

A tribute to all the Doras of the nation

As we honour the women of 1956, let's also celebrate those for whom they fought, write Ayanna M Cole and Nyoko Muvangua

WOMEN will never carry these passes. I appeal to you, young Africans, to come forward and fight. These passes make the road even narrower for us. We have seen unemployment, lack of accommodation and families broken because of passes. Who will look after our children when we go to jail for a small technical offence - not having a pass?"

So said Dora Tamana, a member of the ANC Women's League and a founding member of the Federation of South African Women.

Today, South Africa pauses to recognise the influences and sacrifices of women. Women's Day commemorates the day in 1956 when 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the stifling pass laws which restricted the movement of black South Africans.

The names of women like Dora Tamana are written in history - and rightly so, as she and countless others risked their lives to fight against an unjust system.

Before Tamana's name entered the annals of the struggle, she was a young woman growing up in the Transkei, going to school and working to make a living. There are, however, countless Dora Tamanas - women whose names and faces we may never know or see.

These are everyday but extraordinary women working towards a more just society. Women like 38-year-old single mother Gladys who, like more than one million other South African women, travels kilometres each day to her employment as a domestic worker.

Gladys works for families in

Claremont and Sea Point, and travels from Khayelitsha on buses to get to work.

This daily commute is a common experience, but not always an easy one. The ride from town to Khayelitsha alone can take more than an hour by car.

Gladys gets up before dawn to start her journey to the suburbs. One missed bus and the trek becomes even longer. However, with three children to support, Gladys is happy to press forward, despite the challenges.

"I tell my boys, I'm waking up every day because of you," she says.

Gladys's determination to provide for her children is no different from most mothers', but she attributes her strength to a special source.

"My grandmother was everything to me. That's why I am what I am... she was strong, that's why I'm also strong."

The fortitude of Gladys's grandmother can be seen in the resolve of the women on August 9, 1956. She taught Gladys to be a catalyst for change.

In the manner of traditional "gogos", Gladys's grandmother explained the importance of improving life for her family.

"When you grow up and when you have a husband, change people. If they don't use a spoon, you must buy a spoon and use a spoon," she had told her granddaughter.

Change is the reason why those women stood outside the Union Buildings.

They wanted a different and better life for themselves and their children.

And change is what the unemployed homeless women who

migrate to Cape Town in search of work hope for.

Since 1994, South Africa has built almost three million new homes, but at least 12 million people still need housing. With unemployment at more than 33 percent, many people leave their homes in rural areas and come to the city in search of work.

Janet* is one of them.

A mother of two adult children, Janet has been living on Cape Town's streets for five months as she searches for work.

She grew up in Ceres and enjoyed her childhood, despite the poverty that prevented her from completing her education. She left school at the age of 10 to work and help support the family.

Janet looked to her mother's example while growing up and, now an adult herself, came to Cape Town hoping to find employment and a new life.

"I have a home in Ceres, but came to Cape Town to look for work so I can help my children. I don't want to be a burden."

When asked if she had something to tell the rest of the nation, she said, "I am happy I do not have problems. I am happy."

In April of this year, we came across 16-year-old Yolanda through a newspaper article. She is a Grade 12 pupil at a school in Khayelitsha.

Yolanda rises at 6am to prepare herself and her brother for school, takes a half-hour walk to school, stays after school for assistance in mathematics and science, returns home to clean the house and prepare supper while her mother works, and helps her brother with homework.

About midnight she begins her own homework.

Yolanda is also a member of Equal Education, a movement of pupils, parents, educators and community members working towards practical and sustainable changes so as to be properly prepared academically.

Yolanda has decided to take her future in her own hands, just as the brave women did in Pretoria in 1956.

Gladys's journey to work, Janet's travel to Cape Town and Yolanda's battle for a quality education all point to the essence of what these women represent - determination to change themselves, their environments and their future, for the better.

Those 20 000 women standing before the Union Buildings in 1956 were representing the millions of South African women we may overlook every day.

We may not see these women making sacrifices - to work, to seek work and secure a better future - but they are all of us.

This majority is not so silent; if only you would listen.

While we honour and remember the courageous woman of 1956, let us also celebrate the women for whom they fought.

She is sitting next to you on her way to work or on a bench as you walk by, studying for her exam.

Gladys, Janet, Yolanda, we say happy Women's Day to you. And happy Women's Day to you all.

* Name changed to respect privacy.

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QUIET QUESTS: Ordinary women - mothers, workers, wives and sisters - who make a difference every day to their families, their communities and their country, are what today is all about, say the writers