



THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR RESEARCH AND INFORMATION GROUP

2022 CALENDAR



AT THE FOREFRONT

HISTORIES OF AFRICAN WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

Women's leadership and participation in radical organising against oppression is often overlooked, forgotten, or made invisible when history is written and taught. This is particularly true for women in Africa, who are largely excluded from narratives of women's resistance, as well as narratives of African resistance. But the truth is that women in Africa, who bear the brunt of violence, poverty and inequality under global capitalism and patriarchy, have a long history of collective organising against many forms of injustice. From early anti-colonial uprisings, to the protests that have erupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, African women have shown themselves to be a decisive and formidable force in challenging systems of power.

The selected histories in this calendar, representative of a much broader history of women's resistance on the continent, reject conceptualisations of African women as submissive. These stories show that African women have a rich history of resistance, have played important roles and have developed innovative tactics in building, defending, and advancing emancipatory struggles. Our organisations and movements can draw strength and inspiration from these histories as we wage our own struggles. In the fight against colonialism, apartheid, capitalism and patriarchy- African women have always been at the forefront!

THE WOMEN'S WAR IN NIGERIA (1929)

For two months in 1929, market women in Southeastern Nigeria organised a fierce rebellion against the British colonial administration and warrant chiefs who attempted to impose an exploitative colonial tax on them. This became known as “the Women’s War”, and began in the town of Oloko, after a tax inspector came to the house of a woman named Nwanyereuwa to include her and her livestock in a census. Nwanyereuwa took this as confirmation that women were going to be taxed, and went to tell other women in the town. The Oloko women quickly mobilised and sent messages to women in neighbouring areas, sparking uprisings across two provinces involving over 25,000 women.

The protesting women employed the tactic of “sitting on a man”, an Igbo tradition in which women gather outside the home of a man to sing, dance, beat on the walls, intimidate and publicly shame him until he offers an apology and changes his ways. This was done to men who mistreated women or broke the rules of the women’s market. In the case of the Women’s War, women “sat on” the warrant chiefs (local elite men appointed by the colonial power under the system of indirect rule) until they resigned or gave written guarantees that they would not tax women. The women also protested by destroying native courts, attacking European factories, and breaking into prisons and releasing prisoners.

The uprising was eventually violently suppressed by colonial police who fired live ammunition at protestors, killing over 50 women. However, the Women’s War won significant gains, including forcing the British to limit the powers of warrant chiefs, and abandon their plans of taxing market women. It is recognised as one of the first significant challenges to British colonial authority in West Africa, and inspired many acts of resistance in the decades that followed.

Linocut by Phillipah Rumano (Artist Proof Studio)



JANUARY 2022

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THE RAILWAY STRIKE IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA (1947-48)

In 1947, 20 000 African railway workers and dockworkers undertook a powerful strike throughout French West Africa (a grouping of French colonial territories, including Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Benin), shutting down the entire rail network and thwarting the colonial authority's development plans. The workers were taking action against the unequal treatment of African workers under the colonial administration's racialised labour system. They demanded housing, improved working conditions, and an end to their status as temporary labourers. The strikers held out for five and a half months, and were able to secure significant gains through their unions.

Historians of this event, as well the workers involved in the strike, have acknowledged that the strike could not have lasted as long as it did without the solidarity and unity that existed within the railway workers' communities. Women were central to these community support systems. They played critical supportive roles in sustaining their families and communities for the duration of the strike by selling their clothes and jewellery, and working at markets to make money for food. In addition, women wrote songs which encouraged striking workers, and maintained discipline through criticising and taunting strike-breakers.

While women were not directly involved as strikers and did not organise in a distinct grouping 'as women', this story shows the powerful role women have played in their communities to support and influence struggles. This is one of the main and often overlooked ways that women around the world organise and resist.

Linocut by Welile Dube (Artist Proof Studio)

FEBRUARY 2022

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THE ALGERIAN NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE (1954-62)

Women were active participants in the Algerian revolutionary war against French colonial rule, which began in 1954. They fought as soldiers in the National Liberation Army, planted bombs during guerrilla warfare, and hid militants from French police. Many also collected supplies such as food and medicine, and provided critical logistical support for the liberation movement as caregivers, cooks, fundraisers and secretaries. Because the French assumed that Algerian women were submissive and considered them to be civilians in the war, women used this to their advantage and smuggled messages, weapons, and money for the resistance movement underneath their veils.

Algerian women found themselves in a battle against both colonialism and patriarchal expectations that women should stay in the home and perform gender roles in accordance with 'tradition'. Their involvement in the fight for Algerian independence was therefore also a rejection of their subjugation by Algerian men, as made clear in this warning issued by a group of women at a meeting in 1958: *"You make a revolution, you fight colonialist oppression, but you maintain the oppression of women; beware, another revolution will certainly occur after Algeria's independence: a women's revolution!"*

After independence was won in 1962, the struggle for gender equality and women's liberation was largely abandoned by the national liberation movement. Limited reforms were put in place in the new government, but women continued to be treated as second-class citizens. Nevertheless, Algerian women have continued to challenge patriarchy and organise towards women's liberation, empowered by the courageous contributions of women in the anti-colonial struggle.

Linocut by Gugulethu Mnguni (Artist Proof Studio)



MARCH 2022

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THE ANLU REBELLION IN CAMEROON (1958-61)

Between 1958 and 1961, Kom women in the Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon organised a three-year revolt against colonial agricultural reforms which disrupted their methods of farming. This is known as the Anlu Rebellion because of the methods of protest used by the women. An *anlu* is a Kom practice used to express discontent towards, demand repayment from, or exile a person who violates community values. This involves women gathering at the compound of the offender and acting in ways that were considered offensive, to highlight the seriousness of the wrongdoing. This included stripping naked, urinating, defecating, and hurling insults. Men and traditional chiefs were completely powerless during an *anlu*, as anyone who tried to intervene became a target as well.

During the Anlu Rebellion, thousands of women engaged in *anlu* demonstrations to shut down markets, disrupt colonial meetings, and mock traditional leaders and the British colonial administration wherever possible. Some protesting women dressed in men's clothing and held branches over their shoulders to imitate guns, to challenge the patriarchal idea that power was reserved for men. An important feature of this rebellion is that it was well-organised. There were local leaders in every community, regular meetings held between villages, and strong networks of support which ensured, for example, that women who travelled to attend protests would receive housing and other forms of material assistance.

The Kom women began to win many of their demands after the election of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) in 1959, whose victory they had helped secure by mobilising votes from women organised in the rebellion. Neither the British nor the traditional government were able to control this rebellion for three years. The Anlu Rebellion significantly influenced Cameroon's independence movement, and demonstrated the extent of the women's organising power.

Linocut by Nadine Mathenjwa (Artist Proof Studio)



APRIL 2022

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THE BEERHALL BOYCOTT IN SOUTH AFRICA (1959)

Women in Cato Manor township in Durban, South Africa, led a series of uprisings in 1959 against municipal beerhalls established by the apartheid government. The apartheid regime had criminalised home-brewing, while at the same time restricting black women's movement in cities and ability to work under the pass laws. Selling illegal home-brewed beer was one of the few ways that black women in urban areas could earn an income under apartheid. The existence of municipal beerhalls meant that these women had fewer customers, and that the men who drank in the beerhalls were giving family income to the apartheid government. All of this infuriated the women of Cato Manor, and the state's decision to destroy all the illegal beer stills in Cato Manor in 1959 pushed them to retaliate.

The women called for a boycott of the municipal beerhalls, and ensured this by marching to beerhalls, chasing out the men, destroying the beer, and attacking the facilities. The demonstrations quickly spread throughout the province. Women in rural areas were inspired to take action as well, and destroyed the cattle dipping tanks that they were forced to fill without pay. The women also took worker issues forward, protesting on farms which had refused wage increases to black men, and raising the issue of men's low wages directly with the Mayor.

The police clamped down hard on the revolt, and thousands were arrested and beaten. Despite this, their determination did not waver. The women were successful in stopping men from going to beerhalls, leading to a drop in beerhall profits. The militancy and bravery of the Natal women smashed conceptions of African women as submissive and showed that women were an undeniable political force in the struggle against apartheid.

Linocut by Hlavutelo Ngobeni (Artist Proof Studio)



MAY 2022

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WOMEN'S RESISTANCE THROUGH POETRY IN SOMALIA (1960)

Somalia has a strong oral tradition, and poetry has long been an influential and respected part of Somali life. *Buraanbur* is a form of poetry sung by women in Somalia, and reflects a rich cultural heritage of women's unwavering resistance.

Generations of women have composed poetry to speak out against oppression and raise awareness of social issues. *Buraanbur* was used to denounce tribalism and call for peace in the context of civil war. It was also a significant tool to mobilise people into the fight against colonialism, and played the important role of documenting women's participation in that struggle. Through *buraanbur*, women have carved out a political platform to amplify their grievances and experiences, and build solidarity with other women. After independence in 1960, women used *buraanbur* to highlight their continued subordination, and to reprimand postcolonial leaders for betraying the women who had fought alongside them, as seen in this poem by Hawa Jibril:

*"Sisters you sold your jewellery
Depriving yourselves,
Enriching the struggle.*

*Sisters you stayed as one,
United even when your brothers
Divided and deceived our nation.*

*Sisters, you joined the fight-
Remember the beautiful one,
Hawa- stabbed through the heart.*

*But, sisters, we were forgotten!
We did not taste the fruits of success,
Even the lowest positions
Were not offered
And our degrees were cast aside as dirt.*

Sisters, was this what we struggled for?"

Linocut by Phillipah Rumano (Artist Proof Studio)



JUNE 2022

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WOMEN COMBATANTS IN MOZAMBIQUE (1966-1974)

During Mozambique's struggle for national liberation from Portuguese colonial rule, women refused to be sidelined, and challenged gender roles and expectations through their involvement in armed resistance. At a FRELIMO Central Committee meeting in 1966, it was agreed that women should play an active role in the liberation struggle- FRELIMO leaders realised that without the full participation of women, victory against the colonial capitalist system was not possible. In early 1967, the FRELIMO Women's Detachment was formed by a group of women who underwent political education and military training.

The Women's Detachment engaged in armed combat missions, and collected intelligence for the resistance. They provided political education and training to women, empowering them with knowledge and tools to fight for women's emancipation, and mobilising them into the anticolonial movement. The Women's Detachment also played the vital role of organising and managing the schools, childcare centres, adult literacy centres, health clinics, and collective agriculture fields that had been established by FRELIMO.

The Women's Detachment was also involved in the Organisation of Mozambican Women formed in 1973, as well as the First Conference of Mozambican Women held in that year, where the double oppression and exploitation faced by women under patriarchy and colonialism was highlighted.

While women achieved some gains in the form of equal rights and greater inclusion in political structures after independence in 1975, many felt that the struggle for a gender revolution had been abandoned. The contributions of the revolutionary women who fought Mozambique's liberation from colonialism and patriarchy must not be forgotten - *a luta continua!*

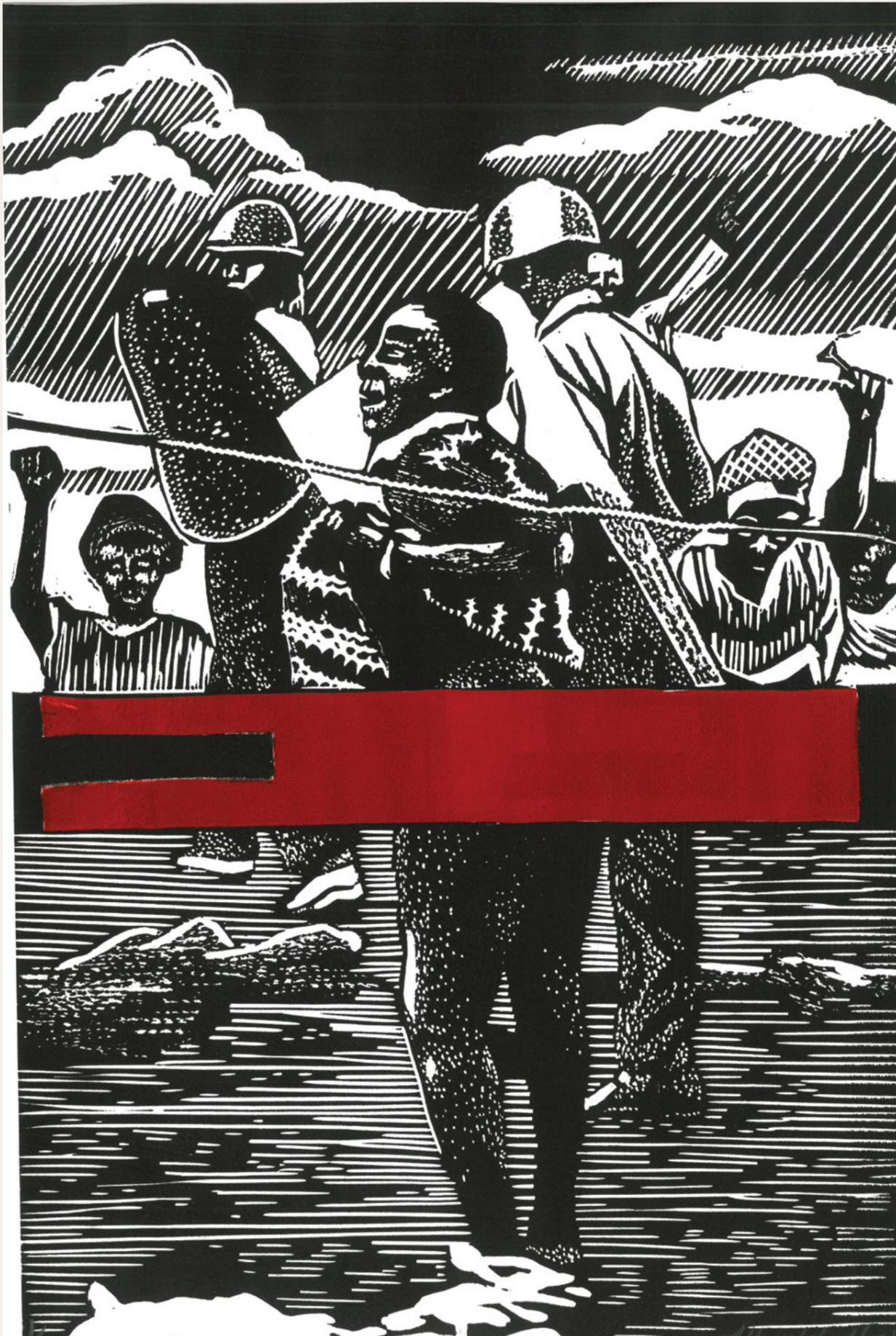
Linocut by Lesego Ditshego (Artist Proof Studio)



JULY 2022

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A MOTHERS' PROTEST IN KENYA (1992)



In February 1992, a group of mothers occupied the corner of Uhuru Park in Nairobi, Kenya. They called this “Freedom Corner” and began a hunger strike to place pressure on the government to release their sons and other political prisoners. This action was in response to a period of intense state repression, which saw widespread arrests of students, journalists, lawyers and activists who were perceived to be critical of President Moi’s government.

The women put up banner and handed out flyers, mobilising support from the public who shared their experiences of torture and violence, and joined in the singing of struggle songs. On day 4 of the hunger strike, the police came to violently remove the protestors, beating some until they were unconscious and had to be hospitalised. The mothers expressed their anger by stripping naked and exposing themselves to the policemen, scaring them away. Their brutal treatment by police inspired strikes by minibus taxis and riots across Nairobi in solidarity.

The next day, the mothers moved their protest to a nearby cathedral which offered them protection. For the next 11 months, the women used the cathedral as a base to continue their campaign. They distributed informational flyers, held daily meetings, and organised open forums to discuss democratic procedures and the importance of defending civic freedoms. By January the following year, all of the mothers were reunited with their sons.

In the context of fear and violent suppression of dissent, the remarkable defiance of this group of women gave many people the courage to speak up and continue to organise against injustice.

Linocut by Hlavutelo Ngobeni (Artist Proof Studio)

AUGUST 2022

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A GARMENT FACTORY OCCUPATION IN EGYPT (2006)

“Here are the Women! Where are the men?”

This was a famous chant by women workers during the strike wave that swept through Egypt between 2006 and 2008. During this time, women workers organised in large numbers, initiating strikes, and mobilising men to join them. This strike wave is seen as a precursor to the Arab Spring, in which women also played a prominent role.

As part of the 2006-2008 strike wave, women at the Mansura-España garment factory led a factory occupation in April 2007. Hearing that the factory would be shut down and the land sold to a property developer, the factory’s 150 workers declared a strike, taking over the factory and sleeping on the factory floor. 75% of these workers were women.

The workers refused to give in to intimidation by managers who threatened to fabricate prostitution charges against the women workers for sleeping in the same building as men who were not their husbands. The workers also criticised trade union officials who entered into agreements on their behalf that the occupation would disband in return for short-term gains and empty promises. Despite the intense pressure they faced to end the occupation, including from police, the workers held out for two months after securing back payment of bonuses, as well as written guarantees that the factory would not close and that there would be no victimisation for the strike action.

Through this factory occupation and the many other forms of worker organising that took place across the country, Egyptian women emerged as leaders and organisers in their workplaces, unions and communities.

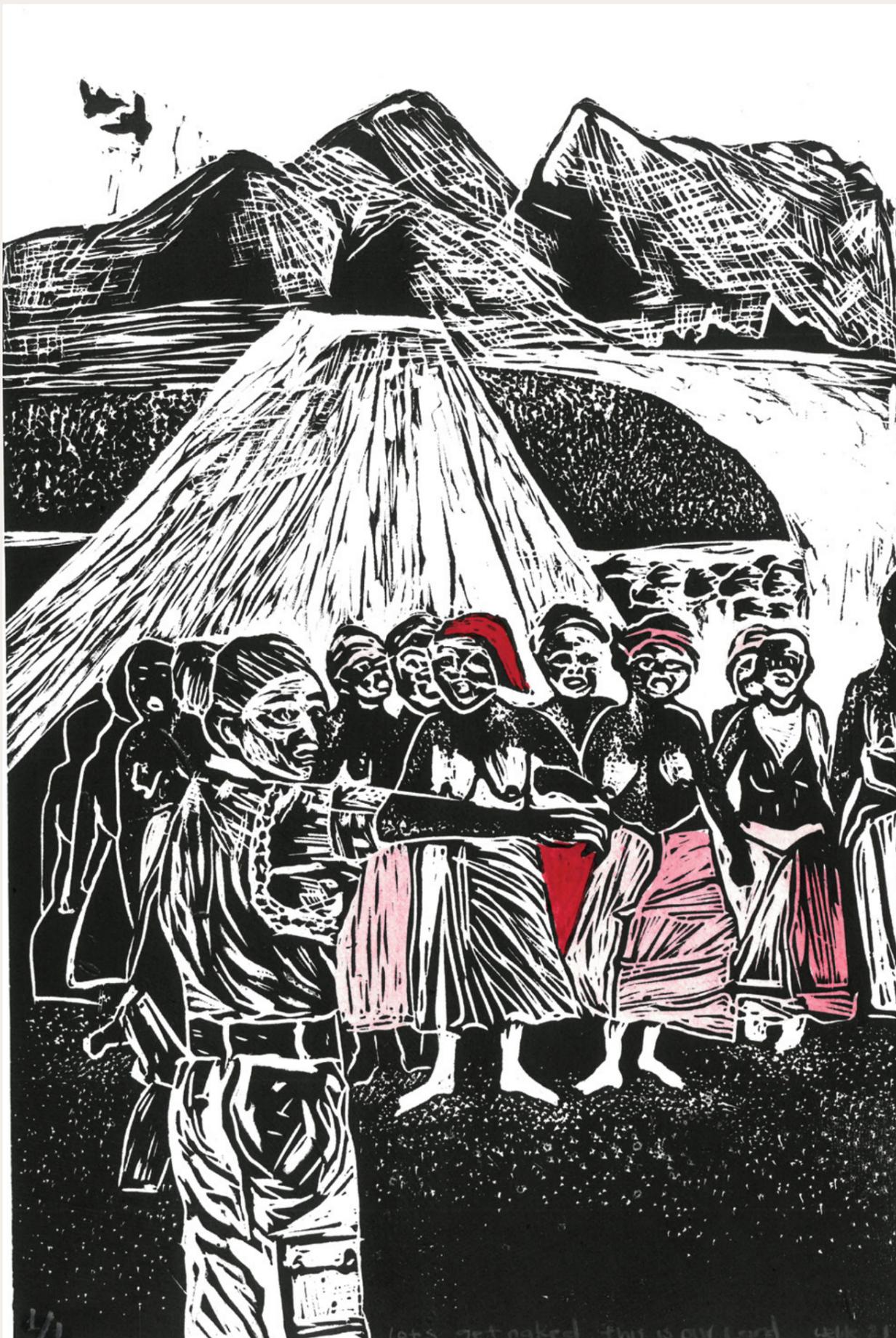
Linocut by Lesego Ditshego (Artist Proof Studio)



SEPTEMBER 2022

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A PROTEST AGAINST LAND DISPOSSESSION IN UGANDA (2012)



In April 2012, a group of over 60 women in the Amuru District in Uganda led a protest against their eviction from land being sold by the government to the Madhvani Group, a Ugandan conglomerate who wanted to establish a sugarcane plantation and factory. The community insisted that this land was their ancestral home and should remain communal, contesting the decision to declare the land vacant and allocate it to private investors.

In front of local government representatives and surveyors from the company, the women stripped naked and chanted “lobowa!”, meaning “our land”. They were supported by men from the community who waved spears and threw objects. This naked protest chased the representatives away. When President Museveni declared that he would visit the area to settle the dispute because the land was owned by the government, the women threatened, “If he comes, we will do an abomination, we will strip naked again to show our anger”. This protest was a source of inspiration for a series of successive naked protests against land grabbing by private companies in the Amuru District.

Undressing in public is a powerful and ancient form of resistance in Acholi culture. When women strip in anger, it is believed to invoke terrifying curses which can only be lifted through the offering of apologies and rituals. It is also used to provoke feelings of shame in the offender.

Through weaponising their bodies as a tool of intimidation and resistance, women have played a leading role in defending their communities and fighting back against land dispossession.

Linocut by Welile Dube (Artist Proof Studio)

OCTOBER 2022

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WOMEN WORKERS LEAD THE STRIKE AGAINST SHOPRITE IN NAMIBIA (2020-21)

In December 2020, workers in Namibia took on Shoprite Holdings Ltd, the largest supermarket chain in Africa. Women made up the majority of the workers who organised a nationwide strike against Shoprite, demanding wage increases, job security, and the introduction of housing and transport allowances.

The strike persisted for a month, and inspired worker-community solidarity in the form of consumer boycotts and protests which shut down Shoprite stores around the country. Because the strikes and boycotts were so widespread, striking workers who ran out of transport money and could not travel to their branch could join demonstrations at nearby outlets. After refusing to budge and even illegally hiring scab labour to undermine the strike, Shoprite eventually agreed to wage increases, backpay, and late shift allowances.

Shoprite has a history of exploitative labour practices and union-bashing activity, including offering pay increases to non-unionised workers to encourage workers to leave their union. Workers have spoken out about discriminatory treatment from managers, limited breaks, and unpaid overtime. Many of the workers are “Permanent Part-Timers” who are kept on recurring short-term contracts for years, and do not have access to the protections and benefits of permanent employees. Time and again, workers have had to go on strike only to receive meager increases, while the company’s executives take home millions.

There is still a long road in the fight against capitalist exploitation, particularly in the context of increasing casual and informal work. Women make up a large percentage of informal and casual sector workers, and will therefore continue to be at the forefront of this struggle. The women-led strike against Shoprite Namibia is an important example of industrial action and community solidarity, from which future worker struggles should draw lessons and courage.

Linocut by Gugulethu Mnguni (Artist Proof Studio)



NOVEMBER 2022

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ORGANISING IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (2020-PRESENT)

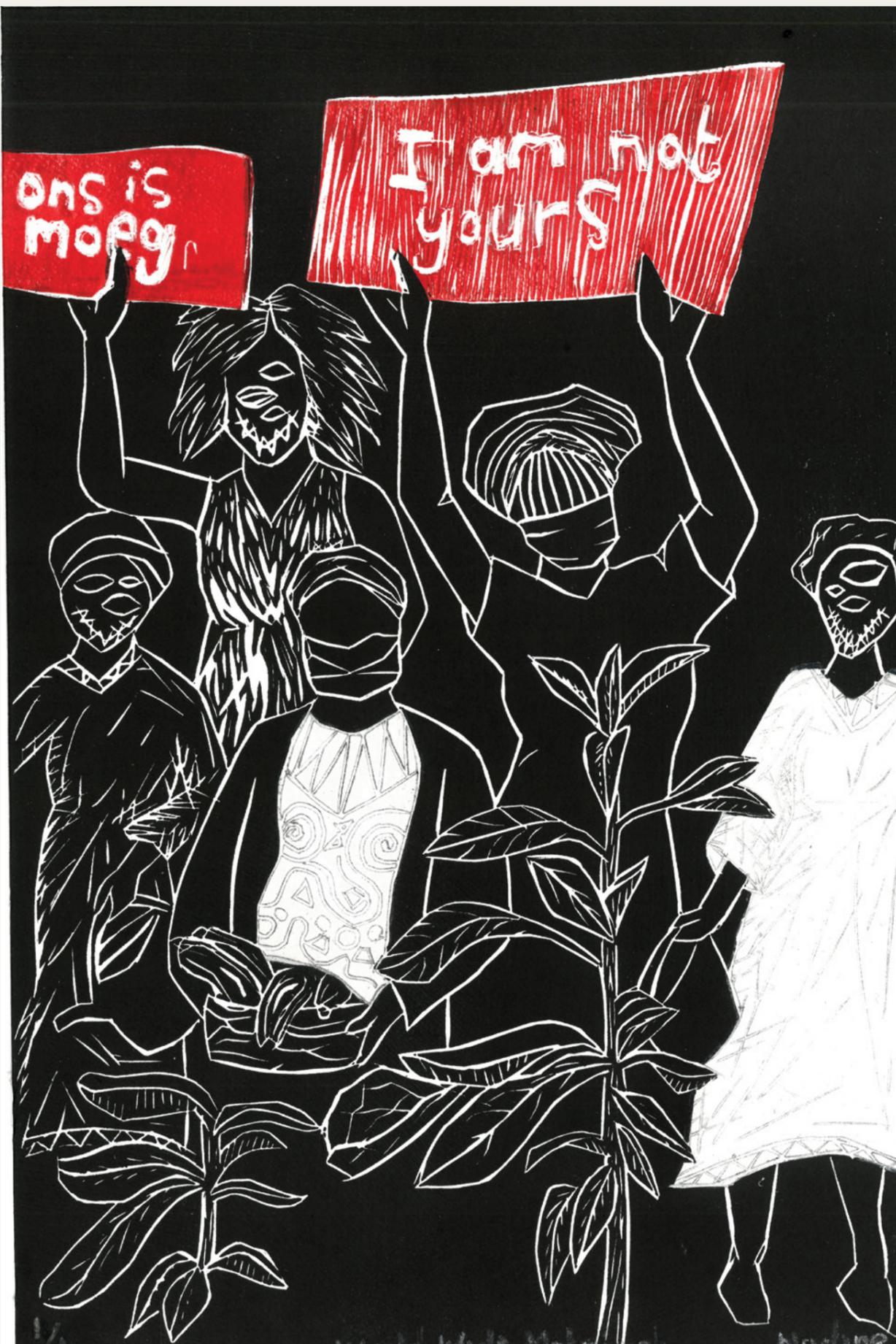
The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened and exposed the inequalities of capitalist society. This moment has also made clear that women play critical organising roles in sustaining and caring for their communities. Women have been on the frontlines in the pandemic, not only as workers in healthcare, on farms, in retail and other industries, but also as community organisers.

Across Africa and all over the world, women have been the vanguard in the fight against COVID-19, providing care and services in their homes and communities. They have started community gardens and community kitchens to combat hunger and food insecurity, and have led the struggle for social grants.

As the coronavirus has spread across the world, many countries have registered increased cases of Gender-Based Violence. Once again, women have been at the forefront in the response to this “shadow pandemic”, mobilising mass protests and international solidarity. In May 2020, women in South Sudan shared their experiences of rape and sexual violence through the #SouthSudaneseSurvivor campaign. In June 2020, Nigerian activists started the #WeAreTired campaign to pressure their government to respond to GBV. The Namibian #ShutItAllDown protests against GBV and femicide that began in October 2020 captured global attention, with women declaring “ons is moeg” (“we are tired” in Afrikaans). These are only a few examples of many women-led actions and movements against GBV on the African continent in the context of COVID-19.

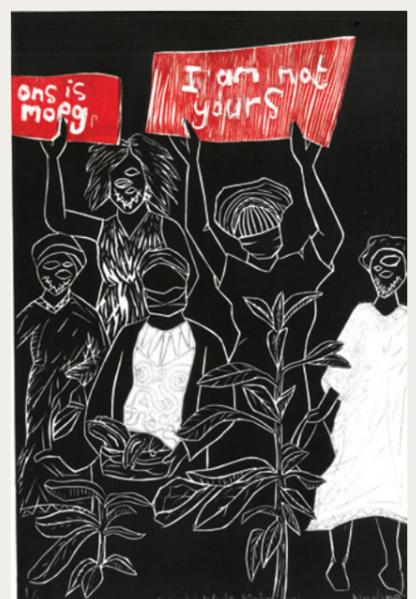
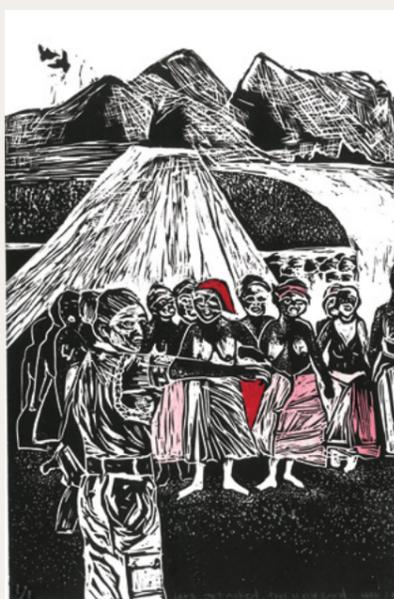
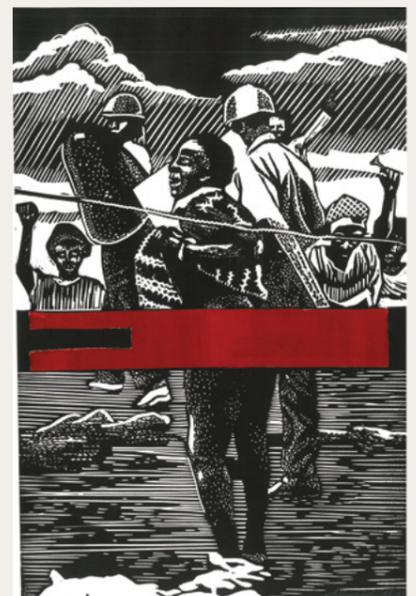
There are many lessons to learn from women-led struggles – including the importance of prioritising care and sustainable organising. Crucially, through their resistance, women have refused to be undermined or made invisible, and have shown that they are a force to be reckoned with!

Linocut by Nadine Mathenjwa (Artist Proof Studio)



DECEMBER 2022

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Artist Proof Studio

The artworks in this calendar were produced in collaboration with Artist Proof Studio (APS), a Johannesburg-based community arts education centre that specialises in printmaking.

With special thanks to the artists who contributed to this publication: Lesego Ditshego, Welile Dube, Nadine Mathenjwa, Gugulethu Mnguni, Hlavutelo Ngobeni, and Phillipah Rumano.



The International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) is a support organisation dedicated to research, education, training, the production of popular materials, and the provision of reflective spaces for working class movements in Southern Africa.

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