

**TIME TO STOP PAYING
FOR THE OPPRESSION**
- Cancel the Apartheid Debt

Apartheid is over, but South Africans are still paying the price. Last year alone, the government paid about R40-billion to service debt incurred by the previous regime. Money that could have been used for fighting poverty and other injustices of the past. The people who suffered in the hands of the apartheid can not be held responsible for the debt that funded the oppression, writes Annika Forsberg from the African Groups of Sweden.

About half of South Africa's R311-billion debt relates to apartheid-era defence spending. Billions more were spent on the homelands and sanction-busting ventures. The repayment of this debt is the second largest post in the state budget. More than one rand in every five the government spends is used to repay apartheid's financiers: the international bankers, South African business and parastatal corporations. By international standards, South Africa's debt levels are not especially high. Some therefore argue that the apartheid debt should be regarded as an ethical question rather than an economical. But as a matter of fact, when repaying the debt the Reserve Bank uses very scarce resources that damage the economy and cripple the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

The ANC-led government spends more on servicing the debt than on either health or welfare. And at the time where South Africa needs to be reversing the worst effects of apartheid, most spending on RDP priorities has been cut in real terms. The foreign debt is R90-billion. Compare this with R82,8-billion which is the amount needed to employ all those unemployed for one year.

Organisations like the NGO-Coalition and Alternative Information and Development Centre are campaigning for this debt to be cancelled. They ask the question if it is justified that the people who are victims of apartheid are now forced to repay those financiers who were immoral enough to finance the oppressive machinery.

Many people feel that the international banks and financial institutions that were willing collaborators in crime against humanity should be forced to make reparations. There is an international "Doctrine of Odious Debts", which the South African Government should take notice of. The idea is; if a debt is incurred by an oppressive power and used not for the benefit of citizens, but to strengthen the illegitimate state, then the nation as a whole can not be held responsible for that debt.

So far, the lenders have turned a blind eye to the call for cancellation of the odious debt. South Africa has set an example by writing off the Namibian debt. Let's hope that the bankers in Europe and North America will follow that route.

By Annika Forsberg

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO CONTRIBUTE ARTICLES, LETTERS, CARTOONS AND IDEAS TO OUR NEWSLETTER, OR COME INTO THE OFFICE AND BE INTERVIEWED ON YOUR VIEWS ON THE MEDIA.

WOMEN'S MEDIA WATCH MEMBERSHIP

Women's Media Watch membership is open to all people with a commitment to bringing the voices, faces and issues of the least visible women and youth into the media. We monitor and respond to the current portrayal of women in the media and work towards access to channels of communication for all women.

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MEDIA WATCH

NEWSLETTER

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**INTERVIEW
WITH SENATOR
BENEDITA DA SILVA**

BOTH OF THESE INTERVIEWS TOOK PLACE IN CAPE TOWN WHERE BENEDITA AND GLORIA WERE ATTENDING THE IDASA BEYOND RACISM CONFERENCE



Benedita da Silva:
"I got involved in community work, particularly working with poor children and all the social questions in poor communities. For this reason I had support from women, from blacks and from children because of my work in the community".

**INTERVIEW
WITH
GLORIA STEINEM**

Gloria Steinem:
"I didn't know what I wanted to say yes to. I just knew what I wanted to say no to, and I wanted to say no to the traditional conditions and confines of a woman's life".



INTERVIEW WITH SENATOR BENEDITA DA SILVA

This interview took place with the assistance of a translator

GABRIELLE:

Benedita, please could you tell us a story, any story that you love. It can be ancient, it can be relating to your life I'm collecting stories.

BENEDITA:

My name is Benedita da Silva, I'm 55 years old. I live in a favela (the slums in Brazil are called favelas) in Rio de Janeiro.

I've learnt since the age of seven that the life of a black woman in Brazil is very difficult and that black women in Brazil serve mostly in the bed or for the table.

My story becomes sad in the sense that I wanted to be a child, but I could never be a child. I wanted so much to be black and to affirm my blackness, but the oppression and the violence against blacks in Brazil was such that I could never affirm my blackness.

But by my side I had a wonderful amazing black woman, who was my mother. She said that anything was possible to achieve in life. She always told us the story of how she left our father in the interior of the rural area "because I had to come here to try to make a new life here together with you and your brothers and sisters. Once I got here, I set up a shack, I organised our life and I sent for your father." These are the women in my family. "The black woman has to be strong. She has to take risks and she has to study," my mother told me.

I had to start to work. I was not able to start studying at that time in my life. When I went out into the street I had to learn how to fight. I learned how to take being beaten up. I learned that life for a woman—and in particular a girl—was not easy. It was particularly difficult for a black person. I learnt how to develop my own weapons and the weapons that I learned how to use were those of a young, black woman from a favela in Rio de Janeiro.

When I went to work I realised what kind of discrimination women and blacks faced and I realised what kind of discrimination women and blacks faced and I realised that this had to be the struggle that I would take on. So wherever I went, whether it was in the workplace, or the favela I lived, I found myself always defending these rights, the rights of women and of blacks. This, together with my intense desire to study, made people say that I was someone who was really going to end up being someone important. So therefore, I became someone, I became something in life.

But I found as time went by that I didn't want to be something in life, I wanted to be a person. My mother also told us that we had to get involved in politics and become aware of politics. She herself was also involved in politics. ***So I got involved in community work, particularly working with children, with poor children and all the social questions in poor communities. For this reason I had support from women, from blacks and from children because of my work in the community.***

I became well known in the communities, among all of these people and when we decided to form a new political party in 1980, I was someone whose name was familiar. The women, the blacks and the children said; "You have to become our candidate". I made a political pamphlet saying; I'm a woman, I'm a black and I live in the favela. So I was elected in 1982 as the first city council person who was a black woman.

Since that time on the city council I served two terms as the Federal Deputy. In congress I got to the second round of my candidacy for mayor of Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and then I was elected as a Federal senator in 1994.

GABRIELLE:

What excites you most about your work?

BENEDITA:

Everything has been exciting since life really denied me of many things, almost everything. ***I was like a great South Africa with all of my problems, a great apartheid. I had to completely restructure my life, from becoming politically aware to becoming politically active and then effective politically.***

GABRIELLE:

What message do you have for South African women?

BENEDITA:

I've learned a lot from the South African woman. I participated with the "Free Mandela Movement" in Brazil and I saw it was the South African women who brought this project of freeing Mandela to Brazil. I know a black South African woman who brought me to South Africa to meet with Winnie Mandela. Winnie received me and we exchanged materials. Then I took all the materials back to Brazil to share with the Brazilians.

I got engaged in the campaign on South Africa and in 1987 I proposed to the Brazilian congress that Brazil boycott products from South Africa. I became more and more involved in the campaign to free South Africa and I continue to see how important the women in South Africa were to the struggle.

I don't want to just continue saying that same old phrase; "Aluta continua," the struggle continues. But I do want to say that hope does continue. We want to say that we believe in a free South Africa.

By Gabrielle Le Roux

INTERVIEW WITH GLORIA STEINEM

STORY SHARING



GLORIA:

My name is Gloria Steinem, I am from New York, from the States and I am a feminist organiser and a writer.

GABRIELLE:

Would you please tell me a story that you love.

GLORIA:

The stories that I love tend to come to me from women and sometimes men whose lives have been changed for the better, by some understandable human effort so, you begin to see possibilities.

For instance, I was in Detroit, an industrial city in the United States. A black woman who was standing in a line for book-signing told me this story while I was signing the book for her. She had first read Ms Magazine, a feminist magazine which I helped to start 25 years ago when she was in prison, for prostitution. ***After she read this feminist magazine she was beginning to wonder why she was in prison and her pimp was not. So she asked for law books - she had seen movies, where prisoners can become jail-house lawyers sometimes - and she was told that in Michigan only the men's prisons had law libraries not the women's prisons. In the States women tend to lose custody of their children when they go to prison. So she organised***

some of the other women prisoners, many of whom had problems, especially custody problems involving their children, to demand law books and ultimately they got law books.

She began to read law, and became something of a jail-house lawyer, advising the other women. So when she got out of prison she went to a woman's law firm and got some kind of job, a clerical job or something and then she went to law school at night. Then she said: "And now I'm a lawyer, I thought you just might like to know." (Laughs). And I said: "Just giving me the gift of that story is enough to keep me going for months and years to come." And it's those stories that keep us going. Stories are nourishment for the soul and give you a sense of what's possible.

Of course many stories are the opposite, many are extremely tragic, and humiliating and violent, and those are equally important to tell, but I think it's stories themselves that allow us to share experience, I think you can't communicate a conclusion, you have to tell how you got there.

GLORIA'S JOURNEY

GABRIELLE:

Thanks for the story. And for you, your own work, you can see its impact on other peoples lives. How has it impacted on your life? What's your story in terms of where your work found you and where you are now?

GLORIA:

My story seems so diverse and complicated sometimes it's hard to see the narrative. I think you only see the narrative when you look back. You have no idea what it is while you are in it, but I think through a series of choices that at the time seemed entirely a process of saying "No;" that is, ***I didn't know what I wanted to say yes to. I just knew what I wanted to say no to, and I wanted to say no to the traditional conditions and confines of a woman's life. I didn't actually say no, I just kept on putting it off.*** I said: "Yes, I'm definitely getting married and having children, but there is this other thing I want to do first." So I just kept on putting it off, and off, and off and then finally the woman's liberation movement was born, or came to my life, and I realised that I didn't have to get married and have children, that people could make different choices.

I also discovered what my long mysterious identification, with everybody else who was in trouble; animals, migrant workers, the civil rights movement was about. I was after all a middle class white person so I was theoretically not supposed to identify with other racial groups, or the poor or whatever, but somehow I did. I was always feeling rendered invisible. If I saw group or person being rendered invisible, I felt like it was me too, and only years later did I understand, that women were also a serious group and we also were marginalised and rendered invisible, but I was feeling it second hand.

With the birth or rebirth or the resurgence of feminism and women's liberation in the United States and world-wide, I had not only understood why, which was a gift in itself, but also acquired work because now I could work on what I cared about the most.

You know it's an incredible gift, and perhaps it is the greatest gift in some ways to be able to work at what you love. I realise how rare that is and how lucky I am. Now part of the reason is that I only have to support myself, so if I had to support children it would be different.

But I sort of support people because they come and stay with me free, but aside from that (laughs) So I'm very, very lucky.

On the other hand it is not all good. I've been so socialised as a female human being, that even though I don't indulge in selflessness in the usual form, that is putting my sense of self into husband and children and so on. I do it in a "movement" way. I have a kind of Ms.'Fix-It' complex. I see a problem and I think: "I could fix that." So I get much too externalised. As a result I don't have enough time for my own writing nor enough internal balance. It's sometimes destructive to the degree that I'm doing over and over what I already know how to do and not growing.

GABRIELLE:

What would you like to do, if you were given the space and you would not be so busy? What would you choose to do?

GLORIA: *I would like to spend at least half, perhaps a compensatory additional 25% of my time in the internal pursuit of thinking and writing. I see this as a spider-like function, you know. You go into the room with nothing and come out with a web that came out of you.*

TALKING ABOUT WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

GABRIELLE:

We are working with media and we are working with women and media and when you talk about women becoming invisible, or being made invisible, I think that this is the basis of the work. I think of it as a sort of violence that the media doesn't often see and portray real women. What do you think?

GLORIA:

The media certainly are the major contact now that most people have with most other people, other than intimate personal contact. ***It is alarming the degree in which the myth can be more powerful than the reality. You can believe your experience is atypical, just because it doesn't reflect the myth. So clearly we need to take over, invade, demonstrate, boycott products, you know, do all the things we need to do to infiltrate and influence the media.***

But I think we shouldn't neglect doing it ourselves, you know. Sometimes we think the media is somewhere else and so we have to go through the media. But that's a little like trying to build a nationwide phone system in order to make one call. You can actually do a lot by making audio tapes, and distributing them, making video tapes and distributing them, publishing our own newspapers and magazines, which is a bit more difficult and of course kind of a 19th century thing to do but still worth while.

So I think we shouldn't allow the bigness of the media to disempower us from an understanding of what we can do on our own without any help from them. The two things are connected anyway. If we just go inside the media, we won't have the experience and the imagery and the material to put in there. As always it's not "either/or," but "and." So we need to develop our own stories and media and imagery ourselves, and then also to infiltrate with that inside the established media. Looking at the roots of racism and sexism

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAVIS MTHANDEKI

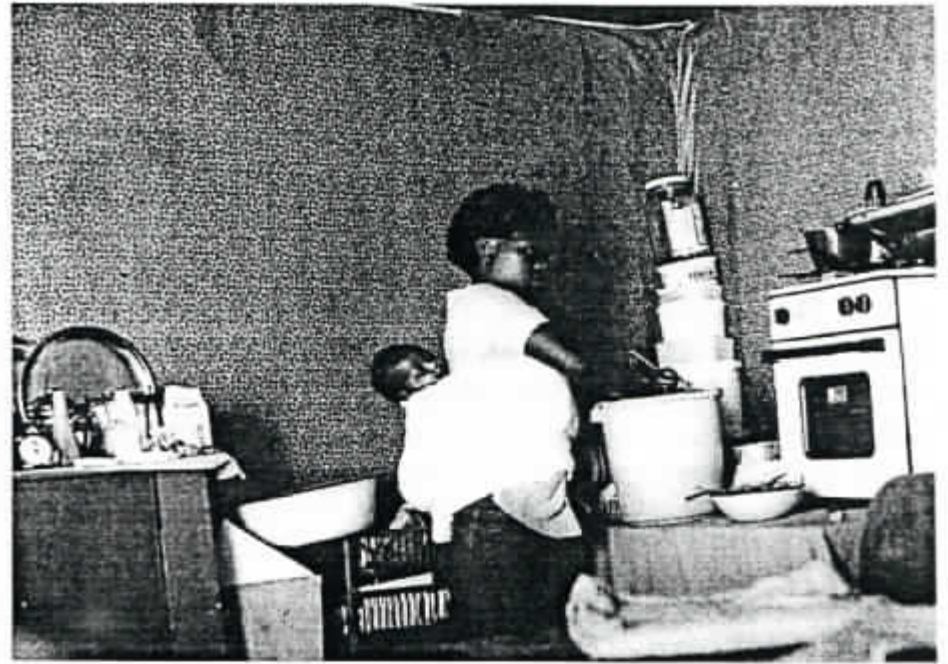
Talented photographer and long-time Media Watch member, Mavis Mthandeki is very frustrated by not being able to earn a living from her photography.

She has to survive by doing domestic work in spite of the fact that her photographs are of such high quality that she has been approached by the Museum of Modern Art in New York who wants some of her pictures.

She has exhibited photographs around South Africa and in London.

If you want photographs of South African reality for women you should look at Mavis' portfolio. As an active member of the struggle she took photographs in the 70's, 80's and 90's of events and of people's every day life.

If you would like to see examples of her work or want photographs taken for events, or portraits, please contact Mavis through the Women's Media Watch, Cape Town 4610368.



On this page are examples of her work.



GLORIA:

I've been here for this conference, called Beyond Racism, which is a comparative, collaborative effort among activists and scholars and so on, from Brazil, the United States and South Africa. So in this setting ***I've become even more aware of the degree to which racism was invented to justify the taking over of land and whole continents.*** And how deep it goes to dehumanise groups of people in order to justify killing and disempowering them and oppressing them and turning them into cheap labour and so on.



Of course what's missing is the gender, the sex component of that. What I mean is that it would not have been possible for European males to become so acquisitive, hierarchically minded and callous that they could do this, had patriarchy not been the preface in which women were taken over as the means of reproduction in order to own the children and so on.

There have been several centuries of the annihilation of the old order of the Pagan cultures in which of course women were at least equally powerful and were the practitioners of spirituality. In these cultures God was present in everything, I believe, in plants and animals and all people. The word "Pagan" really means "country" or "world."

So the withdrawal of God from nature and women as a preface and a justification for conquering women and nature came before, and then led to racism, the whole idea that some people can dehumanise and possess other people.

No-one really knows how many, but something like three to six million witches were murdered over several centuries in Europe. We aren't hearing that here, but that was the preface to the invention of racism and the takeover of the land.

We need to learn from the embattled remains of ancient cultures. I keep having this overwhelming sensation that 95% of human history we don't know about because we've been confined for political reasons to learning about the last 5%, the last 5000 years or so that have been patriarchal and racist and monarhiastic and nationalist and all those things. Of course we can't go backward. I don't mean to romanticise. But I think there is just so much to learn and so great an opportunity to realise that what existed once can exist again.

So clearly the way out is the way we got in, which is to give back the land and for women to take back our own bodies to seize control of the means of reproduction, which Marx never said but should have (laughs). And so it's exciting on the one hand to see this. It is exciting to understand it and to understand that if it was done, it can be undone. On the other hand it is frustrating to see how embedded this social pattern is now that it's overlaid with capitalism and technology and world communications with the media and so on. But I still think it's possible, it's absolutely possible.

I think the art of behaving both effectively politically and ethically is behaving as if everything we do matters. So you know the language we use, the way we treat each other, what we buy, not only the way we earn money, but also the way we spend it. All of these things matter. It may take a leap of faith to think so, but they do, they do.

GLORIA:

We are all struggling with our political training and culture and so on and even the definition of culture. I mean, what happens to men is "politics." What happens to women is seen as "culture." But actually it's all politics. I think that for women the struggle is very often to reverse the golden rule. Not just treat other people as well as we wish to be treated ourselves, (which was the golden rule written by a smart man for men!). But also to treat ourselves as well as we treat other people. This is what women often don't do because we've been trained to be selfless in the service of the patriarchy and so on.

So we very much need to do that and we need to not only do it with men but also with other women. We cannot indulge other women's self-hatred. Women who treat other women badly are essentially saying that they've absorbed, they've internalised the view of woman as inferior. So it's okay to treat a woman worse than you would treat a man. If you indulge that, you are not only punishing yourself, but ultimately you are punishing the other person too, by allowing this to continue.

We also have to remember that our model for human relationships is the family. Since you don't disown someone, you don't just put someone out of the family, it's hard for us to cut off a relationship which is negative. But we have to sometimes to just say: "Well I've done my best. I've told the truth as I experienced it and you're toxic for me. So you'll just have to go away for a while and come back in a different stage of development. But this just isn't good now."

REFLECTING ON PORNOGRAPHY
AND SADO-MASOCHISM

GLORIA:

I hardly know a feminist who is pro-pornography, but the ones who are get lots of publicity. I think that we have to be thoughtful about it, however, and realise that we probably made an error. First of all in criticising pornography, you're not criticising women who make a living that way. That might be the only way they can make a living. I think we're always clear about that because we're always supporting prostitutes and other people who had no other alternative in trying to decriminalise all of that. I think what we should have made more clear is that we are all in a particular stage that we're struggling with and we honour the other person wherever they are.

It's absolutely clear that sado-masochism is a function of child abuse, I mean if you don't have a society with massive child abuse, you don't have a strong tradition of sado-masochism in sexuality.

So while we are trying to get rid of child abuse and sado-masochism we still have to honour the fact that some women, (and men, obviously), had childhood's that caused them to intertwine pain and pleasure in such a way that they can almost not undo them. Now this is extremely dangerous because nature's way of telling us that something is good for us is pleasure, and that something is bad for us is pain, so it's very dangerous. But if it is where someone is we have to honour that.

The interesting thing is that even the few women I know who are fervently pro-sado-masochism, wouldn't choose it for their daughters. That I think is the grounds for our agreement. They don't want to feel judged and they should not feel judged by others

as long as they are not endangering somebody, but they actually would not want this for their daughters.



GABRIELLE:

By the same token that they would not want the abuse for their daughters?

GLORIA:

Well yes, that's right, but not everybody has made the connection because often the abuse in our childhood was so painful and awful and administered by grown-ups on whom we were totally dependant that we walled it off and dissociated from it so we may not ourselves be aware of it. ***It is there, like a magnet underneath a piece of paper and there are iron filings on top and the magnet moves around and the iron filings move around, so it's there, organising our lives, but we may not be able to see the magnet yet.***

Anti-pornography or pornography is treated as if it is divisive thing in the woman's movement, but it really isn't. What really happens is the few people that are pro-pornography are very much supported for obvious reasons in the media and so on and most people who are anti-pornography, their position then is distorted as if it were censorship.

In fact Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mc Kinnon, who are two of the very prominent anti-pornography theorists and activists are not pro-censorship, have never ever proposed prior restraint to say that something couldn't be published. They just suggest remedies if it contributes to a crime in any way after it has been published.

What happens is that the pornography industry is at least twice the size of Hollywood - very, very wealthy to put it mildly. Because its propaganda arms which sometimes include otherwise worthy institutions like the American Civil Liberties Union and so on, say that it's censorship, then the movement is equated to censorship. You get in this bizarre Orwellian situation in which I can stand up and say anything I want about the President, anything I want about the Pope, anything I want about corporations, about capitalism. Anything. And nobody tells me that I am against freedom of speech. But if I get up and speak about the pornography industry, suddenly I'm against freedom of speech. Which is truly bizarre, so now we have T-shirts that say; "I am anti pornography and anti-censorship", to try and make clear what we're talking about.

And I think when we use the racial parallel it becomes clear because yes, what the Nazi party publishes and so on, they have a right to publish and racists hate literature and so on, but we also have a right to protest it to throw it out of the house, to refuse to deal with any groups that sell it, to use our consumer power and our civil rights to protest and hopefully eliminate it and we do too on pornography.

GABRIELLE:

I have a son growing up. We have discussed pornography, which he dislikes because he says it makes him feel ashamed and dirty. But it horrifies me that the youth of today are looking at pornography as a means to educate themselves about sex. For me this is a really tragic and frightening and I see an almost total lack of available literature, or videos or anything that are erotic and sensual, and give respect to sex as a very powerful and important and exciting area of our lives, that aren't just some dry explanation. Do you think that there is space or that it is necessary to produce alternatives to pornography?

GLORIA:

I think we do desperately need to. I mean there are things out there that are erotic and sexual and sensual, and understand that cooperation beats submission and really are what we would want, but there are very few and even the ones that are there are not frequently female produced.

GABRIELLE:

They are so hard to get hold of.

GLORIA:

That's true, it's difficult and there is an urgent need to present a mutually pleasurable, respectful, exciting, sensuous, erotic reality of sex and to represent that in any way we can. That is absolutely true.

At the same time we have to fight against the right wing, which I suppose here as in the States, considers any sex outside of marriage or any form of sex that can't end in conception —whether it's heterosexual form or gay sex— as wrong. So we have to have a clear understanding too and refuse to be lumped in with them, because what they call pornography, and what we call pornography is mostly two different things.

GABRIELLE:

That seems to be problematic, the drawing of the line, that seems to often be the dividing factor because I might draw it here and you might feel very strongly about the fact that you draw it there.

GLORIA:

The number of cases which are subtle are so small, 95% of all cases are utterly clear, with objects being forced up women's vaginas and torture and humiliation and so on, let's all just focus on that.

From a tactical point of view, if I were living here, I would not only focus on those, but on the production of pornography here. Because of the enormous amount of poverty here, I believe that large numbers of the pornographic videos that are sold in the world are made here using poor women and children and we can start with the areas of largest agreement and then progress as understanding progresses.

By Gabrielle Le Roux



Photograph by Gabrielle Le Roux

