

Rites of Defiance

LIVES OF COURAGE

Women for a New South Africa.

By Diana E. H. Russell.

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By Anne McClintock

WHEN South African police came to dragoon the women of Driefontein from their farm, they declined to budge. Piet Koornhof, the Government minister sent to bully the women into submission, said they were nothing but "squatters." "But we own this land," they insisted. In reply, Mr. Koornhof invoked the sacred edict of apartheid: "All black people in South Africa are squatters if you are outside your traditional lands." Rather than yield, the women decided that they would dig graves for themselves: "We will stand beside our graves," the women reportedly said, "because we are not moving from here. You can shoot and we will lie in our land forever." Outmaneuvered, the police backed down. Such rites of defiance crowd the pages of "Lives of Courage" — Diana Russell's remarkable collection of interviews with South African women activists — and together bear witness to a national resistance to apartheid that has become unstoppable.

Indeed, what Mr. Koornhof called the "traditional lands" are nothing of the kind. The Bantustans are scattered patches of the most parched and broken land in South Africa, a wretched 13 percent of the country set aside for 75 percent of the people. Black people are tolerated in white areas only if they are catering to the needs of whites, and recent tinkering leaves the basic system unchanged. As the interviews in Ms. Russell's valuable book testify, the system is most calamitous for black women, who are seen officially as the "superfluous appendages" of their men. Women are the "surplus people," forced to watch their shanties flattened by police during the heavy rains of winter. They are shouldered onto buses and dumped in remote Bantustans, where they have to scratch a living from dust to feed their children. Each patch of land reclaimed is a rite of rebellion, each rebuilt shanty a device against oblivion.

The custodians of apartheid are experts at anger, ready to provide quick lessons in violence to anyone who rebels. Detention without trial takes place at the despotic whim of the police, and most of the 24 women interviewed in this collection have been detained, and several tortured. One especially moving section of

"Lives of Courage" bears witness to the intimate torments of prison life. The women speak of blankets filthy with lice; of cockroaches and worms in half-cooked food, the martyrdoms of solitary confinement, sexual terrorism, gang rape and electric shock administered to pregnant women.

Women do not experience detention in the same way as men. The prison police are skilled at exploiting the vulnerabilities of the female body as a means of sexual terror. One woman recalls her special grief when a security policeman said to her: "I really enjoy interrogating women. I can get things out of them and do things to them that I can't to a man." One woman remembers watching a courtyard of women forced to search through bloody buckets of used sanitary towels for possible smuggled items. Another described her terror at seeing rats' eyes watch through the cracks of the walls when she showered. In the mornings she would find bloody bits of her sanitary pads strewn by the rats over the floor, and recalled tales told by other imprisoned women: "I know someone who had rats pushed into her vagina as a means of torturing her. . . . How do I explain to someone that I found that more threatening than someone hitting me?"

The coverage of South African women's plight is rare. Rarer still, however, is coverage of the unstinting energy and diversity of women's activism. The real triumph of "Lives of Courage" is that it is not a litany of horror. Gathered together at great risk to all con-

cerned, these extraordinary interviews bear witness to women's immense talent for defiance, and are full of the inventive strategies of women's survival. One woman, when threatened with gang rape by the nine men interrogating her, responded: "Oh great! The laws in this country never allowed me to have sex with a white guy. Who's going to be first?" The men were so shocked they left her alone.

Such triumphs are mirrored everywhere on a national scale, in rent and bus boycotts, organized squatter camps, strikes and rape crisis centers. Ms. Russell interviews a wide range of women — black, colored, Indian, English and Afrikaner, women of all ages and regional backgrounds. All are actively engaged in the resistance through an impressive array of organizations, from the banned African National Congress and United Democratic Front to the trade unions and myriad community and women's organizations. One woman recalls how, in 1987, hundreds of women came from all over the country to hold a secret national all-day conference. At the conference they created the Women's Congress of the United Democratic Front, by anyone's standards a stunning achievement during the country's most recent state of emergency (which extends nearly unlimited powers to Government security forces).

ONE of the book's unusual merits is that it does not genuflect to the South African taboo against condemning sexism. The women do not stint in their anger at violent husbands, at the unfair toll of domestic work and child rearing, at sexual harassment both in the apartheid system and within black communities. Several are vocal in their complaints at women's lack of public recognition. Yet they insist that the greatest violence stems from the system. "We explain to people that the real terrorist is the government," says Albertina Sisulu, co-president of the United Democratic Front.

Threaded through the intimacies of these personal lives are some of the most famous events in the annals of black resistance: the marches of thousands of women — as early as 1913 — to protest the Government passes restricting travel; the Defiance Campaign of 1952, in which thousands of South Africans engaged in acts of civil disobedience; the formation of powerful unions, including the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Domestic Workers' Union; the Soweto uprising of 1976 and the continuing struggle under the state of emergency. One of the many merits of "Lives of Courage" is that it is superbly organized to illuminate how the dynamics of apartheid shape these women's lives and how their lives are reshaping the country. As Ruth Mompati, the most powerful woman in the African National Congress, says, "In South Africa you don't decide to join politics; politics decides to join you." □

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FROM "LIVES OF COURAGE"
Ruth Mompati, a member of the National Executive
Committee of the African National Congress.

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