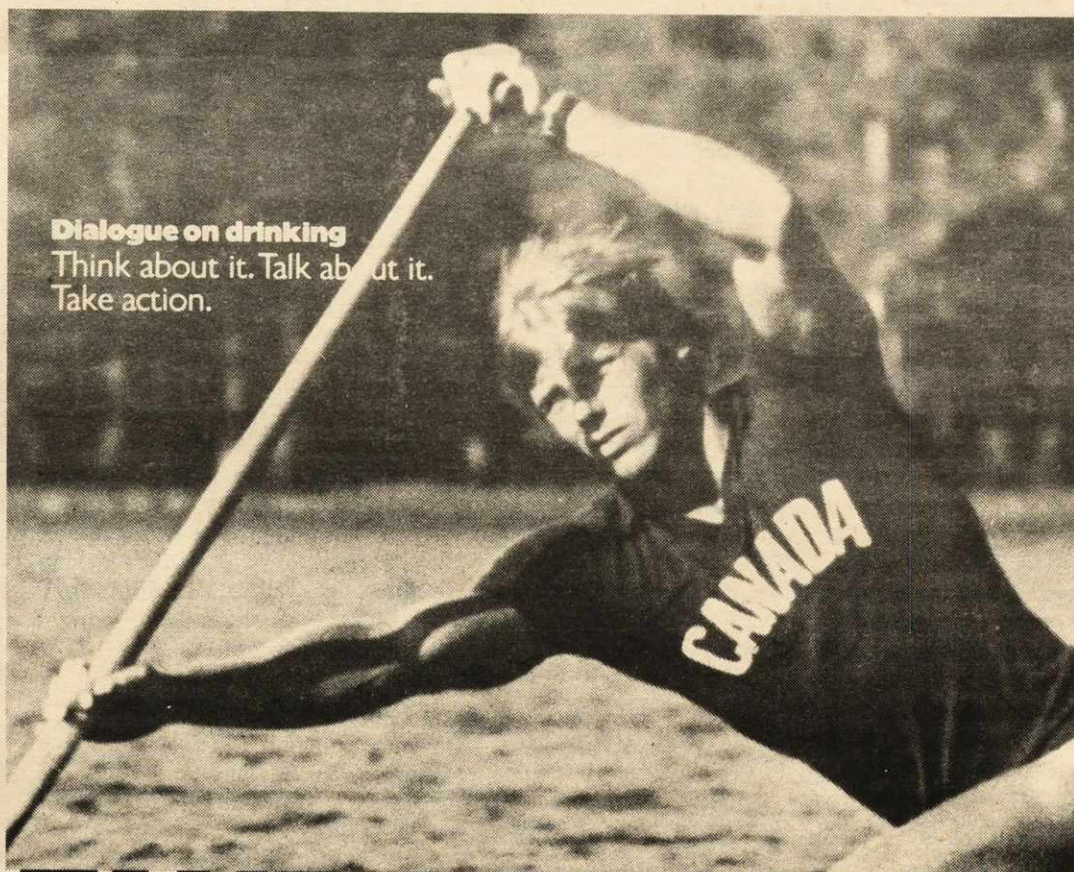
In 1913, the South African government tried to enforce the pass system on black women. Up until that time, it had only been applied to men.

Thousands of women held sit down strikes and marches to protest the pass laws. They regularly entered the city without passes to be arrested en masse. In the end, the government backed down and it wasn't until the 1950's that the issue was raised again.

"For some reason," said Parpart, "women have always been ahead of the men in willingness to participate in marches and civil disobedience."

In the 1950's grass-roots resistance to apartheid grew in spirit and in numbers. Women's grievances expanded to include low wages for women, bad living conditions and the government sponsored beer halls, where the men often spent what little money they earned.

Out of this movement came the formation of the South Africa Federation of Women, one of many branch groups linked to the ANC. "We wanted to make South Africa and the world aware that women opposed apartheid," says Helen Joseph, federation secretary of 1955.



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