OUR LIVES
OUR LABOUR
OUR COMMUNITIES
OUR FUTURE
TOGETHER

A PLATFORM AND PROGRAMME OF ACTION

FOR WORKING-CLASS WOMEN

From the struggles of 1956
to building a new working-class women's movement



MARXIST WORKERS PARTY
WOMEN'S COMMITTEE
SEPTEMBER 2026

A MORE EQUAL SOUTH AFRICA IS POSSIBLE

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PART I: WHY WE NEED A WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

1. Seventy Years After the 1956 Women's March

South African women do not need another Women's Month filled with speeches about empowerment while millions remain trapped by unemployment, poverty wages, violence, inadequate housing, collapsing public services and the burden of unpaid care.

What working-class women need is organisation and struggle.

The conditions facing women today are not the result of too few inspirational role models or too few women in boardrooms, parliament and other positions of power. They arise from a society in which enormous wealth exists alongside mass poverty, in which women's labour is systematically undervalued, and in which the costs of social crisis are repeatedly pushed back into working-class households.

These conditions will not disappear through commemorations. They have to be fought.

That is why the seventieth anniversary of the historic Women's March of 9 August 1956 matters.

Around 20,000 women marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria against the extension of the pass laws to African women. They did not wait for those in power to recognise the injustice of the pass system. They organised, mobilised and confronted it collectively.

Seventy years later, the most important lesson of that march is therefore not simply that women were courageous. It is that organised women can become a social force capable of changing history.

That is the tradition we need to rebuild today.

Seventy years later, South African women have won important democratic and legal rights. Formal discrimination has been outlawed. Women have entered occupations previously closed to them and occupy positions in parliament, government, the professions and corporate leadership.

Yet these gains exist alongside enormous inequality amongst women themselves. For the majority of working-class women, daily life remains dominated by unemployment, low wages, poverty, inadequate housing and public services, responsibility for children and other dependants, and extraordinarily high levels of violence. Whilst black women are included in the top 10% who own 84% of the

country's wealth in income and assets, the face of poverty amongst the bottom 50% who own negative wealth is black and female.

The decisive dividing line is class.

A small layer of women has gained access to the wealth, occupations and positions of power previously overwhelmingly monopolised by men. Working-class women produce that wealth, and do the work of reproduction of the working class itself. They staff the shops and hospitals, clean the offices and homes, care for children and the elderly, teach, perform clerical and service work, work in factories and farms, and carry an enormous amount of unpaid work within households and communities.

The struggle for women's liberation must therefore begin from the material conditions confronting the majority of women and from the social power of the working class to change those conditions.

2. From Individual Survival to Collective Struggle

Working-class women resist these conditions every day. They organise in workplaces and trade unions; fight evictions and electricity cut-offs; organise school and community struggles; defend children and families; participate in strikes and demonstrations; and fight violence and discrimination.

These struggles, however, remain fragmented. Wage struggles take place separately from the struggle for childcare, campaigns against gender-based violence likewise separately from housing and unemployment, community struggles separately from workplace organisation. Women's demands inside unions are often treated as specialised 'gender issues' rather than demands of the whole working class.

A working-class women's movement can bring these struggles together.

Its programme must arise from the conditions of working-class women while drawing behind it every woman prepared to struggle on that basis. It must organise across workplaces, trade unions, communities, schools, universities and colleges, linking immediate struggles to the wider struggle over who owns South Africa's wealth, who controls production and whose needs determine how society's resources are used.

The Marxist Workers Party Women's Committee should contribute towards building such a movement alongside other organisations and formations of working-class women. The objective should be a democratic, fighting and nationally coordinated working-class women's movement, united around an agreed programme of demands and programme of action.

The demands developed in this Platform begin with what working-class women urgently need today: jobs, higher wages, shorter working hours, adequate social grants, housing, healthcare, childcare, education, safety and freedom from violence.

Winning these demands will require struggle against employers, landlords and the capitalist state. Every serious struggle poses a further question: who controls the wealth and resources required to meet these needs?

South Africa possesses the productive capacity and social wealth to provide a decent life for every person. That wealth is produced collectively by workers but concentrated in the hands of a small capitalist class.

The struggle for women's liberation therefore forms part of the struggle to take the commanding heights of the economy into public ownership under democratic workers' control and management, and to plan production according to social need rather than private profit.

PART II: THE ROOTS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND THE HISTORY OF STRUGGLE

1. Women Have Not Always Been Oppressed

The oppression of women is ancient, but it is not natural and it is not rooted in biology.

For roughly 99% of human existence, people lived without private ownership of the major means of producing wealth and without the systematic oppression of women that developed with class society. The sexual division of labour differed between societies, and these societies should not be romanticised as completely equal. But the systematic subordination of women familiar to later class societies did not yet exist.

This means that private property, class division and the systematic subordination of women are relatively recent developments in the history of humanity. They are products of particular historical conditions, not permanent features of human nature.

The decisive transformation came with the development of human productive capacity. As agriculture, animal husbandry and other forms of production developed, human societies became increasingly able to produce more than was required for immediate survival. For the first time, a regular social surplus could be produced and accumulated.

The existence of a surplus posed new questions. Who controlled it? Who inherited accumulated wealth? Who performed the labour that produced it? Who commanded the labour of others?

Over long historical periods and through very different processes in different parts of the world, communal social arrangements increasingly gave way to societies divided between those who controlled accumulated wealth and those whose labour produced it. Private property, class divisions and eventually the state developed together. It was within this transformation that women's position also fundamentally changed.

2. Private Property, the Family and Women's Oppression

Engels' great contribution in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* was to locate women's oppression historically rather than biologically. His argument was that the rise of private property and class society transformed both relations between women and men and consequently the family.

Once substantial property could be accumulated privately, inheritance acquired a new importance. Property-owning men had an interest in ensuring that accumulated wealth passed to recognised biological heirs. Control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacity consequently became a necessity. There thus developed a corresponding change in the form of the family into a monogamous patriarchal family as an institution through which property, inheritance and the reproduction of the now class divided society could be organised and maintained.

This transformation did not happen everywhere in exactly the same way. Archaeological, anthropological and historical research since Engels wrote in the nineteenth century has corrected important aspects of the empirical material on which he relied. Human societies developed through far more diverse pathways than the available research of his period suggested.

But the central materialist insight remains enormously important: women's oppression has a history. It developed together with changes in production, property, class relations and the organisation of social reproduction.

Under capitalism, most working-class families have little property or accumulated wealth to pass from one generation to the next. Among the ruling and possessing classes, however, the family historically served to preserve and transmit private property. The ruling class simultaneously promoted this family form as a model for society as a whole, helping to reproduce the capitalist social order. Yet 'women's work' differs sharply across classes. Much of the daily work of raising children, preparing food, cleaning, caring for the sick and elderly, and maintaining workers themselves is carried out without payment by women in working-class households. In wealthier households, much of this labour is transferred to working-class women employed as domestic workers, housekeepers and carers. Capitalism depends upon this unpaid and low-paid labour because it reproduces the workforce without employers bearing its full social cost. Women continue to perform a disproportionate share of this work.

This process is sometimes described as social reproduction: the labour and social arrangements through which human beings and therefore the labour force itself are reproduced from one generation and one working day to the next.

Discriminatory attitudes towards women are rooted in, and reflect, the deeper material foundations on which their oppression rests. Sexist ideas, patriarchal customs and violence help to legitimise and reproduce social relations that serve ruling-class interests in class society.

3. Capitalism Both Changes and Reproduces Women's Oppression

Capitalism profoundly transformed women's position, reproducing and reshaping forms of oppression inherited from earlier class societies. The spread of wage

labour drew millions of women into economic production and the provision of services. Women became factory workers, agricultural labourers, teachers, nurses, domestic workers, clerical workers, retail workers and participants throughout almost every part of economic life.

This development created the material basis for enormous advances. A woman earning her own wage has possibilities for economic independence denied to women confined entirely to dependence upon a husband or extended family. Collective workplaces also create the possibility of workers organising together and discovering their collective power.

But capitalism incorporated women into paid production without eliminating the responsibilities for domestic labour and care assigned to them with the emergence of class society. The result was a double burden: exploitation as wage workers combined with disproportionate responsibility for unpaid labour in the household.

Capital accumulation also benefits directly from women's oppression. Employers have historically used women's subordinate position to justify lower wages, insecure employment and occupational segregation. Divisions between women and men, migrant and local workers, workers of different nationalities and racial groups weaken the ability of workers to struggle collectively against exploitation.

Capitalism continually breaks down older restrictions on women's participation in economic life because capital requires labour. At the same time, it reproduces the family, unpaid care work, economic inequality and divisions within the working class on which women's continued oppression rests. This helps explain why enormous advances in women's rights which required organised struggle, have been achieved under capitalism, while complete liberation has remained beyond reach. Those gains have also never been irreversible.

4. Colonialism, Migrant Labour and Triple Oppression in South Africa

Women's oppression in South Africa acquired its particular form through colonial conquest, land dispossession and the development of capitalism. Pre-colonial southern African societies were varied and changed over time. Although not yet capitalist, patriarchal relations existed in many of them. Colonial conquest fundamentally reorganised existing social relations.

The seizure of African land, taxation, destruction of independent livelihoods and development of mining capitalism created a vast demand for cheap African labour. The migrant labour system became central to this process.

For African men to be drawn into the mines and industry, both land dispossession and the upending of the system of pre-colonial political organisation was necessary. The pre-colonial form of political organisation was subverted to serve

the new colonial order – effectively re-engineered into a colonial civil service. Its responsibility was to police the new colonial order in which independent economic self-sufficiency had been foreclosed and the survival of the population rendered completely dependent on the new capitalist money economy. On what were now reserves of cheap labour women in particular were expected to sustain workers' families and reproduce labour at a fraction of the cost that would otherwise have had to be borne by employers. In the rural areas, African women cultivated food for survival, raised children, cared for the old and sick and sustained households during the long absence of male migrant workers on whose financial remittances they depended. Their unpaid labour helped subsidise the extraordinarily low wages paid by the mines.

The concept of the triple oppression of Black working-class women emerged from these material conditions. Black working-class women experienced oppression as women, racial subjugation, under colonialism and apartheid, and exploitation as members of the working class. These forms of oppression were intertwined in their daily lives. A Black woman domestic worker, for example, experienced exploitation as a worker, apartheid racial oppression as a Black person and gender oppression as a woman.

The concept remains useful today, provided class is not understood simply as a third identity alongside race and gender. Class arises from relations of production in which the working class produces wealth socially while the capitalist class appropriates it privately. Racial and gender oppression have developed historically within class societies and are reproduced through their material relations. Social production, organised collectively in workplaces and across the economy, gives the working class a distinctive potential power to transform society. The struggle against racial and gender oppression must therefore be consciously bound together with the struggle of the working class against capitalism itself.

The colonial and later apartheid states regulated where African people could live, work and move. Controls over women's movement had a particular purpose. The state initially sought to restrict African women from permanent urban settlement because their labour in the reserves was essential to sustaining migrant households.

But capitalist development generated its own contradictions. Factories, farms, shops, hospitals, homes and other workplaces increasingly required women's labour. African women were consequently drawn into wage work while simultaneously subjected to pass controls, racial discrimination and patriarchal restrictions.

Domestic labour became one of the most important forms of employment available to African women in the cities. Black women performed cooking,

cleaning and childcare for white families while their own children were frequently cared for elsewhere by relatives. This history helps explain why paid domestic work remains so widespread in South Africa today. The socialisation of domestic labour has remained extraordinarily underdeveloped; household labour is often transferred from one woman to another along the class and apartheid racial hierarchy.

5. Women Resisted From the Beginning

The history of women's oppression is also a history of resistance. African women resisted colonial dispossession, taxation and restrictions on their movement. They fought municipal controls over brewing and other activities through which women earned incomes and sustained households.

One of the most important early struggles came in the Orange Free State in 1913, when African women resisted attempts to force them to carry passes. Women in Bloemfontein organised petitions, demonstrations and direct defiance. Hundreds were arrested.

This struggle occurred decades before the famous Women's March of 1956. It demonstrates that African women developed a class consciousness as the material conditions for it were created by capitalism’s transformation of the dispossessed into a proletariat. They organised themselves politically against the state and against measures that threatened both their freedom of movement and their ability to sustain their households.

6. Industrialisation Created a New Force: Women Workers

As South African capitalism industrialised, a growing number of women became wage workers. This created new forms of exploitation but also new sources of collective power.

Women organised in food processing, textiles, clothing, manufacturing, domestic work and other sectors. Their struggles increasingly combined questions that capitalism attempted to keep separate: wages, maternity, childcare, dignity at work, sexual harassment and political rights.

The 1973 Durban strikes marked one of the decisive turning points in rebuilding an organised working class after the repression of the 1960s. Women workers were part of this movement. African women textile workers faced apartheid controls, extremely low wages and gender discrimination. Women at Frame textile factories could earn at least 20% less than African men; pregnancy could mean dismissal, maternity leave was absent and sexual harassment was a constant threat.

Their experience demonstrates how women's oppression can be used directly to deepen capitalist exploitation. But it also demonstrates the opposite: once organised collectively at the point of production, women workers possess enormous social power.

The strikes beginning in Durban in 1973 opened a new period of working-class organisation, from which flowed a growing class and political consciousness across the whole of the black working class. The momentum created by the independent unions that developed during the 1970s eventually culminated in the formation of COSATU in 1985 the most powerful trade union formation in SA history that played a central role in the mass struggles that shook the apartheid regime.

7. From 1913 to 1956: Women Confront the Pass Laws Again

By the 1950s, the apartheid government was attempting systematically to extend pass controls to African women. Resistance developed across the country. On 9 August 1956, around 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria.

The mobilisation demonstrated the capacity of women to organise as a political force in their own right while participating in the wider liberation struggle. It brought thousands of working-class women directly into mass political action and placed women's resistance visibly at the centre of the struggle against apartheid.

The subsequent history also poses an important question. Women's mass participation in national liberation movements does not automatically guarantee women's liberation after victory. Unless the specific material foundations of women's oppression are consciously addressed, inequalities between women and men can continue within the movement, workplace, household and society.

8. Women in the Mass Struggles of the 1970s and 1980s

Women played a major role in the explosion of working-class and community struggle during the 1970s and 1980s. They organised as workers and trade unionists and participated in civic organisations, youth struggles, rent boycotts, consumer boycotts and campaigns against mass removals and state repression.

Women often stood at the point where apparently separate struggles met. A rise in food prices was simultaneously a household issue and a wage issue. Rent increases were inseparable from workers' wages. Inadequate childcare affected women's ability to work. State repression entered households through arrests, detentions and killings. Township organisation and workplace organisation increasingly interacted.

This experience remains important today. Capitalism organises working-class life across apparently separate sites - workplaces, households, schools, hospitals and communities - but working-class women experience these pressures together.

9. 1994: Major Victories, But the Material Foundations Remained

The defeat of apartheid rule brought enormous democratic gains. Women secured constitutional equality and important legal rights against discrimination. Reproductive rights were strengthened. Legal restrictions inherited from apartheid and older patriarchal systems were dismantled. Women's representation in parliament and public institutions increased dramatically.

The negotiations that produced these democratic gains took place against the background of a global neoliberal offensive against the working class. The post-war social-democratic model in the advanced capitalist countries was being dismantled through privatisation, deregulation, attacks on trade-union power and the retreat of the state from social provision. In South Africa, however, leading layers of the working class and youth had come to see the struggle against apartheid as bound up with the struggle against capitalism itself. For the strategists of capital, far-reaching democratic concessions became necessary to preserve the capitalist system. Bourgeois-democratic concessions from above were used to prevent the revolutionary movement from below developing into a struggle for socialist transformation - a capitalist counter-revolution in democratic form.

Political democracy therefore arrived without a socialist transformation of the economy. The mines, banks, farms, factories, retail monopolies and other commanding sectors remained overwhelmingly under capitalist ownership. The capitalist class saw democracy as a means of preserving capitalism; for the working class, democratic rights could become weapons for extending the struggle towards the socialist transformation of society. The negotiated settlement interrupted a revolutionary process that leading layers of workers and youth had understood as capable of moving from the overthrow of apartheid towards the overthrow of capitalism. The democratic gains are real and must be defended. But the bosses and government have already taken advantage of the weakness of the trade-union leadership, including by securing agreement to measures that weaken the right to strike and protections in labour law.

The ANC government's imposition of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy - GEAR - in 1996 brought socio-economic policy in SA into line with the globally dominant neo-liberal model. This deepened the contradiction between the aspirations of the masses for decent jobs, education, health, housing and equality, and the impossibility of their achievement on the basis of capitalism. Privatisation, outsourcing, commercialisation, pressure on public expenditure,

casualisation and the restructuring of the working class followed. Permanent jobs were lost or replaced with insecure employment. Public services came under growing pressure. Women carried a disproportionate share of these consequences.

At precisely the moment when women had achieved unprecedented formal political rights, the economic conditions required to exercise those rights fully were being undermined for millions of working-class women.

10. What Happened to the Organised Women's Movement?

During the struggle against apartheid, mass organisations mobilised women around immediate community, workplace and political demands. After 1994, significant parts of organised women's activism moved into parliament, government institutions, professional organisations and NGOs.

Some of this work secured important reforms and services. But the centre of gravity shifted away from mass organisation and collective struggle. Political questions were increasingly reframed as questions of policy, representation, advocacy, professional expertise and individual advancement.

The language of women's emancipation increasingly became the language of “empowerment”. For a small layer of women, empowerment became very real: access to corporate leadership, senior positions in the state, professional careers and accumulation of wealth. For millions of working-class women, “empowerment” without jobs, income, housing, childcare and public services is experienced as powerlessness.

Putting more women into institutions controlled by capital does not change the class character of those institutions. Within the framework of capitalism, women can become cabinet ministers but are obliged to administer austerity. Women can become corporate executives but can preside over the exploitation of other women in the working class. The question of power is not simply a matter of gender, but of which class holds power and in whose interests that power is exercised.

11. Class, Sexism and the Struggle for Women's Liberation

Sexism is an essential component of oppression under capitalism. The economic dictatorship of the capitalist class is ideologically reinforced, among other things, by patriarchal and sexist ideas. Even when the working class becomes organised against the bosses - in trade unions or politically - sexism does not automatically disappear. Working-class men can and do reproduce sexist ideas, violence and oppressive behaviour. Trade unions and socialist organisations themselves can reproduce inequalities present in capitalist society. Women can also internalise

their oppression and reinforce practices and norms that reproduce patriarchal systems of oppression. These must be fought consciously.

Class remains decisive because of the position the working class occupies within capitalist production. Workers collectively produce the wealth of society. When organised, they possess the capacity to stop production and distribution and ultimately to take control of them.

The working class contains within itself the overwhelming majority of oppressed people. Its potential power depends upon overcoming divisions within its own ranks. The struggle against women's oppression is therefore indispensable to working-class unity. Sexism weakens the working class. Women's liberation strengthens it.

12. Lessons of Women's Struggle

Women's greatest gains have been won through collective struggle. Rights that today appear permanent were created by people who organised, marched, struck, defied laws and confronted existing institutions.

Women also require the ability to organise around their own oppression and demands. Without conscious organisation, women's particular demands can disappear even inside movements fighting progressive or revolutionary struggles.

Independent organisation does not mean political separation from the working class. A working-class women's movement derives its greatest potential power precisely from connecting struggles against gender oppression with struggles in workplaces, trade unions, communities and among young people.

Organisation must remain politically independent of the capitalist state and capitalist political parties. The gains of women's struggles must be defended continuously.

Above all, women themselves change through struggle. People who enter a campaign around a wage, a pass law, electricity, childcare or violence can begin to draw wider conclusions through their own collective experience. Immediate struggles can become schools of political consciousness.

PART III: CONDITIONS FACING WORKING-CLASS WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. Mass Unemployment and the Exclusion of Women from Work

South Africa's unemployment crisis has reached catastrophic proportions. In the second quarter of 2026, 8.5 million people were officially unemployed, producing an official unemployment rate of 33.6%. Women were affected even more severely: women's official unemployment rate was 37.5%, compared with 30.3% for men. Only 34.3% of working-age women were employed, compared with 44.9% of men.

For young women the prospects are even bleaker. Among women aged 15-24, 38.2% were neither employed nor in education or training in the second quarter of 2026.

These figures describe a society in which millions who could contribute to producing socially necessary goods and services are prevented from doing so because their labour cannot be employed profitably.

There is no shortage of work that needs to be done. South Africa needs teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, ECD practitioners, carers, builders, engineers, artisans, agricultural workers and workers to expand public transport, housing, water, sanitation and renewable energy.

The contradiction is glaring: millions need work while millions of people need services that are not being provided.

2. Women at Work: Low Wages, Insecure Jobs and Occupational Segregation

Women who find employment remain heavily concentrated in lower-paid occupations. In the second quarter of 2026, only 7.1% of employed women were managers, compared with 10% of employed men. Clerical work accounted for 17% of women's employment but only 5.8% of men's, while domestic work accounted for 10.8% of women's employment and just 0.5% of men's.

Domestic workers perform labour essential to the functioning of millions of households, yet remain among the lowest-paid workers in society. Their labour also allows better-paid women to enter employment while the domestic burden is transferred to another, generally poorer, woman.

The gender wage gap remains part of this inequality. Female-headed households had an average annual income of only R158,481 in 2023, compared with R239,590 for male-headed households.

The gulf inside the workforce is even more revealing. Shoprite reported an average cashier rate of R34.83 an hour in 2025 - about R6,037 a month, or roughly R72,446 a year for a 40-hour week. In the same financial year, Shoprite Group CEO Pieter Engelbrecht received R87.005 million in single-figure remuneration. At the average cashier wage, a worker would have to work for approximately 1,200 years to receive what the CEO received in one year. This is not fundamentally an inequality between women and men. It expresses the class division between those who must sell their labour to survive and those who own, control and direct capital - and appropriate vastly disproportionate shares of the wealth workers collectively produce.

3. Unpaid Labour: The Work Capitalism Does Not Count

Millions of women perform work every day that never appears on a payslip. They cook, clean, fetch water, care for children, nurse sick relatives, care for elderly and disabled people, accompany children to school and clinics, manage household budgets and find ways to feed families when wages and grants run out.

In 2025, around 2.1 million women were outside the labour force because they were classified as homemakers, compared with only about 300,000 men. Calling these women 'economically inactive' conceals the reality. Their labour is economically indispensable.

If every parent stopped caring for children, every household stopped preparing food and every family stopped caring for sick and elderly members, paid production could not continue for long. Capitalism separates this labour from what it defines as productive employment because much of it produces no direct profit and is performed without wages.

4. Austerity Transfers Public Work Back onto Women

When a clinic is understaffed, patients do not stop becoming ill. Families care for them. When ECD centres are unaffordable or unavailable, children do not cease needing care. Women stay home or rely on grandmothers, older daughters and other female relatives. When water systems fail, households still require water. Somebody queues at tankers or carries buckets.

Women are both major users of public services and heavily represented among the workers who provide them. Austerity attacks them from both directions: as workers whose jobs and conditions deteriorate and as members of households required to absorb the work abandoned by the state.

The scale of understaffing is starkly illustrated in education. The Minister of Basic Education has acknowledged, in response to a parliamentary question, that there are approximately 27,000 vacant teaching posts nationally. Yet South Africa has

qualified teachers who cannot find work, while learners sit in overcrowded classrooms. Teachers are needed, trained teachers need jobs, but posts remain vacant because expenditure is constrained. This is the irrationality of capitalism in practice sharply accentuated by austerity.

Public-service staffing has stagnated despite population growth. Hospitals do not become less crowded because posts are frozen. Classrooms do not become smaller because budgets are cut. Children do not need less care because ECD provision is inadequate. The work is redistributed downward into working-class households and disproportionately onto women.

5. Poverty, Grants and the Struggle to Reproduce the Household

Millions of households survive through a combination of low wages, informal income, pensions and grants. More than four in ten South African households are headed by women.

Women frequently become the managers of permanent shortage. They decide which bill is postponed, which food item is removed from the basket, whether electricity can be purchased, whether transport to a clinic is affordable and who eats less when food runs short.

The value of social grants must therefore be measured against the actual cost of living, not against poverty boundaries that merely measure degrees of deprivation. A working-class cost-of-living basket must include nutritious food, electricity, water, housing costs, transport, clothing, healthcare costs not already publicly provided, education-related costs, communication and internet access.

6. Housing, Water and Basic Services Are Women's Questions

Housing is central to women's independence. For a woman experiencing violence, leaving an abusive household requires somewhere else to live. Without income and affordable housing, the legal right to leave may have little material meaning.

Overcrowding increases the burden of domestic labour and can expose women and children to violence and abuse. Every breakdown of water, sanitation and electricity creates additional household labour and expense. The fight for housing, water, sanitation, electricity and public transport is consequently also a struggle over women's time and labour.

7. Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

Violence is one of the most brutal expressions of women's oppression in South Africa. The first national HSRC study of gender-based violence found that about one in three South African women over the age of 18 had experienced physical

violence during their lifetime. Approximately one in four had experienced physical violence from an intimate partner.

Police statistics record only a portion of the violence actually experienced. In the three months from January to March 2026 alone, 9,782 rapes were reported to police. Nearly half were reported as having taken place in the home of the victim or perpetrator.

Economic dependence can trap women in these circumstances. A woman without a wage, adequate grant, childcare or alternative housing may face the choice between remaining with an abusive partner and homelessness or destitution.

Housing, jobs, wages, grants and public services are therefore vital weapons in the struggle against gender-based violence.

8. Health and Reproductive Freedom

Working-class women depend overwhelmingly on the public health system. A constitutional or legal right has limited value if the service required to exercise it is inaccessible, understaffed or geographically distant.

Reproductive freedom means material access to contraception, safe termination of pregnancy, maternity care and treatment for sexually transmitted infections and HIV. Women living with HIV must receive treatment without stigma. LGBTQI+ people must have access to appropriate public healthcare without humiliation or discrimination.

Healthcare must be treated as a social need, not as a commodity.

9. Childcare and Early Childhood Development

Childcare lies at the centre of women's ability to participate fully in economic, political and social life. Where affordable ECD provision is unavailable, somebody must care for young children. That person is still most commonly a woman.

Universal, free and high-quality ECD would benefit children, women and society as a whole. The workers providing that care must themselves be treated as workers performing socially indispensable labour - properly trained, permanently employed and paid decent wages.

10. Young Women and Girls

Girls encounter sexual harassment and violence at school and on the journey to school. Teenage pregnancy can disrupt education. In poor households, care work and household responsibilities can fall disproportionately on girls.

Education about sex and relationships must include consent, bodily autonomy, contraception and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. Young women need free education, jobs, housing, healthcare and childcare together with the right to control their own bodies.

11. LGBTQI+ People and Gender Oppression

The struggle against women's oppression must also oppose violence and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people. Working-class LGBTQI+ people face these pressures without the protections that wealth can purchase.

A working-class movement cannot allow sexuality or gender identity to be used to divide workers and oppressed people from one another. Unity requires the defence of every member of the working class against discrimination and violence.

12. A Crisis Produced by the Organisation of Society

Unemployment, childcare, gender-based violence, housing and healthcare are usually treated as separate problems. For working-class women, they are experienced together.

A woman may be unemployed because she has no childcare. She may remain in an abusive household because she has no income or housing. A cut in healthcare may increase the care she performs at home. A low wage may force dependence on a partner or extended family. Long working hours may make political and trade-union participation almost impossible.

These are connected conditions produced by the organisation of society. The programme that follows begins with the urgent needs of women now, strengthens their ability to organise and struggle, and points towards transferring wealth and power from capital to the working class.

PART IV: A PROGRAMME FOR WORKING-CLASS WOMEN TO FIGHT FOR

Working-class women need jobs and an income they can live on. They need time outside work. They need housing, healthcare, childcare, education, public transport, water and electricity. They need the economic independence to leave violent relationships. They need control over their bodies and reproductive lives. They need organisations through which they can fight collectively for these things.

These demands must be fought for now. Every demand should begin with what working-class women and their families actually need. Where meeting those needs comes into conflict with the profits, wealth and property of the capitalist class, the movement should fight for the wealth and productive resources of society to be brought under democratic public ownership and workers' control.

1. Jobs for All - Share the Work

- Jobs for all who can work. Launch a massive programme of socially necessary public employment to build houses, schools, clinics, hospitals, ECD centres, public transport, water and sanitation infrastructure and renewable energy, and to expand education, healthcare and social care.
- Convert EPWP, community health work and other permanent forms of supposedly temporary public employment into permanent jobs with full labour rights, benefits and collectively negotiated wages.
- Fill all funded and unfunded vacancies in health, education, social development and municipal services. Train and employ the additional workers required to expand these services according to social need.
- Ban labour broking and end casualisation and repeated temporary contracts for work of a permanent character.
- Nationalise companies threatening mass retrenchments under democratic workers' control and management, with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need.

2. A Living Wage of at Least R15,000 a Month

We demand an immediate minimum living wage of R15,000 a month for a full-time worker, automatically increased in line with the cost of living. This must become a floor beneath which no worker can fall, rather than a ceiling used to hold down collectively bargained wages.

- Equal pay for work of equal value and full wage transparency.
- Abolish discriminatory grading systems that systematically undervalue work concentrated among women.

- Full labour rights and the living wage for domestic workers, farmworkers, retail workers, care workers and all other low-paid workers.
- Restore and strengthen protections in the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and Labour Relations Act and reverse amendments that have weakened workers' rights.
- No exemptions allowing employers to pay below the minimum because they plead poverty. Companies claiming inability to pay must open their books to inspection by elected workers' committees.

3. A 32-Hour Maximum Working Week - Towards 20 Hours

We demand an immediate maximum working week of 32 hours, without loss of pay or benefits and without intensification of work. Where shorter hours require additional staff, employers and the state must employ them.

Overtime must be strictly limited and paid at premium rates. Shift systems must be negotiated with workers and their unions and organised to protect health, family life and adequate rest.

We raise the perspective of a 20-hour working week without loss of living standards as productivity and technology make a radical reduction of necessary labour possible. Machines, automation and new technologies should free human beings from exhausting labour - not create unemployment for some and intensified work for others.

4. Social Grants Must Provide a Living Social Income

Social grants must provide the material means to live independently and with dignity. Their value must be determined by the actual cost of living, not by official poverty lines.

A realistic working-class cost-of-living basket must include adequate nutritious food, electricity, water, housing costs, public transport, clothing and household necessities, healthcare costs not already provided freely by the state, education-related costs, and communication including data and internet access.

A Universal Basic Income for Every Adult

Replace the R370 SRD grant with a Universal Basic Income Grant of at least R5,000 a month for every adult from age 18 until they qualify for the Older Persons Grant, irrespective of employment status or income.

Universality removes means tests, bank-account surveillance and bureaucratic barriers. The full value of the grant should be progressively recovered through the tax system from higher-income earners. High-income earners would therefore

receive the payment administratively but return part or all of it through taxation, while working-class and low-income recipients remain net beneficiaries.

Pensioners and People Living with Disabilities

Increase the Older Persons and Disability Grants immediately to no less than half the minimum living wage demanded for employed workers: at least R7,500 a month. This is a floor, not a ceiling.

People living with disabilities must receive additional support where disability creates extra costs for mobility, equipment, personal assistance, specialised healthcare or communication.

Care Dependency Grant

The Care Dependency Grant should be at least R7,500 a month, together with free publicly provided healthcare, assistive devices, transport, respite care and other necessary support.

Child Support Grant

Increase the Child Support Grant immediately to at least R2,000 per child per month. This is an immediate minimum demand and must rise towards the actual cost of maintaining a child, calculated through a child-specific cost-of-living basket.

The cash grant must be combined with universal free childcare and ECD, healthcare, education, school meals, school transport, textbooks, stationery, learning materials and internet access.

Foster Child Grant and Grant-in-Aid

The Foster Child Grant must be substantially increased and calculated according to the actual cost of raising a child, with additional support where foster children have particular health, psychological or educational needs.

The Grant-in-Aid must be radically increased to meet the actual costs of full-time care, alongside a massive expansion of publicly employed home-based carers, respite care, disability support, elder care, community health services, assistive devices and accessible public transport.

All Grants

- Increase automatically with the real cost of living.
- Use a transparent working-class cost-of-living basket rather than poverty lines as their benchmark.
- Be paid reliably and without punitive bureaucratic obstacles.
- Be protected from deductions by lenders and other private interests.
- Be accessible without discrimination.

We fight simultaneously for a R15,000 minimum living wage; jobs for all who can work; a 32-hour maximum working week moving towards 20 hours; a minimum R7,500 income for pensioners and people living with disabilities; a R5,000 universal adult income; a Child Support Grant of at least R2,000; and free universal public services.

5. Free, Universal Childcare and ECD

Caring for children is a responsibility of society as a whole. We demand free, universally available, high-quality Early Childhood Development and childcare from birth to school-going age.

- Increase the ECD subsidy to at least R50 per child per day, with further increases based on the real cost of nutritious food, care, infrastructure and educational programmes.
- Reinstate and expand nutrition support for young children in poor and working-class communities.
- Establish publicly funded ECD and childcare centres in every working-class community and near major workplaces.
- Provide extended opening hours where workers work shifts, without extending individual ECD workers' working hours.
- Employ ECD practitioners as public-sector workers with permanent jobs, full benefits, union rights and decent wages.
- Provide free meals, healthcare screening and early learning programmes through ECD centres.

6. Paid Maternity, Parental and Family Leave

- At least six months fully paid maternity leave.
- At least six months paid parental leave available to the other parent, including adoptive and same-sex parents.
- Full income replacement during maternity and parental leave, with a guaranteed minimum equal to the living wage.
- Guaranteed return to the same or an equivalent job after leave.
- A complete ban on pregnancy discrimination and dismissal.
- Paid leave for miscarriage, stillbirth and serious pregnancy complications.
- Substantially expanded paid family-responsibility and carers' leave.

7. Socialise Domestic and Care Work

The long-term liberation of women requires much of the labour currently performed privately in individual households to become socially organised.

- Childcare and ECD.

- Elder care.
- Disability support and respite care.
- Community laundries.
- Affordable communal kitchens and dining facilities where communities want them.
- School feeding.
- Home-based public healthcare.
- Accessible public transport.
- Water and sanitation.
- Safe public spaces and recreation facilities.

Workers performing care and domestic services must be recognised as skilled workers and receive permanent employment, living wages and full labour rights.

8. Housing as a Right and a Condition for Women's Freedom

We demand a massive programme of publicly built, high-quality housing for rent or occupation at genuinely affordable cost, under democratic control by workers and communities.

- Emergency public housing available immediately to survivors of domestic and gender-based violence.
- Sufficient shelters so that no woman or LGBTQI+ person is forced to return to a violent household because there is nowhere else to go.
- Long-term housing following emergency accommodation.
- An end to evictions where no suitable alternative accommodation exists.
- Upgrading informal settlements with water, electricity, sanitation, roads and public facilities.
- Expropriation of unused land and buildings needed for mass public housing, with compensation based only on proven need.

9. Water, Electricity and Public Transport

- Sufficient free basic water and electricity for every working-class household.
- Steeply progressive block tariffs so that wealthy households and large corporate users pay substantially more.
- An end to cut-offs that deny poor households access to basic services.
- Public investment to repair and expand water, electricity and sanitation infrastructure.
- Publicly owned renewable-energy development under workers' and community control.
- Safe, reliable and affordable public transport operating according to workers' actual hours, moving towards free public mass transport for all.

10. Free, High-Quality Public Healthcare

We demand a fully funded, publicly owned and democratically controlled national health service, free at the point of use.

- Fill all vacancies in hospitals and clinics and employ unemployed doctors, nurses and other health workers.
- Massively expand community clinics and primary healthcare.
- Provide sufficient medicines and diagnostic services.
- Bring private hospitals, major healthcare providers and pharmaceutical monopolies into public ownership under democratic workers' control as part of a unified public health service.
- Provide free mental-health and trauma services in every community.

11. Reproductive and Sexual Freedom

- Free contraception through adequately staffed public facilities.
- Free, safe and accessible termination of pregnancy services throughout the country.
- Free prenatal, maternity and postnatal healthcare.
- Comprehensive sexuality education covering consent, contraception, bodily autonomy, relationships and teenage pregnancy.
- Free menstrual products in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and public facilities.
- Free prevention and treatment of HIV and sexually transmitted infections.
- Access to life-saving medication without discrimination or stigma.
- Healthcare that respects LGBTQI+ people.

12. Fight Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

- Fully staffed specialist GBV units in the police and prosecution services.
- Properly funded, accessible specialist courts dealing rapidly with sexual and gender-based violence.
- Free legal representation for survivors.
- Free healthcare, counselling and long-term trauma services.
- A major expansion of publicly funded shelters and safe houses.
- Guaranteed emergency income and housing for anyone fleeing violence.
- Properly resourced sexual-offences evidence and forensic services.
- Safe public transport, streets, schools, campuses and workplaces.

Police stations, courts, shelters and other services dealing with GBV must be subject to democratic oversight involving elected representatives of women's organisations, trade unions and communities.

Working-class communities should organise democratically controlled local structures able to accompany survivors, mobilise when institutions refuse to act, organise safe transport and emergency assistance, identify unsafe areas and support shelters and survivors. The objective is collective working-class organisation, not vigilantism.

13. End Violence and Discrimination Against LGBTQI+ People

- Equal protection from violence and discrimination.
- Safe access to housing, schools, universities, healthcare and workplaces.
- Prosecution of hate crimes and violence.
- Protection from bullying and harassment in schools and workplaces.
- Appropriate public healthcare without discrimination.
- Trade unions and workers' organisations to actively defend LGBTQI+ workers.

14. Education for Liberation

- Genuinely free public education, including books, materials, transport, meals and accommodation where required.
- An end to school and university financial exclusions.
- Free sanitary products.
- Safe schools and campuses.
- Properly functioning procedures against sexual harassment and violence.
- Comprehensive sexuality and consent education.
- Support enabling pregnant learners and young mothers to continue education.
- Free public childcare at universities, TVET colleges and large workplaces.

15. Rebuild the Public Services - End Austerity, Outsourcing and Tenderisation

- Reverse austerity and restore and expand health, education, municipal and social-service staffing according to population needs.
- Fill vacancies immediately.
- End outsourcing and the tenderisation of permanent public functions. Work that forms part of the permanent functions of the state - including cleaning, security, catering, maintenance, construction and care services - must be performed by directly employed public-sector workers on permanent contracts, with full trade-union rights and decent wages.
- End the use of the tender system to transfer public functions and public money into private profit. Where specialised goods or services genuinely have

to be procured externally, procurement must be transparent, publicly accountable and subject to workers' and community oversight.
- Reverse the privatisation and commercialisation of state-owned enterprises begun in the dying years of apartheid and continued and deepened since 1994. Bring privatised and outsourced public functions back into public ownership under democratic workers' control and management.
- Permanently employ workers currently performing ongoing public functions through temporary schemes.
- Expand state provision of childcare, elder care, disability support and community health services.

16. Make Capital Pay - Take the Wealth Into Public Ownership

Every serious demand in this programme will produce the same response from government and big business: where will the money come from?

South Africa is not a poor country. It is a country in which enormous wealth and productive resources are concentrated in private hands.

During much of the second half of the 1980s, companies faced a corporate tax rate of at least 50%. Today the standard rate is only 27%. While governments tell workers there is insufficient money for teachers, nurses, grants, housing and public services, successive governments have dramatically reduced the share of corporate profits claimed through taxation.

- Restore corporate taxation at least to the levels imposed on big business in the 1980s and close corporate tax loopholes.
- Impose sharply progressive taxation on high incomes and accumulated wealth.
- Stop and criminalise illicit financial flows and aggressively prosecute corporate tax evasion.
- Abolish tax concessions that primarily benefit the wealthy.
- Repudiate illegitimate public debt.
- Redirect expenditure away from privileges for senior politicians and corporate subsidies towards socially necessary services.

Taxation alone cannot overcome the control exercised by private capital over investment and production. The commanding heights of the economy - the banks, mines, major energy companies, large-scale industry, telecommunications, major retail monopolies, commercial agriculture and other strategic sectors - must be taken into public ownership under democratic workers' control and management. Compensation should be paid only on the basis of proven need.

Democratic economic planning could then direct society's productive capacity towards housing, food, healthcare, education, transport, care and environmental protection. This is the economic foundation required to make women's liberation material rather than merely legal.

PART V: HOW WE FIGHT - A PROGRAMME OF ACTION

Demands on paper change nothing unless there is an organised social force capable of fighting for them. Working-class women already struggle in thousands of separate battles. The task is to bring these struggles together.

1. Build Committees of Working-Class Women

Build democratic committees in workplaces, trade unions, working-class communities, schools and campuses, informal-worker organisations, campaigns and social movements. These structures should elect representatives who are accountable and recallable. They should begin from concrete struggles already taking place and develop common demands and coordinated action.

2. Fight Inside the Trade Unions

Women make up a major part of the organised working class but remain underrepresented in many levels of union leadership. Women union members should organise to compel unions to take up wages and equal pay, childcare, parental leave, sexual harassment, GBV, safe transport, working hours, casualisation, reproductive rights and public services as trade-union demands.

Unions must organise the enormous numbers of women workers who remain unorganised, especially in retail, domestic work, farms, care, informal employment and precarious work.

3. Unite Workplace and Community Struggles

The separation between workplace and community struggles weakens the working class. A woman fighting for higher wages at work may return home to electricity cuts, inadequate water, unaffordable childcare and an unemployed household.

We should consciously link wage struggles to the cost of living; jobs campaigns to public services; GBV campaigns to housing and income; childcare campaigns to women's employment; and community campaigns to organised labour.

4. Use the Methods That Have Won Before

We need mass meetings, workplace organisation, petitions used as organising tools rather than substitutes for action, demonstrations and marches, coordinated community protests, consumer boycotts where strategically useful, occupations, workplace stoppages, strikes and generalised mass action where movements develop the strength to organise it.

The purpose of action is to build organisation, draw wider layers into struggle, increase confidence and apply sufficient collective pressure to win.

5. Build Political Education Through Struggle

Working-class women need spaces in which their experiences can be connected to an understanding of capitalism, class society and women's oppression. We should organise political education circles, workshops and schools, reading groups, workplace and community discussions, popular pamphlets, videos, podcasts, social media and public meetings linked to active campaigns.

Political education should not be separated from struggle. The most powerful education often begins with questions workers themselves encounter: Why are there unemployed nurses when hospitals are understaffed? Why can supermarkets make billions while cashiers cannot live on their wages? Why is childcare treated as a private responsibility when the whole economy depends upon children being raised? Why does increased productivity produce retrenchments instead of shorter working hours?

Following those questions through leads directly to questions of ownership, class power and socialism.

6. Towards a National Working-Class Women's Movement

The objective should be to convene working-class women's organisations, trade-union structures, campaigns, community formations, socialist organisations and individual activists prepared to organise around a common working-class programme.

From these forces we should work towards a federated national movement of working-class women. Its structures should be democratic from the bottom up. Local formations should retain their own identity while agreeing on common campaigns and demands. Representatives should be elected, accountable and recallable. No organisation should own the movement.

The Marxist Workers Party Women's Committee should participate as one organised current within this wider movement, arguing openly for a socialist programme while working alongside others on agreed campaigns.

Middle-class women who support its programme should be welcomed into the struggle. But the programme and political centre of gravity must remain rooted in the needs and social power of working-class women.

Winning Wider Layers of Women

A working-class women's movement does not mean a movement that excludes women from the middle classes or professional layers. On the contrary, a movement rooted in the organised power and programme of the working class

must seek to draw behind it every layer of women prepared to struggle against oppression, austerity and capitalism.

The middle strata do not possess the same independent social power as the working class. Their position leaves them subject to competing class pressures. As Trotsky argued, the middle strata need a leadership capable of inspiring confidence; under conditions of sharpened class struggle, that leadership can be provided by the working class.

This places a responsibility on working-class women. It is not enough simply to proclaim working-class leadership or dismiss middle-class women because some have benefited from professional advancement or positions within existing institutions. Patient political and organisational work is required to win wider layers to a programme based on the interests of the working class.

A bold working-class programme can therefore become a pole of attraction for women far beyond those already organised as workers: opposing austerity and the destruction of public services; fighting gender-based violence and discrimination; defending reproductive rights; demanding housing, childcare and decent public services; and challenging the enormous concentration of wealth and power in capitalist hands.

Middle-class and professional women who support such a programme should be welcomed into the struggle. But the programme and political centre of gravity of the movement must remain rooted in the needs, organisation and social power of the working class. Working-class leadership should mean not narrowing the movement, but providing the political basis upon which the widest possible layers of women can be united in struggle.

7. Link the Struggle Internationally

Women's oppression and capitalist exploitation cross national borders. Women garment workers in Asia, farmworkers in Africa, care workers in Europe, migrant domestic workers in the Gulf, teachers, nurses, retail workers and women fighting violence and attacks on reproductive rights are confronting different expressions of the same world capitalist system.

A South African working-class women's movement should build direct links with workers' and socialist organisations internationally. We oppose imperialist war and occupation and defend the independent organisation and unity of the international working class.

PART VI: FROM WOMEN'S STRUGGLE TO SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION

Every demand in this Platform is achievable in material terms. There is enough food. There are enough people capable of building houses. There are unemployed teachers and healthcare workers. There are unused skills, machinery, land and productive capacity. There is enormous accumulated wealth.

What stands in the way is the organisation of production around private profit.

Capitalism treats workers' labour as a cost to be minimised. It treats childcare and care for the elderly as private household responsibilities. It treats houses as property investments. It treats healthcare as a market. It leaves millions unemployed when their labour cannot generate sufficient profit. It introduces technology to reduce labour costs while workers lose their jobs. And it concentrates the wealth produced collectively by millions of people into the hands of a tiny class.

The fight for women's liberation therefore leads directly to the question of who owns and controls society's productive wealth.

We fight today for R15,000 wages, a 32-hour week, adequate grants, housing, childcare, healthcare and safety because working-class women need them now. Through those struggles workers can discover their own collective strength. Victories can raise expectations rather than lower them. Every improvement can create the confidence to demand more.

The struggle for reforms can therefore become part of a struggle for power.

We fight for a society in which the major productive resources are owned publicly and controlled democratically by workers and communities. Production can then be planned according to human and environmental need. Necessary work can be shared. Working time can be radically reduced. Care can become a collective social responsibility. Every person can have access to housing, healthcare, education, food, transport and culture.

Women would possess the material independence to determine their own lives. The economic foundations that continually reproduce women's inequality could finally be dismantled.

The liberation of women will be the work of women themselves - but it cannot be achieved by women alone. Working-class women have a decisive role because they stand simultaneously at the centre of production, households and communities.

By organising themselves, they can strengthen the entire working class. By fighting sexism within the working class, they can strengthen its unity. By linking the struggle against women's oppression to the struggle against capitalist exploitation, they can help build the social force capable of transforming society.

For jobs, a living wage and shorter working hours.

For income, housing, healthcare, education and care for all.

For freedom from violence and control over our own bodies.

For the independent organisation and unity of working-class women.

For the unity of the working class.

For socialism and the liberation of all humanity.

HELP BUILD A NEW WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

This Platform is not presented as a finished programme to be handed down to a movement from outside. We are inviting working-class women, trade-union structures, community organisations, campaigns, students and others interested in these ideas to discuss it with us and help determine what happens next.

Read the Platform. Tell us what you think. Help decide what we do next.

Complete the form anyway so that we can include you in future discussions and organising.

Register your interest: [Google Form link]

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScHrjGHIzDaDW-TzojH3VdcqvPSLkN_XQU_ddWryct3ArbJ0g/viewform?usp=header

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