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**Women and Work in South Africa: A Historiographical Perspective  
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### **FOUNDING TRAJECTORIES AND PUBLICATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the climate of South African progressive politics was strongly attuned to the need for practical activity and grassroots activism in opposition to apartheid. Many writers and scholars who addressed women's issues and engaged in feminist politics developed their research under the aegis of this populist and grassroots-orientated banner. This period witnessed a range of activist-orientated research and writing that dealt directly with black women's experiences of political subordination and economic exploitation. Deborah Gaitskell aptly comments on this trend when she writes that "in trying to support themselves and their children, black women lack access to any meaningful political power, while the government pursues a policy of systematic dispossession and forced population removals which bears most harshly on women, children and the old."<sup>1</sup> Activist orientated research was most prominent in the Western Cape (WC), Johannesburg and Natal. The WC, exhibited a variety of gender work ranging from university-based research and education to activism within non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots organizations. This work generated diverse publications, including pamphlets, newsletters and research findings from NGOs and papers published through university departments and institutes. Other academic publications disseminated information about black women's experiences of oppression and exploitation, focusing largely on women factory workers, domestic workers and farm workers or women in informal settlements. For example, at the University of Cape Town, the Department of Economic History, under its South African Research Papers Series, published a special issue on housing and women garment workers in the Western Cape. In Natal, the **South African Labour Bulletin**, a monthly labour journal, devoted articles to the exploitation of women's labour in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The Institute of Black Research also produced numerous publications focusing specifically on women.

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<sup>1</sup> D.Gaitskell, *Introduction*, **Journal of Southern African Studies**, Special Issue on Gender, 10, 1, October 1983; Feminist Knowledge-Review Essays: GWS in South Africa, [www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org); J.Yawitch, *The Incorporation of African Women into Wage Labour 1950-198*, **South African Labour Bulletin**, 9, no.3, December 1983.

Much of the work focusing on women's economic and political subordination in the 1970s, was concerned primarily on how women were oppressed under capitalism and racism. The trend was to record how particular women bore the brunt of an economically and politically unjust system, rather than to explore why this was the case, by analysing gender dynamics in relation to racism and capitalism. Commenting on this pervasive approach in the 1980s Belinda Bozzoli, in a publication written in 1983, *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, remarks:

"This collapsing of female oppression into the capitalist mode of production has been the dominant tendency in analyses of women in South Africa to-day. It is a tendency, which has suited the indigenous left, reluctant, as it is to consider the implications of its own internal sexism. It appears to be far more comfortable for the left to absorb feminist struggles, or indeed subordinate them, into the general struggle against capitalism, than to begin to consider the vast implications of admitting the relative autonomy of women's oppression"<sup>3</sup>

Work on women studies in South Africa in the 1970s fell into two categories. One was empiricist and largely pre-feminist tradition within the academy. The other primarily activist tradition located beyond the academy, although many who worked within this tradition had some form of academic affiliation. Gaitskell, provides a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which women academics in the field of anthropology, initiated research on women in South African studies to pioneer academic attention to women's roles and life histories. She argues that this work was emphatically pre-feminist and that "sexual division in society is seen as relatively unproblematic." She further adds that scholars like, Hansi Pollak, Monica Wilson, and Hilda Kuper produced social records that although, largely rectificatory accounts of the diverse aspects of women's lives, provided a platform for women studies to be within the ambit of serious academic discussion in South African studies.<sup>4</sup>

The activist tradition in early research emerged out of liberal, philanthropic and anti-apartheid organizations like mission schools and projects associated with them, the Institute of Race Relations, the Federation of South African women (FSAW), and the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL). The trajectory focused on topical events and was directly concerned with black women's welfare. A number of black women contributed to this body of work. These included Lilian Ngoyi, Charlotte Maxeke, Sibusisiwe Makanya, Katie Makanya and Madi-Hall Xuma. Their involvement in a range of educational, political and welfare activities limited their

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid; B.Bozzoli, *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, Journal of African Studies, vol. 9, no.2, 1983, p.142.

<sup>4</sup> Feminist Knowledge, [www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org); Gaitskell, *Introduction*.

ability to make significant inroads into writing traditions that were dominated and defined by white South Africans, even though black women were, often than not, the subjects of investigation.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was only in the 1980s that consolidated and systematic research began to develop. It was a reflection of the growing consensus among researchers and activists that gender was a distinct and dynamic area of research and could not be incidentally woven into other forms of political activism. The growth of women studies at universities, was considerable, and established the academic validity of feminism and studies of women in disciplines, university departments and institutions that had long been gender blind. Leading seminal works which gave direction to specifically feminist study of women in South Africa include, Julia Wells, Belinda Bozzoli, Cheryl Walker, Jacklyn Cock, and Deborah Gaitskell, to mention a few.

Cheryl Walker's book ***Women and Resistance in South Africa***, first published in 1982, provided a detailed account and pioneering account of women's involvement in the political struggles of twentieth century South Africa. Drawing on interviews with women activist and archival sources, the value of Walker's research is derived from its analyses of the connections between race, class and gender in shaping struggles and consciousness. One of her central arguments is that consciousness among black South Africans has been primarily nationalist or race conscious, rather than gender conscious. While the argument has been contested and in some way qualified by others, it has given shape to many subsequent interpretations of black women's consciousness. Walker also provides a brief but interesting account of women in industrial employment and their subsequent trade union activity.

She states that prior to 1939, women's economic position was largely in the domestic sphere. Women's main occupational category was still that of housewife and in the case of women in the reserves, that of peasant farmer. In both instances, their primary importance lay in the reproductive not productive sphere. Domestic service and agriculture were the largest areas of employment for black women, with industry trailing far behind.<sup>6</sup> By the 1940s there was an increase in women entering the public sector of employment, particularly among African, 'Coloured' and White women. The diversity of jobs in employment favoured white women. Clerical work was by far the largest area of white female employment. For black women the largest area of employment was still in the service sector, primarily in private domestic work. A feature of female employment trends in industry was the continued sex stereotyping of jobs. The influx of women workers in the 1940s and 1950s were still primarily directed into those areas of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid; C.Walker, ***Women and Resistance***, (David Philip Publishers, Cape Town), 1991; pp.36-43.

<sup>6</sup> C.Walker, ***Women and Resistance*** (Daid Phillip, Cape Town, 1991), p.66-67.

manufacturing, which corresponded broadly to traditional female domestic occupations. The clothing and textiles and, to a lesser extent, the food canning industries dominated. In the clothing and textiles industry the total female labour force, increased from 17,293 in 1937/38 to 43,527 in 1952.<sup>7</sup>

Belinda Bozzoli's publication on, *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, was extremely important in raising awareness about reasons for the absence of significant political and intellectual discussion of gender until the early 1980s. Bozzoli, explored previous traditions of studies of women, focusing on the extent to which this research, falling within a conventional Marxist framework, failed to problematize discussion of gender hierarchies and patriarchy. She argues that approaches to gender oppression studies in the 1970s (with a few exceptions), in South Africa did not fully examine or explained the system of female oppression in South Africa. No serious attempt was made to conceptualize the relationship of women within the domain of industry, family and community. Analysis of gender relations fell into two categories, none of which have adequately provided theoretical frameworks to cope with the subtleties which the complex social relations of gender demand. The first approach adopted a **rectificatory approach**, rectifying the gender bias in history writing by recovering the hidden history of women and gender relations.<sup>8</sup> While some writers recognized the connections between their opposing categories of public and private, production and reproduction, they sometimes tended to link them in a static, a-historical fashion.<sup>9</sup>

The second approach, writers on South Africa who have combined Marxist and feminist perspectives, have attempted to provide a materialist explanation for female oppression. Their primary emphasis was the relationship between that oppression, and the capitalist mode of production: women's reproductive roles subsidized and thereby sustained the capitalist sphere of the economy. This argument put forth are: female low wages and exclusion from trade union participation; the nuclear family and low paid labour performed by women (domestic servant and wife) within it, served to lower the cost of reproduction of labour power.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, **Women and Resistance in South Africa**, p.116.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp.140-141; C.Walker, *Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics: The Federation of South African Women, its Roots, Growth and Decline*, (Unpublished M.A thesis, University of Cape Town, 1978.); J.Wells, *Women's Resistance to Passes in Bloemfontein during the Inter-War Period*, Africa Perspective, 15, Autumn, 1980; I.Obery, *Makabongwe Amakosikazi! The FSAW and mass struggle in the 1950s*, Africa Perspective, 15, Autumn 1980;

<sup>9</sup> Bozzoli, *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, p.141-145; Berger, Threads of Solidarity – Women in South African Industry 1900-1980, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington), 1992, p.6.

<sup>10</sup> Bozzoli, *Marxism, Feminism in South Africa*, pp.141-142; C.Stone, *Industrialization and Female Labour Participation*, South African Labour Bulletin, 2, 4, n.d; J.Yawitch, *Black Women in South Africa: Capitalism, Employment and Reproduction*, Africa Perspective, 1980.

Bozzoli argues, that while such analyses explain the point at which female oppression and the capitalist mode of production complement each other, there are many aspects of female oppression which are explained by such an emphasis, the prevalence of rape for example, and the exclusion of middle class white women from positions of power and authority. She adds further that because female oppression performs certain functions for capitalism, this does not mean that it was a “pure creation of capitalism”.<sup>11</sup>

H.Wolpe article, *Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid*, is a structuralist interpretation of the genesis and functions of the reserve economies over the decades since the discovery of gold. Wolpe argues that as capitalist mode of production for labour increased, men were forced off the land and women remained behind, engaged primarily in reproducing, maintaining and sustaining in times of sickness and old age, the cheap labour force required by the mining industry. This interpretation has been taken as the theoretical basis for an analysis of the role of Black women in South African society. Bozzoli, is critical of this argument. She argues that the model provides no explanation of the fact that it was **women** who remained behind, and **men** who left. This interpretation does not examine or raise issues of sexual division of labour or about class and age-based differences.<sup>12</sup>

Bozzoli in her article, *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, has sought to provide an alternate approach to the examination of gender relations in South Africa. The approach is Marxist and retains a materialist, dialectical and historical focus. She proposed alternative directions for synthesizing Marxist and feminist theoretical tools, with the second half of her paper identifying three forms of consciousness among South African women: “philanthropy and liberalism among the middle classes, socialism in the case of white workers and populist nationalism in the case of blacks. Bozzoli, therefore offered a conceptual map, on which subsequent feminist scholars often drew, for analyzing consciousness and politics among South African women.<sup>13</sup>

Deborah Gaitskell's article, *Introduction*, to a special issue on gender, in the Journal of Southern African Studies, offers a rich survey of scholarship on women during the early and mid 1900s, showing how this work, originating in anthropology, marked the beginning of scholarship on

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<sup>11</sup> Bozzoli., *Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies*, p.143.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., H.Wolpe, *Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid*, *Economy and Society*, 1, 4, 1972; Jon Lewis, *South Africa Labour History-A Historiographical Assessment*, *Radical History Review*, 46/7, 1990, pp.216-218; S.Trapido, *South Africa in a Comparative Analysis of Industrialization*, *Journal of Development Studies*, 7, 1970-1971; M.Legassiac, *South Africa: Capital Accumulation and Violence*, *Economy and Society*, 3, 1974.; F.A.Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: a Study of Class Relations and Discrimination in South Africa*, (London, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

women's experiences within South Africa Studies. The particular strength of this survey derives from the way that Gaitskell shows how an early rectificatory tradition was rooted in gender blind paradigms, simultaneously demonstrating its connection to subsequent work attuned to gender politics.<sup>14</sup>

Studies on women immigrant workers in colonial Natal was undertaken by Jo Beall. Her article, ***Women under Indenture Labour in Colonial Natal 1860-1911*** provides a useful counterpoint to the historically more prominent clash between indigenous and the settler sex-gender system.<sup>15</sup> Indian indentured immigrants were invited by the colonial government of Natal to labour on their coastal plantations. Beall suggests that Indian women found themselves at the very bottom of the class-race-gender hierarchy in the colony. As workers they were ultra-exploitable, being used for the most arduous tasks and least skilled tasks. They were drawn into production in a number of different sectors of the Natal colonial economy. As seasonal workers they served as a reserve army of labour for the planters. Women working on the sugar plantations were the poorest. Plantations were organized along quasi-industrial lines. Workers were housed in rows of huts, long buildings constructed of corrugated iron or built of masonry and roofed with iron. They were poorly, ventilated, badly lit and overcrowded. Sexual division of labour was also established. Field tasks regarded as suitable for women including hoeing, weeding, planting beans and cow peas.

Women were also poorly remunerated, nevertheless, towards the end of the nineteenth century Indian women were gradually replaced by African male workers on the sugar estates, and according to Beall, "a relatively early example of the way in which both gender and race could be manipulated to divide the workforce"<sup>16</sup> The powerlessness of indentured women had important consequences for the relationships between Indian men and women. Beall cautions against the assumption that their relative scarcity increased women's bargaining power. Their economic and social status limited their bargaining power and resistance to oppression was in most cases individualistic and spontaneous, rather than collective and organised.

These seminal studies have undoubtedly contributed to gender research in South Africa. However, white academics and scholars undertook most of the teaching and research. Relatively few black women played an active role in the production of critical knowledge. Given the political

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<sup>14</sup> Gaitskell, *Introduction*, **Journal of Southern African Studies**, Special Issue on Gender, 10, 1 October 1983.

<sup>15</sup> J.Beall, *Women Under Indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860-1911*, in C.Walker (ed), **Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945**, (David Phillip, Cape Town), 1990, pp.146-167; Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (ed), **From Canefields to Freedom- A Chronicle of Indian South African Life** (Kwela Books, Cape Town), 2000; S.Bhana, **Gandhi's Legacy-The Natal Indian Congress 1894-1994** (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg), 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Walker, **Women and Gender in Southern Africa**, p.16.

history of the country, black South African women had limited social and educational opportunities for acquiring skills and training in comparison, with white women. Black women, because of the extremity of their oppression, also prioritised activism and everyday struggles in ways that few white women did; even when they did acquire the educational leverage for producing scholarship they had fewer opportunities to do so. Lastly, the institutionalising of racism in South Africa severely limited black South African women's access to the publishing, research and teaching resources more easily available to white South African women academics and teachers.

Overall, in the eighties and nineties, writings by black women were mostly autobiographical. Feminist scholarship and politics have long valued this disparaged genre as a source of women's knowledge and self-perceptions. The vantage points and politics implicit in black women's autobiographies and life histories have been peripheral in relation to white feminist scholars' historical, sociological or literary interpretations. This is evidenced in the positioning of personal narratives in studies like Belinda Bozzoli's *Women of Phokeng*.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the marginalization of black women to a body of knowledge production, there were a few black writers and publications that contributed to political and intellectual agendas in important ways. For example Miriam Tlali, rose to prominence as one of the few women writers within a fictional tradition often known as "literature of resistance". This tradition was significantly shaped by the rise of Black Consciousness and the student revolts of the seventies, and drew considerably on the Black Consciousness philosophy and politics of the time. Tlali's writing, *Footprints of the Quag*, (1989), *Mihloti* (1984) amongst other publications were important in highlighting women's experiences and perspectives in the context of male-centred, Black Consciousness philosophy and activism. The dominant themes in her book deal with black women as workers and mothers, and demonstrates that many South African women, although often subsumed under the political category of "black", have had very gendered experiences of oppression and exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

Prominent political activist and sociologist, Fatima Meer, who has always defined herself as a feminist, made an important contribution to black women's studies. Her publications, *Black Women, Durban* (1975), *Case Studies of 85 Women at Home and Work* (1976) and the *Black Women in South Africa* (1976) examined women's lives, especially on wage and domestic

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<sup>17</sup> B.Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983* ( Rvan Press, Johannesburg), 1991.

<sup>18</sup> M.Tlali, *Mihloti* (Skotaville, Johannesburg), 1984, *Amandla* (Ravan Press, London), 1986, *Footprints in the Quag* (David Philip Publishers, Cape Town), 1989, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg), 1985.

labour. Meer, also conducted research for the Institute for Black Research based in Durban. One of the key publications of the Institute was **Factory and Family** (1984), based on interviews among researchers with a range of South African women. As a publication with a bilingual text, (English and Zulu), the report sought to reach a wide audience and so offer a resource for strategising and struggles among women workers themselves. Published in 1990, **Black Woman Worker: A Study in Patriarchy and Woman Production Workers in South Africa**, is a more detailed, scholarly project. Combining historical overview, case studies and records based on interviews and fieldwork, the book provides an analytical exploration of the exploitation of women's work in apartheid South Africa.<sup>19</sup>

### **GENDER, COMMUNITY AND WORKING-CLASS HISTORY**

Valuable and intensive research on gender and working class history has been undertaken by Iris Berger. Her publication, **Threads of Solidarity – Women in South African Industry 1900-1980**, draws on comparative labour history and feminist theory to trace the history of black and white women as industrial workers and trade unionists in South Africa between 1900 and 1980. Her study attempts to reknit the community among generations of working women and to restore some of the hidden connections between past and present struggles against racial, gender and class oppression. She also places this history within the wider perspective of working women in other parts of the world and other time periods.<sup>20</sup>

For example, she argues that globally, South Africa included, employment trends at factories have tended to employ larger number of men than women. Subsequently this has left women predominantly in agricultural work, domesticity and independent *informal work* ranging from petty trade to prostitution.<sup>21</sup> In many countries in North America and Europe, cottage or home industries offered employment to large numbers of women who resisted or were unwelcome in factory work. These patterns of women's proletarianization often followed phases of the family cycle, with factories absorbing young, single, and often better-qualified women, while older

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<sup>19</sup> Feminist Knowledge, [www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org); F.Meer, **Black Women, Durban**, 1975: Case Studies of 85 Women at Home and Work and the The Black Woman in South Africa in T.Thoahlane (ed) **Black Resistance** (Ravan Press, Johannesburg), 1976, **Black Woman Worker: A Study of Patriarchy and Woman Production workers in South Africa** (Durban Institute for Black Rsearch), 1990, *Feminist Agendas in Activism and Academia*, **Agenda**, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Berger, **Threads of Solidarity**, *Gender, Race and Political Empowerment: South African Canning Workers, 1940-1960*, in **Gender and Society**, vol. 4, no. 3 (September 1990), pp.398-420, *Sources of Class Consciousness: South African Woman in Recent Labour struggles*, **International Journal of African Historical Studies**, vol.16, no.1, 1983, pp.49-66, The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa in S.Marks and S.Trapido (Longman Publishing Group), 1987, *Gender and Working Class History: South Africa in Comparative Perspective*, **Journal of Women's History**, vol.1, no.2, (Fall 1989), pp117-33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

married women working at home remained part of the *sub proletariat*. While the nature of women's employment patterns in factories have varied, regionally and locally, common gender stereotypes, have tended to keep women concentrated in low-paid work that was compatible with their *natural* tendencies. For example, workers in the international electronics industry are valued for their *nimble fingers* as were the thousands of female typists in the United States in the late nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Berger adds further that a history of factory employment patterns globally can draw similarities in the South African context. She cites Helen Safa, who outlined three stages applied to the northeastern states of the US, which are comparable to those in South Africa. The first phase relied on native labour, mainly single, unmarried daughters of farm families parallels the first quarter of the twentieth century in South Africa, when industries and factories emerged and absorbed daughters of rural Afrikaner families. The second stage incorporated immigrant women in the clothing industry, were similar in respect to black women who entered the factories after World War II. Lastly, the emergence of runaway shops, as the industry branched out into developing countries, is analogous to the development of rural clothing factories in South Africa, where low wages match those of other peripheral centres worldwide.<sup>23</sup>

The experience of female factory work often had broad social and political implications. Ivy Pinchbeck, in her pioneering study of British women workers argues that young women gained independence working in the mills and factories and influenced the awakening consciousness of middle class women. In many countries, female factory employment was common, (albeit their numbers were small), prior to marriage and family. The growing number of women in factory and industrial work was an important development in women's labour history, with far-reaching implications for their position in society and the attitude of the state towards them. It created bonds among workingwomen that promoted their involvement in trade union movement. It also opened up new opportunities for political training. Factory work in the 1930s and 1940s also mobilised a racially diverse group of women who, under other circumstances, would have had contact with each other only in unequal relationships. According to Iris Berger, "working in factories had the potential to extend women's experience in a variety of ways, exposing them to new ideas and to people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds."<sup>24</sup>

Berger also details women's changing place in both formal and casual work. From the late 1920s through World War II, white women filled much of the demand for cheap labour in the rapidly

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<sup>22</sup> Berger, p.4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Berger, p.5; C.Walker, *Women and Resistance in SouthAfrica* (David Philip Publishers), Cape Town,1991, pp.114-115.

growing garment, textile and food processing factories. As black workers gradually replaced whites in the following decades, women's relationships across racial lines in both factors and trade unions were complex and varied. Based on archival and oral interviews, Berger has produced a rich source narrative on the combined impact of race, gender and class on the lives of South African woman. *Threads of Solidarity*, extends beyond the workplace to also analyse the connections among work, family and community.<sup>25</sup>

Berger's study is a pioneering study in this field. In the 1970s and 1980s writings on South African labour history focused mainly on trade union activity. Undoubtedly, this was valuable research; given the fact that trade unionism had awakened quite strongly during the 1970s and 1980s. However, their work was limited in a sense that gender roles, lives of women in the factories, family and community life was not sufficiently examined. According Berger, women trade unions often were discussed in a "gender-blind fashion, ignoring the issue of whether and how women's double or triple burden influenced their consciousness or union participation".<sup>26</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The publications and work cited are undoubtedly valuable in South African labour history, and illuminates working-class life in South Africa from a new perspective. Firstly, the inclusion of women and gender experiences as a category of analysis also transforms received ideas about labour history and class relationships. It challenges the usual narrative of the white working class as a highly paid, skilled group that, from the late 1930s onwards, occupied supervisory positions in the labour process. Secondly, it gives one a better perspective as to how industrial labour influenced women's perception of themselves, as workers and as woman. During the first quarter of the century most women lived within a patriarchal society, and all women were treated officially as dependents. However, by the late 1920s and 1930s, the inexorable push of proletarianization forced many women into wage labour, most blacks as domestics and many white Afrikaans speaking and coloured women as factory workers. Thirdly, with regards to women and trade union activity, the South African case suggests that women were drawn into this type activity which gave them the opportunity and the space to express personal and community concerns that extend beyond their lives in the factories. Finally, the integration of gender into working class history also suggests the need to shape accepted ideas of "proletarianization" The notion of a single process from dependence on the land to reliance on the sale of labour power cannot be easily applicable to women. Rather, women moved slowly into wage labour in the cities. In post-

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<sup>25</sup> Berger, *Threads of Solidarity*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.7.

apartheid South Africa, women and gender studies is an integral part of academia, and women's labour history has become an important area of research.



