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A CAKE OF SOAP

The *Volksmoeder* Ideology and Afrikaner Women's Campaign for the Vote

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Introduction

The 1920s witnessed a great volume of activity associated with the women's suffrage campaign in South Africa. Existing women's organisations added the demand for the vote to their programmes and new organisations were formed with suffrage as their exclusive goal. This campaign is usually associated with the English-speaking women of the country. Cherryl Walker, for example, in her article on "The Women's Suffrage Movement" asserts that "its leaders were not rural or Afrikaner, but characteristically middle-class, urban and English-speaking". Walker sees Afrikaner women as firmly under the sway of the patriarchal ideology of the Dutch Reformed Church and "content to exercise their power indirectly, without questioning the principle of male hegemony."[1] Lou-Marie Kruger, in her study of the magazine, *Die Boerevrou*, finds that the issue of female suffrage was hardly ever discussed in *Die Boerevrou* and concludes from this that Afrikaner women played no part in the campaign.[2] Marijke du Toit's work on the *Afrikaner Christelike Vroue Vereniging* (the Afrikaner Christian Women's Association) comes to a similar conclusion. She argues that sporadic reports of militant suffragette action in Britain made little impact in South Africa and that, for the most part, Afrikaner women agreed that "unbiblical suffragettes" threatened domestic life.[3]

This paper challenges the perception of the suffrage campaign as a movement of English-speaking, middle-class, urban women. It argues that Afrikaner women played a significant role in what was referred to at the time as one of the most controversial issues ever to have been dealt with in the South African Legislative Assembly. Leading Afrikaner women campaigned vociferously for their own enfranchisement. In order to do so, they had to challenge existing Afrikaner nationalist ideas about the proper role of women in society. As the title of the paper suggests, Afrikaner women employed the language of home-making and motherhood as a means of conferring legitimacy on their campaign for citizenship. The title is taken from an article which appeared in the suffrage magazine, The Flashlight in July 1930. In this article, Mrs M. Moldenhauer described the newly-won suffrage as "a cake of soap" which women would use to "clean up the dirty places of the country, and lighten darkness wherever it is possible".[4] The Afrikaner suffragists succeeded in expanding the parameters of Afrikaner nationalism's prevailing gender orthodoxy so that suffrage became an acceptable part of being an Afrikaner woman. However, as the paper points out, the employment of the *volksmoeder* ideology to win

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[1]Walker, Cherryl. "The Women's Suffrage Campaign," Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945, 1990: p.318.

[2]Kruger, Lou-Marie. "Gender, Community and Identity," 1991: p.183.

[3]Du Toit, Marijke. "Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism," 1996: p.114.

[4]Moldenhauer, M. "Our Suffrage Victory and After," in The Flashlight, July 1930: p.36.

legitimacy for the suffrage ambitions of Afrikaner women also imposed serious limitations on the emancipatory potential of their project.

Afrikaner women and the limited franchise

The campaign for women's enfranchisement was first taken up in South Africa by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) which represented about five thousand white women and also had coloured and African branches. Shortly after its inception in 1889, the WCTU formed a franchise committee with Julia Solly, an Englishwoman, as Superintendent. The first Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL) in South Africa was established in Durban in 1902, with similar organisations founded in towns and cities across the country soon afterwards. The Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union of South Africa (WEAU) was formed in 1911 as a body which would unite all organisations working for the enfranchisement of women.

From the outset the suffrage organisations' propaganda was aimed at both English- and Afrikaans-speaking constituencies. The WEAU's publication, The Flashlight, accepted contributions in both English and Afrikaans. In addition, the Association's press campaign was addressed to both the English and Afrikaans-language newspapers, while all its pamphlets were written in both English and Afrikaans and distributed in both the rural and the urban areas. The WEAU also made direct contact with both Unionist and Nationalist women's political parties, urging them to campaign to have women's suffrage formally adopted as part of the policy of their respective parties. As the Association's Organising Secretary, Laura Ruxton pointed out, no progress would be made until Afrikaner women began to organise in favour of their own enfranchisement. Women of all political persuasions needed to unite on a common platform.[5]

But the common platform for which Ruxton hoped proved difficult to secure. The guiding principle of the WEAU had always been to campaign for women to be accorded the vote "on the same terms as men". In terms of the existing franchise laws, however, women's enfranchisement on the same terms as men would have meant that the total number of black voters would be increased. While the franchise limitations disqualified the vast majority of potential African voters, by the late 1920s, approximately forty thousand black and coloured voters existed at the Cape, or one fifth of the total number on the Cape voters' roll. Enfranchisement of women on the same basis as men would have increased this number. The effect of enfranchising white women only, on the other hand, would be to reduce the total percentage of black voters to eleven per cent of voters at the Cape and just under five percent nationally.[6]

Afrikaner nationalist women were amongst those who were adamant that they did not wish to see an increase in the total number of black voters and they therefore could not find agreement with the WEAU. Afrikaner women were in clear sympathy with the segregationist views of their male counterparts in parliament. They agreed that women's enfranchisement had to be delayed, not on the grounds of the unfitness of women, but on the grounds of the "difficulty of the

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[5]Ruxton, Laura. The Women's Outlook, July 1921: p.8.

[6]Walker, C. Ibid., p.314.

coloured and the native vote".[7] Walker concludes from this that Afrikaner women were unwilling to question "the principle of male hegemony";[8] that Afrikaner women were passive onlookers while "Hertzog now emerged as the central figure in the campaign".[9]

While there is no doubt that the race question occupied a central place in the Afrikaner nationalist approach to the suffrage campaign, the conclusions which Walker reaches overlook the central role which Afrikaner women played in generating a groundswell of support for the suffrage. Moreover, it was not in the immediate interests of these women to support any other version of the suffrage than that proposed by Hertzog. The extension of the franchise to women on the same basis as men may have meant continued disenfranchisement for many Afrikaner women at the Cape and in Natal. Few Afrikaner women owned property and many had little in the way of formal education. Even if the qualifications were changed to include only a salary requirement, this would have led to the curious situation at the Cape in which the women of poorer families who had been forced to seek work in the towns would qualify to vote, while the wives and daughters of wealthier farmers who had remained in the rural areas where the majority of the National Party's support lay, would not qualify.

For the emergent nationalist movement which sought to include in its imagined community a disparate set of class and social interests, extending the franchise based on educational and property qualifications would have done more to divide and exclude, than to unify its constituency. There was no way of including all Afrikaner women of the *volk* in a qualified franchise other than on the basis of race alone. As it happened, the nationalists could have been in no doubt that the race card would play well among a white minority constituency which, across all political parties, appeared increasingly fearful of being "swamped" by the black majority. The growing organisational prowess of organisations such as the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) which Helen Bradford describes as having "spread like wildfire" through the countryside, could only have added to the alarm of Afrikaner nationalism's rural constituents.

The majority of nationalist women therefore saw it as neither in their personal nor their political interests to campaign for an effective extension of the coloured and African vote. As Mrs J.H. Conradie of the Women's Nationalist Association put it to the 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women:

> I think it would complicate the matter very much if the native women were given the vote now. Considering everything I would prefer to have the matter of segregation settled before European women get the vote.[10]

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[7]Conradie, J.H. "*Die Registrasie Van Kiesers*" (the registration of voters), Die Burgeres, May 1928: p.21.

[8]Walker, C. Ibid., p.318.

[9]Ibid., p.335.

[10] "Minutes of Evidence," 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, p.58.

Martha Mabel Jansen, founding president of the Natal nationalist women's party was even more forthright:

> I would rather forfeit the vote myself indefinitely than that our white civilization should be placed in danger by extending the vote to native women.[11]

In taking this view, nationalist women were not alone. Hertzog's Pact allies in the Labour Party had little to gain from a franchise limited on the basis of educational or property qualifications. As a result, Labour supported the so-called "civilized" standard as the sole basis for enfranchisement. The party argued that the average white woman, with all her responsibilities in the home and family, had sufficient knowledge of life and the world to qualify her to vote without having to pass any further test. Elsie Groves of the Women's Auxiliary of the South African Labour Party in the Cape Peninsula made her reasoning quite clear:

> As regards an educational test, I do not believe in that. I know the mothers of big families – working women – who cannot read or write, but I also know of Kaffir servants who have passed standard five or six. I believe in a civilized standard. I would not give the vote to the natives. The Europeans are being outnumbered, and if a few years time we shall be a hybrid nation and we shall not know who are white and who are black. *It is a question of race preservation.*[12]

Like many of their contemporaries then, Afrikaner women did not find themselves in sympathy with the WEAU's platform of female franchise on the same basis as it was held by men at the time. Instead they opted for a racially exclusive campaign which suited both their own interests and that of the National Party. They embraced the racial prejudices which were so prevalent at the time and employed the vocabulary, not of equality and universal human rights, but of the *volksmoeder*. While this may lead us to conclude that their campaign was limited in its progressive potential, it does not support the conclusion that these women were politically inert. While the enfranchisement of white women was by no means inimical to the nationalist project, this did not mean that it was immediately enthusiastically embraced by every actual and potential National Party supporter. Instead, support had to be won in the face of opposition both from elements within the nationalist political hierarchy, and from ordinary Afrikaner men and women throughout the country.

Afrikaner attitudes to the suffrage

The idea of women's suffrage at first met with derision and alarm on the part of many Afrikaner nationalists. In Willem Postma's *Die Boerevrou. Moeder Van Haar Volk* (the Boer woman, mother of her *volk*) which marks one of the earliest articulations of the *volksmoeder* ideology in Afrikaner nationalism, he stressed that there was no place for the Afrikaner woman in the party

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[11]Ibid., p.68.

[12]Groves, E. "Minutes of Evidence," 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, p.33.

political arena.[13] A variety of arguments against women's enfranchisement were marshalled by nationalist commentators of the time: it was claimed that since women paid no taxes, they did not have the right to a say in how tax-payers' money was spent; it was suggested that if both husband and wife were allowed to vote, they could end up voting for different parties which would have a divisive impact on the family unit; it was argued that women's physical disposition made them naturally unsuited to the hurly-burly of political life; suffrage ideas were labelled "foreign" and "alien"; it was even said that suffrage was ungodly and immoral.[14] As one nationalist wrote in *Die Huisgenoot*:

> If we regard the family as the foundation of our national life, the basis of our established principles of government, then we must recognise that women's suffrage is going to undermine that foundation and ultimately destroy it.[15]

One of the most pervasive themes which recurred throughout the 1920s in the arguments of the anti-suffrage nationalists, was the contention that Afrikaner women themselves did not want the vote. Rising in parliament to oppose Hertzog's 1930 Enfranchisement Bill, Minister of Agriculture, General Kemp, argued that if a referendum were to be taken among the women of South Africa, the great majority of them would be found to be against suffrage. This was the reason why, he pointed out, the Transvaal National Party had mandated him to oppose the Bill.[16]

Opposition to the suffrage was informed by underlying ideological assumptions about the need for forms of social organisation to correspond with a putative "natural" hierarchy of being. The existence of different nations, each with its own specific destiny to fulfil, was regarded as part of the natural order of things, pre-ordained by God. Likewise, social roles within nations were seen as necessarily corresponding to the innate characteristics of different kinds of people, men and women, black and white. In an article by the leading Afrikaner ideologue, C.J. Langenhoven, entitled "The Female Franchise and the Native Franchise" he argued that there would always be those who would be responsible for directing and administering the vastly complex interests of the modern state. "This duty," he intoned, "we shall assign to the European males .... As a class, they have abundantly shown their capacity for these duties, and no other class has shown an equal capacity". As for the "natives" whom, Langenhoven argued, nature had endowed "with the physical strength to perform physical labour" – they would not be burdened with the "harassing worries" of statesmanship. With the "duties of the hand and the duties of the head" having been assigned, all that was left was "the duties of the heart". Here Langenhoven had in mind a class which would:

> watch over the cradles of our young, nurse our aged and sick, brighten our homes with cheer and lighten our burdens with sympathy, comfort us in distress and

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[13]Cited in a review by Lydia van Niekerk, *Die Huisgenoot*, March 1919: p.671.

[14]Arguments against the suffrage summarised by "*Dikkop*" (thick-head) (pseud.) in the pro-suffrage article, "*Vrouekiesreg*" (women's right to vote), *Die Huisgenoot*, October 1918: pp.507-508.

[15]Oost, Harm. "*Waarom Ek Teen Vrouestemreg Is*" (why I am against women's enfranchisement), *Die Huisgenoot*, 6 April 1928: p.29.

[16]Cited in the Rand Daily Mail, Johannesburg, 7 March 1930.

encourage us in adversity, adorn our lives with the sweet influences of affection.

It was, of course, the Afrikaner woman who was called to fulfil this noble calling rather than opting to sell her birthright for what Langenhoven described as "the mess of pottage of the hustings".[17]

The nationalist women's parties and the franchise

Afrikaner women, for their part, however, were less convinced that their birthright did not include entitlement to the franchise. As the suffrage campaign progressed, they challenged the assumption that women did not want the vote and should not have it. The suffrage ambitions of Afrikaner women were embodied in their political parties, most notably the women's nationalist parties which represented thousands of Afrikaner women across all four provinces of the country. The existence of these nationalist women's political parties is a little-explored feature of South African history. Most commentators appear to have assumed that the gender ideology of Afrikaner nationalism prohibited Afrikaner women from playing a direct role in politics. In their lengthy party-political history, *Die Nasionale Party* (1975), Geyser and Marais mention Afrikaner women's political contribution but cite only their role in the 1914 rebellion against South Africa's participation in the First World War. They do not mention at all the existence of nationalist women's political parties. Those who do acknowledge the women's parties have invariably reached the conclusion that they were little more than an adjunct of the (male) National Party. Commenting on one of the women's nationalist parties, Gaitskell and Unterhalter, for example, write that "no doubt in their 'helpmate' role" the Women's National Party was founded in July 1915 to work in conjunction with Hertzog's party.[18] We may reach a similar conclusion from the minutes of the first congress of the *Nasionale Vroueparty* (the women's nationalist party in the Cape - NVP) in 1923, at which motions were submitted by the Burgersdorp, Mosselbay, Parow, Aliwal-North, Loxton, Unionskraal, Victoria West, Dordrecht and Indwe branches, urging the organisation to use its influence against suffrage. But if we look further we find that in 1927 at the party's Malmesbury congress, by which stage party membership numbered 5 000, delegates declared themselves unanimously in favour of the vote. The congress included thirteen executive members and seventy-four delegates representing sixty-eight branches. The party's pro-suffrage stance was seen as a bold step to take. One delegate summed up the spirit of the times when she remarked, "even if I get a hiding when I go home, I'm voting in favour of the motion".[19]

Many of the earliest male supporters of the women's nationalist parties, such as Piet Grobler and General Kemp, could not have expected the women's parties to become suffrage organisations. They had envisaged the women's parties chiefly as fund-raising organisations for the National Party and were themselves ardently opposed to women's enfranchisement. Nevertheless, from 1924 onwards, a close working relationship developed between the women's political parties and

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[17]Langenhoven, C.J. "The Female Franchise and the Native Franchise," July 1909.

[18]Gaitskell and Unterhalter, 1989: p.64.

[19] Cited by Van der Merwe, A.E. "*h Vrou in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek*," (a woman in South African politics), INCH Private Collection 32, p.18.

the suffrage organisations. The Women's Charter, written by prominent suffragist Julia Solly, was translated into Afrikaans and, with the permission of the *Nasionale Vroueparty* executive, sent to all NVP branches. The organisational links were strongly represented in the leading personalities of the NVP. Mrs J.S. van der Lingen was secretary of the *Vroue Kiesrecht Liga* (VKL - women's suffrage league) before becoming secretary of the NVP in 1925; Mrs G. Lyon, who was President of the VKL was also on the first executive committee of the NVP and remained a member of the party throughout its existence, and M.E. Rothmann who was appointed to the NVP executive in 1924 had by that stage already been a campaigner for suffrage in the pages of *Die Burger* for many years. Rothmann's bi-weekly column in *Die Burger* was called "*Vrouesake*" (women's matters). While, as Marijke du Toit notes, Rothmann's editorial brief for the column was "Madam, please no politics!" she insisted that politics was not out of place in a women's column and employed the *volksmoeder* motif as a means of defying the "no politics" injunction.[20] Like Rothmann, the entire NVP executive was in favour of suffrage. So were the majority of executive members of nationalist women's parties in other provinces as we can tell from their evidence to the 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, in which party representatives spoke out strongly in favour of suffrage.

While leading nationalist women supported the suffrage campaign, their views were, at the outset, not shared by rank-and-file constituents who remained to be fully incorporated into the nationalist fold. At times their response to women's party organisers was antagonistic and even threatening, as Mrs A.E. van der Merwe recalled:

> Initially women's suffrage was handled like a hot potato and our organising secretary, Mrs van der Sandt de Villiers was pushed and shoved on her travels, particularly by men who all had only one fear, namely that things would go awry at home. [21]

Moreover, the women of the sparsely populated rural districts with whom it was exceptionally difficult to maintain contact and who frequently had little access to books, magazines or newspapers, were a worry for the National Party. While Afrikaner nationalists were not about to enfranchise black women, nor were they willing to give the vote to white women whose support for the party was regarded as unpredictable. The perception of this constituency as unreliable was aggravated by the conviction of male nationalists that women were likely to be politically naive and thus easily misled. For the National Party it was important that once these women were enfranchised, not only would they afford the party their tacit support but they would also turn out at the polls. If they did not, the party risked reducing its majority since English-speaking women were likely to use their vote and to use it in favour of the opposition.

The method of organisation employed by the women's nationalist parties lent itself to reaching women in the outlying areas of the country. Women's party organisers travelled alone on horseback and by train, back and forth across the vast rural countryside, stopping at one town after another to hold meetings and set up new branches. Party organisers were often pleasantly

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[20]Du Toit, Marijke. 1996: p.211.

[21]Van der Merwe, A.E. "A Woman in South African Politics," 1963: INCH Private Collection 32.

surprised at the response their suffrage message received from women on the *platteland.* Executive member, C.L. Oosthuizen for example, reported that at a gathering she had addressed, one woman had travelled twenty-two miles by horse-and-cart with her two daughters to come and listen to the NVP's message. "There appears," she wrote, "to be a thirst for information".[22] The party mouthpiece, *Die Burgeres* was consciously crafted with the aim of meeting the needs of this constituency. The editors focused deliberately on articles which did not date easily and would therefore be of use and interest to people in outlying areas even if the magazine only reached them months after publication.[23] The perceived relationship between the franchise question and Hertzog's racial legislation meant that the women's parties came to take a very active interest in the resolution of the so-called "Native Question". But their real achievement was to activate a rising tide of politicised ethnicity among a constituency which had previously remained largely untouched by the formal political process. The women's parties worked to make certain of the support of Afrikaner women both for suffrage and for the broader aims of the nationalist project. In doing so, they achieved the necessary precondition for their own enfranchisement.

By the late 1920s the women's parties believed that they were in a position to deliver a constituency which would both turn out at the polls and vote for the right party. As a result they began to become impatient for the vote. "What is the use of all the noble resolutions passed at party congresses," E.C. van der Lingen inquired, "if there is no-one to represent our views in the places where decisions are taken?"[24] The women's parties intensified their campaign to dispel the myth that women themselves did not want the vote by urging their members to use the votes they did have in other spheres such as school committees and parents' associations.[25] The women also resolved to make their campaign support for National Party candidates during elections contingent upon the candidates' suffrage views. The stance of their opponents had to be consistent, they argued. If they were opposed to women becoming involved in politics then they should not be asking women to work to support election campaigns or to raise funds. The NVP went so far as to suggest that men were opposed to women's enfranchisement because they feared they would not be able to hold their own in direct competition with women.

Employment of the *volksmoeder* discourse in the suffrage campaign

The women's political parties included among their leading members pioneering suffragists such as Anna Malan,[26] M.E. Rothmann and Enid van der Lingen. The latter was well known for

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[22]Oosthuizen, C.L. "Report of the Head Office Member for Ward IV," *Die Burgeres*, October 1930: p.49.

[23]*Die Burgeres*, October 1927: p.35.

[24]Van der Lingen, E.C. "*Vrouekiesreg*" (women's suffrage), *Die Burgeres*, May 1928: p.22.

[25]Malan, A.M. "Opening Address," prepared before her death and read out to the NVP Congress. *Die Burgeres*, March 1928, p.5.

[26]Anna Magdalena Malan was the mother of D.F. Malan who was one of the male nationalist supporters of the enfranchisement of white women. He of course later went on to lead the *Herenigde Nasionale Party.*

her highly regarded letters to the nationalist newspaper, *Die Burger*, in which she argued in favour of women's enfranchisement. Van der Lingen went on to become joint editor of the official mouthpiece of the NVP which, significantly, was called *Die Burgeres* (the female citizen). The magazine's title left no doubt as to the suffrage intentions of the party. Along with the women's pages of *Huisgenoot* magazine, it was to become a prominent suffrage propaganda tool. In this emergent suffrage discourse, Afrikaner women chose to employ the *volksmoeder* icon as the central weapon in the armoury of their campaign.

The defining feature of the *volksmoeder* ideology was the idea of women as mothers, not only in the private sphere of the home and family, but also as mothers of the Afrikaner nation. This dual conception of motherhood meant that *the volksmoeder* discourse was ideally placed to play an ideological support role for the Afrikaner nationalist suffragists. They argued that the family was an integral part of the state and that a woman's children belonged as much to the state as to herself; political issues were also family issues and it was therefore natural, and indeed necessary, for women to be involved in politics.[27]

Explicitly rejecting Willem Postma's narrow version of the *volksmoeder* ideology, the Afrikaner suffragists argued that they were well-equipped to take up their position in the formal political process since housekeeping for the nation (*volkshuishouding*) required knowledge of exactly the same issues as private house-keeping: "order, respect for authority, training, child-care, nutrition, sanitation, building and decorating".[28] But the *volksmoeder* ideology was not simply used to justify women's suffrage in general. It was also employed to argue for the more specific demand for a franchise limited not on the basis of education or property qualifications, but on the basis of race alone (or, as it was euphemistically put, "civilization"). Nationalist women invoked the historical legends of *volksmoeder* heroines past to explain why white women alone should be enfranchised. Whereas the suffragists of Europe looked to the contributions of women during the First World War, Afrikaner women looked primarily to the Great Trek and the South African War. By the end of the South African War (1899-1902), twenty-eight thousand Boers (including twenty-two thousand children under the age of sixteen and four thousand adult women) had died in the English concentration camps[29] – which amounted to more than twice the number of men on both sides killed in the fighting of the war.[30] These events provided nationalist dramatists, poets and authors with a rich vein of stories, symbols and memories which could be tapped for years to come. With the unveiling of the *Vrouemonument* in Bloemfontein in 1913, the suffering of women and children in the camps was once again publicly invoked. The unveiling was attended by between fifteen and twenty thousand people from all over South Africa and given extensive coverage in the press. A whole industry of writing about the camps and about Afrikaner women in particular, followed in its wake.

In addition to stories of suffering women in concentration camps, a still older historical experience which was important for the *volksmoeder* paradigm was that of the "Voortrekker

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[27]Cited in a review by Lydia van Niekerk, *Die Huisgenoot*, March 1919: p.671.

[28] "Oplettend" (observant) (pseud.). *Die Huisgenoot*, 15 June 1928.

[29]Kruger, Lou-Marie. p.130.

[30]Krebs, Paula. 1991: p.41.

Mother". The legendary Voortrekker women were held up as the embodiment of all the essential *volksmoeder* traits. Tough and self-reliant, they had done everything for themselves, from house-keeping to dress-making and their singularity was demonstrated in even the most mundane of their chores. For example, they were not just common-or-garden seamstresses, but seamstresses who had to make do "with a single needle, month after month, year after year, until eventually, from constantly having to sharpen it, there was barely a stump left to hold onto".[31] The Voortrekker Mother was teacher, doctor and nurse, and if there was fighting to be done, she cast the bullets and stood faithfully at her husband's side.[32] Together, this fund of historical mythology provided the basis upon which the Afrikaner suffragists argued that white Afrikaner women had proven themselves fit to receive the vote. They had worked and suffered for it by rendering great service to the nation, whereas, as Martha Jansen, President of the women's nationalist party in Natal put it, "coloured women have not proved themselves to the same extent".[33]

In addition to providing the basis for their arguments for a racially exclusive franchise, these historical legends were useful in combatting an important pillar in the anti-suffrage edifice, namely the idea that women's suffrage had its origins among outsiders whose ways were foreign and unacceptable to true Afrikaners. By appealing to the heritage of the Voortrekker women the suffragists were able to cast their campaign in an indigenous mould and counter claims that their demand for the vote was an exotic bloom of no relevance to the earthy Afrikaner woman.

In their attempts to minimise opposition to their cause from within the National Party, they argued that a "women's perspective" was needed in public life and urged MPs to regard women's suffrage as "a matter of conscience" (*gewetenssaak*). Material well-being and import and export figures were not, they suggested, how one measured the greatness of a nation. These things were but external manifestations. Only by involving women could the moral and spiritual foundation of the nation be properly established.[34]

One of the key arguments used by nationalist opponents of women's suffrage was that it was a demand emanating from the urban centres and that it had little resonance among Afrikaner women on the *platteland*. This was a powerful argument since the rural idyll featured prominently in the idealised conception of the Afrikaner heritage and rural Afrikaners were held up as representatives of a purer Afrikanerdom than the degenerate urban variety. The *platteland* was not only symbolically important, however. Rural voters were a significant component of the nationalist support base and many regarded women's suffrage as incompatible with their, predominantly "*Dopper*" (reformed) religious convictions. The suffrage campaign therefore had to address the rural areas quite centrally if it was to succeed and win rural constituencies over to the idea that suffrage was desirable. The *volksmoeder* ideology was the centrepiece in the strategy that was adopted to achieve these goals. Rural women were assured that the suffragists

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[31] *Die Huisgenoot*, 18 October 1929: p.71.

[32] *Die Huisgenoot*, May 1919: p.11.

[33] Jansen, M.M. (President of the Women's National Party in Natal from 1923). "Minutes of Evidence," 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, p.64.

[34] "A Nationalist" (pseud.). *WEAU Occasional Paper*, October 1926.

were not calling for political rights because they wanted women to turn their backs on their highest calling as mothers. Instead, they argued, it was those women who exemplified the true character of the *volksmoeder* who most wanted to be politically active:

> The majority of those who do not want [the vote] are either empty-heads (*leëkoppe*) and fashion dolls (*modepoppe*) who have time only for themselves, or weaklings who are too afraid to stand up for their own opinions. Gladly, very gladly will the Afrikaner woman accept the vote in order to make use of it for the benefit and blessing of her children, her *volk* and her country. Not a single farm woman is so selfish as to exclude herself from such a noble responsibility.[35]

As gradual advances began to be made in winning over rural women to the cause, the suffragists were able to respond with some cogency to accusations that the movement had no support outside the urban areas. Women's organisations, including nationalist women's political parties, had sprung up in almost every town. The suffragists frequently commented on how, through their participation in these organisations, rural women had gained confidence, learned skills such as public speaking and become drawn into the political process. Politicians were beginning to actively seek out the expertise of these organisations, for example, in relation to questions of what was termed "morality" (issues such as alcoholism and sexual practices). Employing the housekeeping metaphor, the suffragists used these opportunities to urge Afrikaner women to tidy up the nation's legislative closet and scrub its moral fabric.

One historical memory whose uncovering and reinterpretation proved particularly important for the suffragists was the claim that the old Boer Republics pioneered the granting of citizenship rights to Afrikaner women. In her evidence to the 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, Engela Lyon spoke of how "the old Voortrekker women felt that the responsibility [to vote] was theirs, as well as that of their husbands. The women, when they fought at Blood River, had been promised that they would have the right to vote".[36] These rights were actually conferred in a decision of the Boer Parliament (*volksraad*) at Pretoria on the 18th of June 1855. The decision was taken to honour the courage of a group of Afrikaner women who, in a demonstration led by Susanna Smit[37], told British commissioner Advocate Henry Cloete that they would rather return barefoot across the Drakensberg than submit to British rule. The 1855 *Volksraad Besluit* granted women burgher rights but these rights were never exercised and a law was later passed limiting the franchise to men only.[38] Susanna Smit became an icon for the Afrikaner suffragists and, in a comment which reads like a direct response to Cherryl Walker, it is Susanna Smit, rather than Hertzog who the WEAU's Annette Krause singled out as the key to what she termed the Afrikaner woman's emancipation. Susanna Smit laid the cornerstone,

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[35]The Flashlight, First Quarter, 1929, p.5.

[36] Lyon, E. "Minutes of Evidence," 1926 Select Committee on the Enfranchisement of Women, p.25.

[37]Susanna Catharina Smit was the sister of Voortrekker leader Gert Maritz and wife of Dutch missionary Erasmus Smit.

[38]Ruxton, L. "Development of Woman Suffrage in South Africa"(undated). Collection of the National Council of Women of South Africa, State Archive, Pretoria, A296.

Krause argued, in a speech entitled "The Services of Women to South Africa," while Hertzog merely completed the edifice.

In congress motions, press releases, speeches and letters, the membership of the Afrikaner women's political parties looked forward to what could be achieved with the franchise. They saw themselves standing proudly alongside male nationalists, in control of South Africa's destiny and the welfare of the state. They envisaged large numbers of women speaking with one voice and making a powerful difference to social life by means of the changes they would make to legislation.[39] When the dream of the women's parties was realised, members met the news of their enfranchisement with a determination to take up their new responsibility with enthusiasm. Where they had once only been able to play an advisory role, they now regarded themselves as jointly responsible for the future political leadership of the country. They were anxious to dismiss the idea that their work was finished. If there was ever a time to organise, they argued, it was now.[40]

Afrikaner nationalist women did not fulfil their promise, however. Ironically, at the height of their political parties' popularity and in the hour of their greatest achievement, the women were called upon to dissolve their political organisations and fuse with the National Party. Both the leadership of the women's parties and the ordinary members expressed deep misgivings about surrendering their organisations. Their eventual capitulation marked the beginning of the end for Afrikaner women as an organised, independent political force in South African politics.

Conclusion

The arguments and campaigns of the Afrikaner suffragists inevitably drew heavily on the imagery of women as mothers of the nation as they sought to persuade fellow Afrikaners of the legitimacy of their cause. But the status which the *volksmoeder* ideology afforded Afrikaner women was a two-edged sword. While it offered them a platform from which to express their own interpretation of their identity as women, it also had the potential to act as means of control over them. The dual conception of motherhood which lay at the heart of the notion of the *volksmoeder* meant that it was an image which held obvious potential for the nationalist project. It operated as a mechanism by means of which the traditional role of women in the family could be extended to include a public role. This opened the space for women to be employed as a resource for the achievement of nationalist political goals without transgressing traditional conceptions of the proper sphere of women's activity. But this conception of both a public and a private interpretation of motherhood held possibilities for women too. It meant that they could potentially explore a wider self-definition while at the same time claiming the legitimacy conferred by remaining within the *volksmoeder* framework.

By choosing to remain under the shelter provided by the *volksmoeder* mantle, Afrikaner women confined themselves to the restrictions of Afrikaner nationalism's biological determinist

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[39]Van der Sandt de Villiers, H. "*Ons Het die Stemreg - Hoe Gaan Ons dit Nou Gebruik*?" (we have the suffrage - now how will we use it), Die Huisgenoot, 13 June 1930: p.69.

[40]Louw, T. "Opening Address to the Somerset East Congress of the NVP," Die Huisgenoot, December 1930: p.70.

understanding of race and gender. Like all nationalisms, the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism had as much to do with who was included in the imagined community as with the designation of a set of outsiders. The starting point for Afrikaner nationalism was not the rights of the individual but the idealised conception of organic units such as the *volk* and the family, where membership and identify were laid down according to criteria which emanated from within the nationalist narrative itself. In this sense the *volksmoeder* ideology was concerned with restriction and separation and its dubious achievement was to legitimise a measure which dismissed the possibility of political rights for the vast majority of South African women.

But Afrikaner women were to find that the *volksmoeder* ideology was not only racially restrictive. Afrikaner nationalism entered a new phase after 1930 as it strove to find a definitive framework for itself. The Nazi-sympathising "Shirt Movements" were becoming a force within Afrikaner nationalism as was the all-male Afrikaner Broederbond. In this context, the independent stance which the nationalist women had started to take was no longer quite so easily tolerated. Influenced by the ideologies of the far-right, which assigned very separate spheres of activity to male and female members of the *volk*, a more restrictive pattern of gender relations began to emerge in Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s. The *volksmoeder* discourse which they had used to such good effect in winning the vote was now turned against them. As initial uncertainty over the loss of their political parties began to turn into a long-term absence from formal politics as the 1930s wore on, the *volksmoeder* ideology was employed to reassure them that there was no need to feel guilty about not wanting to be involved in politics. This process was facilitated by the fact that Afrikaner women themselves had employed the *volksmoeder* ideology in their campaign for political rights. Far from challenging fundamental social inequalities, a campaign based on the *volksmoeder* discourse reinforced notions that women possessed certain natural predispositions which could legitimately be said to define and circumscribe their social capacity in a variety of ways. The result was, that by the 1970s, after forty-four years of enfranchisement, only one Afrikaner woman had entered parliament. In the absence of any serious challenge to the idea that they bore primary responsibility for the family and without specific mechanisms to facilitate their political involvement, Afrikaner women largely disappeared from the political map.

At one level, then, the paper concurs with Elsabe Brink's conclusion that the embracing of the *volksmoeder* ideology represented the ideological incorporation of women into a male-dominated nationalism and a socially, morally, economically and politically subordinate place in society.[41] But while there is no doubt that Afrikaner nationalism relegated women to a separate and subordinate sphere, it is equally clear that these women contested the terms of their subordination. They were not merely passive subjects of the *volksmoeder* ideology, but their gender interests were not their only interests and, as it happens, they chose to subordinate their gender interests to what could be achieved in status and material well-being by aligning themselves with Afrikaner nationalism. In this they were not peculiar. As Anthony Smith has pointed out, while we are in many ways defined by our gender, the universality and all-encompassing nature of gender differentiation makes it a less cohesive and potent base for collective identification and mobilisation. Gender identity thus frequently finds that it must ally itself to other, more cohesive identities, usually those of class or nation, if it is to inspire

[41]Brink, E. "Man-made Women," p.291.

collective consciousness or action.[42]

This does not mean that Afrikaner women were blind to the gender dimensions of their relationship with the male national party, however. Asked why there was such resistance to women's organisational independence, one of Marijke du Toit's sources replies, "oh, it was simply still the attitude that women shouldn't do that sort of thing, you know, everything should be under the men".[43] Instead of the disappearance of Afrikaner women from formal politics after their enforced amalgamation with the National Party being interpreted as a straightforward case of subordination, there is a sense in which it can be interpreted too as an act of resistance. When Afrikaner women lost the battle over maintaining a separate political identity after their enfranchisement, they fought for a quota system whereby women would be guaranteed representation in the upper echelons of the party hierarchy. When they lost the quota battle too, many of them retreated to women-only organisational spaces such as those provided by welfare organisations like the ACVV. This was not the only example of the determination of Afrikaner women to organise separately from men. Marijke du Toit mentions the occasion on which four nationalist women - Geyer, Rothmann, Van der Lingen and Roome - decided to resign from the Housing League because they did not think it desirable for men and women to serve on the same body. As Rothmann later explained, "it is after all very clear that as regards cooperation, the men always have one policy: you and I are one but I am that one".[44]

The argument that Afrikaner women's retreat into the women-only organisations of the welfare sphere can be seen as an act of resistance is rendered more persuasive by Marijke du Toit's work on the ACVV which puts paid to the dominant understanding of this organisation as a body of self-sacrificing nurturers. An influx into the ACVV of politically seasoned women whose hopes of high office had been dented may serve to explain why, from the mid-1930s, the organisation began to come into direct conflict with the all-male establishment of Afrikaner nationalism. This conflict took the form of an attempt by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to dominate the provision of welfare to the *volk* (a sphere of work given some prominence by the recent publication of the Carnegie Report) and wrest control of this sector away from the ACVV. In a period of bitter strife the Church issued thinly-veiled threats to the ACVV about what might happen to the organisation if it refused to submit to Church authority. As one church elder put it:

> Now that the Church itself will act more strongly and systematically as regards social work, it seems self-evident that the ACVV, composed solely of members of our Church, must serve as a powerful tool in the hands of the Church and must be absorbed into the Forward Movement. If the ACVV does not want to offer her services to the Church, then she is in danger of losing the support and sympathy she has enjoyed.[45]

With the greater centralisation of control over the programmes of Afrikaner nationalism and the

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[42]Smith, A. National Identity, p.4.

[43]Du Toit, Marijke. 1996: p.338.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Cited in du Toit, p.325.

occupation of the central organs of control by men, Afrikaner women were now beginning to be required to reproduce the dominant ideology of Afrikaner nationalism rather than question it. Years later, Afrikaner women would wistfully reflect on their disastrous arranged marriage to the National Party. They would see it for what it was: a fight of women against men in which women lost and had to give up their independence. Not only did they lose their organisational voice but the role which they played throughout the 1920s was effectively obscured in the annals of Afrikaner nationalist history. Looking back on their participation in the suffrage campaign, nationalist women would later speak of these years with great nostalgia as the most exhilarating of their lives. As Mrs A E Van der Merwe recalled:

> It was the heartfelt cooperation between kindred spirits inspired by the ideal of uplifting our *volk*, spreading knowledge, improving legislation affecting children and gaining a political voice. The fact that we simply had to give it all up was a bitter pill to swallow.[46]

[46]Van der Merwe, A.E. "*h Vrou in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek*" (a woman in South African politics), INCH Private Collection 32: pp1-18.