

The Institute of Current World Affairs

4 WEST WHEELLOCK STREET
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE 03755

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

Author: Griffin, Sharon F.
Title: ICWA Letters - SubSaharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X
Imprint: ICWA, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Subjects: Europe/Russia; East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa; The Americas

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ICWA LETTERS

ISSN 1083-429X

ICWA Letters are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755.

The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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ICWA LETTERS

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Dare to Cross the Line In Bloemfontein

BLOEMFONTEIN, South Africa

August 1996

By Sharon F. Griffin

As I left my Durban apartment building for the last time, a 60-ish man with a beard, glasses and an egg-shaped body rode the elevator with me. Eyeing my big bags, he asked: "Where are you going?" I answered, "Bloemfontein." Without pause, he said: "The Orange Free State!!! You should know that there are no oranges there, nothin' is free and it's in quite a state."

I was not surprised to hear my elevator companion's retort. I'd heard plenty of less-than-complimentary editorials about the Free State and its capital city of Bloemfontein before setting foot here. The stereotype of the Free State is that it's conservative, dull and an outpost for right-wing Afrikaners — the architects of apartheid.

Marge, a plump, wobbly grandmother living on the fourth floor of my Durban apartment building, has four children residing in the Free State. "It's bitterly cold there in the winter and blistering hot in the summer," she said and then advised, "because you're going in winter, you'd better go to Woolworth's and buy some thermal underwear." Marge told the truth about winters here. In early July, it was shivering cold in Bloemfontein, with temperature dipping to four degrees below zero (centigrade). In Harrismith, a city three hours east of the capital, it was snowing.

"With Afrikaners you know exactly where you stand. If they hate you, you know it. The English are sneaky," he said. "They smile in your face and stab you in the back."

A Johannesburg journalist teased that it takes no more than three days to learn all there is to know about Bloemfontein, and he suggested that

I use the rest of my time to write an epic novel. He wasn't far off the mark. The city's publicity association gave me a map that features 25 points of interest in Bloemfontein. The total walking time between all the points is one and a half hours; the total distance is three miles. The "Historical Walkabout" includes stops at a fire station, a railway station, court houses, military forts, war museums and a bronze statue of James Barry Munnik Hertzog, a self-confessed white supremacist and founder of the National Party.

The journalist, who is black, added that he preferred Afrikaner people to people of English descent. "With Afrikaners you know exactly where you stand. If they hate you, you know it. The English are sneaky," he said. "They smile in your face and stab you in the back."

Afrikaners are the white "natives" of South Africa. They are a blend of Dutch, German and French Huguenot ancestry. Their roots date back to 1652 when Jan van Riebeck, a seafarer with the Dutch East India Company, arrived on the Cape coast. Van Riebeck and his company, in their thirst for land, destroyed the social and economic order of the Khoikhoi, the indigenous people who had lived in the region for centuries. As the Dutch East India Company released men from its service, the "free burghers" gradually spread into the interior of South Africa. These wandering farmers lived in virtual isolation and developed their own vernacular form of Dutch, Afri-

kaans. They also separated themselves from black inhabitants living in the interior, in effect sowing the first seeds of apartheid.

Given the history of the Afrikaner, I wasn't quite sure how to interpret the journalist's perception of them. His comment reminded me of a similar view held by African-Americans regarding Southern whites. Southern blacks who have migrated to other parts of the U.S. often speak, almost in nostalgic terms, of how they prefer to deal with openly racist whites, as opposed to white bigots who are subtle and covert in their practices. I shared the same view for a long time. But now I strongly believe that there is no difference between naked racism and racism clothed in subtleties. Racism is wrong, and it hurts, deeply, regardless of whether the perpetrator is in-your-face or behind-your-back — and I've experienced both.

You, South Africa's version of *People* magazine, recently carried a story titled "Bloemfontein, SA's *hitty city." (the asterisk stands for an unprintable letter). The writer visited Bloemfontein after the release of a CD on which a local crooner sings the "Bloemfontein Blues." David Kramer, the song writer, basically bashed the city. The *You* writer wanted to get a feel for how the local folks reacted. In a word, she reported that the locals were, well, mad.

I understand their feelings. That's exactly how folk in my hometown of Winston-Salem, N.C. reacted when hotshots from New York moved in to take over the management of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco and one of them had the nerve to describe the city as "bucolic," a word that, to make matters worse, most folk weren't familiar with. The "Yankees" also complained that Winston-Salem had no arts, culture and, worst of all, no establishments that sold liquor-by-the-drink. People in Winston-Salem still fume over the "bucolic" slight, and the incident happened sometime in the early '80s, maybe even late '70s. So I suspect Bloemfontein locals won't soon forget David Kramer.

So far, both the white and black people I've met here are friendly, courteous and helpful. Certainly, the level of customer service here is far superior to that I've experienced in Durban and other parts of KwaZulu-Natal. The friendliness may be due to the fact that Bloemfontein is relatively small. An estimated 300,150 people live here, compared to more than two million in the Durban metropolitan area. Whatever the reason, it's refreshing to meet people who smile. Try to find a happy face in KwaZulu-Natal; it's like trying to find the hidden hippo in a three-dimensional hologram picture. I recall a conversation I had with a sales clerk at a checkout counter in Durban. She happened to be coloured.¹ "You're American," the clerk

said, surprised. "But you look like me. Shame! People must treat you bad, like you're a local."

When my mother visited last summer, I made a reservation for us to spend a night in a "traditional" Zulu hut at a tourist camp in Ulundi, the heart of Zululand. I believed it would be a good experience for my mother, a middle-school teacher for 30 years. She could report back to her 6th-grade students. It was a disaster. The one Zulu woman on duty hardly uttered a word to us. Her body language said, "bug off." I tolerated getting the cold shoulder. But doing without our "traditional" dinner, which I'd paid for in advance? No way! Two other foreign tourists staying at the camp appeared worried that they, too, might not get fed. The four of us sniggered when one of the men pointed to a flower pot where a chicken had laid an egg. "Maybe that's our meal," he teased.

Durban is also full of what I call "whining whites." These are people who unashamedly complain about everything to do with South Africa — crime, the devalued rand and, most of all, black people. I strongly suspect that they secretly hope that the black-led government will fail the nation so that they can proclaim, "Aha! We were right! The blacks cannot lead." A former neighbor, named Sharon, is typical. She is 33, divorced, and the mother of a 12-year-old. I made the mistake of having a beer with her at a bar. The more beer she drank, the more she spewed racist comments. That was the night I first heard the expression, "Revenge of the Dark People (RDP)." The expression is a twisted corruption of the government's plan for uplifting the people and economy of South Africa, which is called the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

Since arriving in Bloemfontein, I haven't run into white people complaining about anything — not blacks, not the falling rand, not even crime. I asked a black community activist about this apparent lack of negativism. His response was that blacks and whites, most of whom are Afrikaners, get along well. That's not because local blacks and whites have lots in common. Instead, he said it's because black people are invisible to the whites, except when they're doing work for them. "White people have no idea where we live or how we live," he said. "Most have never been to a township."

In Durban, a different scenario exists. Whites come into direct contact with blacks — Africans, coloureds and Indians — on more than a master-servant level. First, many blacks live in central Durban, which two years ago was off limits to them. Moreover, many blacks, particularly South African Indians, own housing in upmarket, suburban neighborhoods that once were the exclusive domain of whites. Indian businesses dominate an entire section of the city center,

"Try to find a happy face in KwaZulu-Natal; it's like trying to find the hidden hippo in a three-dimensional hologram picture."

1. Coloureds are South Africans of mixed descent.

and African traders operate their micro-enterprises on Durban's two main streets — West, which leads into the city and Smith, which leads out. Add to this scenario the fact that whites work side-by-side with blacks who are as competent, competitive and highly trained as they themselves are. In other words, one can see shifts in power in Durban, not only politically but economically and socially. Blacks are crossing the line in all facets of life, and in many instances whites feel threatened and overwhelmed.

In Bloemfontein, it's another story. Whites clearly retain control. Politically, the black-led African National Congress (ANC) controls the province. ANC representatives comprise 80 percent of the Free State Legislature.² However, this political clout has not yet had a ripple effect. For instance, fewer than five percent of the people residing in Bloemfontein are black. Unlike Durban, where large numbers of blacks settled in the city after the April 1994 elections, Bloemfontein remains the reserve of whites. There are no recent figures to back up my observation and claim. However, South Africa's 1991 census found that 126,867 people lived in Bloemfontein. Of that total, whites numbered 111,374, whereas census takers counted only 10,736 blacks. Coloureds numbered 21,689, while Asians numbered a mere 426.³

That blacks are out-of-sight and therefore out-of-mind is intentional. That's what apartheid was all about — ethnic separateness. Bloemfontein is the product of more than 100 years of planned ethnic separation. The Cape Town-to-Johannesburg railway line is the barrier that divides blacks and whites. It's both a physical and social boundary, separating whites in the city from blacks and coloureds in townships on the periphery.⁴ Blacks once occupied an area of the city called Waaihoek. But this area was demolished in 1941. Sadly, an 80-year-old, original part of Bloemfontein disappeared without a trace.

Upper- and middle-income blacks are trickling into the city, but Bloemfontein is expected to remain ethnically segregated for a long time to come. This is because the least expensive white-owned houses are out of the price range of most blacks. The area in which the least expensive houses are located also happens to be where whites are most opposed to the "greying" of neighborhoods. This is the conclusion of P.S. Krige, who authored a 1991 report titled "Homes Apart: South Africa's Segregated Cities."

A 1994 survey of the Free State found that the average estimated value of a house in which whites live was R117,479 (\$26,700). By comparison, the average estimated value of a house in which blacks live was R11,197 (\$2,544). Equally relevant is the fact that Free State blacks are clustered in what demographers describe as "elementary occupations," which basically means they are unskilled laborers. The net monthly earnings of workers in this occupational category falls between R100 (\$23) and R499 (\$113).

To give an idea of the purchasing power of R100 (\$23), I saved my most recent grocery bill, which amounted to R87.42 (\$19.86). I bought 17 items: ground beef, one can of baked beans, a box of Rice Krispies, a small jar of mayonnaise, a quart of orange juice, bananas, a pint of milk, tomatoes, pears, oranges, a small bag of carrots, wheat crackers, yogurt, a loaf of bread, shaved smoked ham, havarti cheese and a box of no-name tissues. I am one person. The average black household includes more than four people.

"Blacks are crossing the line in all facets of life, and in many instances whites feel threatened and overwhelmed."

Black-owned enterprises in Bloemfontein are the exception rather than the rule. The few businesses that do exist are in no position to dent soaring unemployment, which is 24.4 percent overall and, among blacks, 27 percent, compared to 7.4 percent for whites. The majority of black business people are informal traders — hawkers of fruit and vegetables, clothing, shoe racks and the like. These micro-enterprises operate along city sidewalks. There are very few medium-size businesses owned by blacks and coloureds, and no manufacturing businesses.

In effect, little opportunity exists for blacks in terms of jobs. Forty-eight percent of individuals living in the Free State are poor and nearly all of the poor are black. The regional director of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, Teboho Loate (pronounced Lo-WAH-tee), told me that most poor people are not criminals and violence is not endemic to black people. However, he emphasized that poverty has spawned criminal behavior, which is true in other parts of the world as well.

The Free State is predominantly an agricultural region where approximately one-third of South Africa's wool, meat and grain is produced. Since the first democratic elections in 1994 there's been a mass migration of black and coloured people to Bloemfontein. Most of

2. In January 1912, one of the most historic events in South Africa happened in Bloemfontein. More than 60 prominent black leaders from across the country gathered in the city to establish the South African Native National Congress, which in 1923 became the African National Congress. I've found no mention of the event, however, in any of the literature handed to me at the local publicity office or at museums.

3. The number of Indians in the Free State is minuscule. An ordinance promulgated by the Free State *Volksraad* (people's assembly; parliament) in 1890 forbade Indians from settling or trading in the province. This provision was lifted only in 1986.

4. The reason I refer here to blacks and coloureds is because here in the Free State coloured people take exception to being part of the generic definition of black, which includes Africans, Indians and coloureds.

them have migrated to informal settlements on the fringes of the city. There are two ways in which these informal settlements are created. First, many black and coloured people are evicted by white farmers from their farms and their first option is to seek opportunities in the city. The evictions can be attributed to the fear of new laws being promulgated to protect labor tenants living in almost slavery-type conditions on white farms. Second, many come from rural areas with a high expectation of finding a job and quality education for their children. Rarely are their dreams realized. Instead, they remain poor, if not poorer.

Free State legislators are currently hoping to create jobs and spur development in the metropolitan area by lobbying for the relocation of the nation's parliamentary capital, which is Cape Town, to Bloemfontein. Bloemfontein is, and always has been, the judicial capital of South Africa. One of their arguments is that it is the most central city in the country, and this is why Patrick "Terror" Lekota, the premier of the province, believes that it is the perfect location for the nation's parliamentary capital.

In making such a bid, I believe that Lekota and Free State legislators must change the widely-held perception that the Free State is a prime domain of right-wing Afrikaners. This perception is deeply rooted in historical fact. Afrikaners fought and killed for this land. Their quest for cultural, political and economic self-determination resulted in land seizures, social upheaval and bloodshed. Their past is kept alive through monuments, streets names and buildings that memorialize Afrikaner "heroes" who oppressed and marginalized the black majority. President Brand Street, described in local literature as the greatest historical street in South Africa, is named after Johannes Henricus Brand, the Orange Free State president who in 1865 sent commandos to wage war against Moshoeshoe, the first paramount chief of the Sotho. This is similar to U.S. history, where American war "heroes" oppressed and marginalized American Indians in the pursuit of expansionist policies.

The legal effects of apartheid are dead. What remains is an invisible line that divides blacks and whites even in the absence of forced separation. One Sunday afternoon I visited the Oliewenhuis Art Gallery, former residence of governor generals and state presidents of South Africa. There on display was a wonderful exhibit depicting the birth, life and death of Shaka Zulu. Behind the neo-Cape-Dutch manor house a pianist played classical music. Listeners bit into fluffy pastries, sipped teas and sprawled on a perfectly manicured lawn.

There were no black, coloured or Indian people in the crowd, either inside or outside the gallery. I'm sure that black people are now free to visit the gallery, but that's

not really the issue. The issue is whether black people are made to feel that they can come and go there. South African blacks and whites now face the daunting task of having to mix and mingle with each other at different social levels, especially at public recreational facilities. For adult people who have not had the opportunity to socialize with each other, it is a very difficult thing to do psychologically.

One can still see, as at the Oliewenhuis Art Gallery, that people of a particular ethnic group are more prominent than members of other ethnic groups. This is true for various reasons. First, the now-repealed Group Areas Act restricted different ethnic groups to specific areas. If public facilities are available to people in areas formerly designated for them, they are still more likely to visit there. Second, some blacks are loathe to visit public facilities in areas formerly designated as exclusively for whites. Black people were subdued and controlled by whites for many decades and some find it very difficult to deal with controlling white attitudes. Moreover, many black people in South Africa remain very suspicious of white people.

This will be an ongoing process in South Africa. I have found that at mixed social functions members of various ethnic groups gravitate to each other, in the same way that black and white students on American college campuses tend to segregate themselves by race. Thirty years after America was supposed to have had equality across all levels of society, the problem of blacks and whites mixing and mingling at social levels still exists. South Africa is no different and it may take more than 30 years for whites and blacks to deal with their attitudes toward each other.

However, South Africa is very different from America in one important respect. African-Americans make up 11.8 percent of the U.S. population, while blacks in South Africa comprise 87.9 percent of the population. This configuration may force whites to change their attitudes towards blacks or flee the country, as they're doing now at a rapid rate.

Having enjoyed freedom in the U.S. for the last three decades, I found myself in a rather invidious position when I visited the Oliewenhuis Art Gallery and was the only black person present. After touring the inside of the gallery, I decided not to sit and have a cup of coffee outside. I didn't feel comfortable. Had I been with another black person I might have felt differently.

People can make you feel uneasy no matter how free you are. I am free to go anywhere in my all-American hometown. However, when I come across neighborhoods in which I see the Confederate flag flapping high from a pole in a private yard, I know I have crossed an invisible line and, suddenly, I'm as conscious of the American South's shameful past as I am of my beating heart.

"Black people were subdued and controlled by whites for many decades and some find it very difficult to deal with controlling white attitudes."

Bloemfontein: “City of Roses”

Bloemfontein celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. South Africa’s history is being rewritten to include the stories of previously excluded people and to correct historical lies and distortions. The story of Bloemfontein that follows has been taught to generations of South Africans and the story begins in 1840.

That is when *voortrekker* (literally, ‘front trekker’)⁵ Johannes Nicolaas Brits, established a farm he called “Bloemfontein,” which means flowering spring, in reference to the abundance of clover found growing in the shade of the spring.

In 1854, the British allowed the trekkers to establish the Orange Free State, an independent Boer (Afrikaner) republic. Blacks were not party to this agreement, which is known as the Bloemfontein Convention. Approximately 50 years later, after the British defeated the Boers in the South African war in 1902, they annexed this republic and named it the Orange River Colony.

The War Museum in Bloemfontein depicts the Afrikaner perspective of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 - 1902. The exhibits are informative, well-presented and highly emotive. One gets a real sense of the grief of the approximately 26,000 Boers banished to camps and forts in Natal, the Cape coast, St. Helena, Bermuda, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and India as prisoners of war. Meanwhile, the fate of the black people who “inadvertently” became embroiled in the so-called ‘White Man’s War’ is confined to a single panel in the museum. It explains what jobs black people performed for the British and for the Boers, and also notes that British records maintain that 14,154 black people died in concentration camps. Which ethnic groups they belonged to, how they “inadvertently” became embroiled in the war and what became of them is a matter of speculation. They are treated as a footnote to the war.

I also visited the local National Museum. A write-up in the A to Z Visitor’s Guide to Bloemfontein, the City of Roses, lists several museum highlights. They include, for example, the only complete skeleton of an *Euskelosaurus* dinosaur, the world-famous Florisbad skull fragment and a working bee hive.

The guide makes no mention, however, of an exhibit depicting the traditions and culture of the indigenous black people who have lived and worked in the region for centuries. Nevertheless, I decided to go, with the hope that I’d find such information. There is a section of the museum that features certain aspects of the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Venda and Tswana people, as well as Khoikhoi (known to whites originally as Bushmen). But I did not learn much. Beadwork worn by the respective ethnic groups, clay pots, smoking pipes and other such artifacts characterize the displays.

In the area that features lifelike Bushmen figures, the curator also chose to display a collection of ceramic salt-and-pepper shakers. There must be more than 50 shakers in all shapes, sizes and designs. One ceramic design is of a woman with pink skin and yellow hair laying on her back. The figure wears a bikini bottom but nothing on its oversized breasts. Actually, the left breast is the salt dispenser and the right, the pepper. Finding no panels to explain this display, I was left to imagine its significance and also contemplate how many more curiosities I might come across during my time here in the City of Roses.

“Meanwhile, the fate of the black people who “inadvertently” became embroiled in the so-called ‘White Man’s War’ is confined to a single panel in the museum.”

5. Boers who trekked out of the Cape Colony in 1830s to set up an independent republic away from British rule.

The Free State at a Glance

Premier: Patrick "Terror" Lekota

Capital: Bloemfontein (motto: *Floreat. Let it Flourish*)

Area (sq km): 129,437

Population, 1994: 2.7 million (2.3 million blacks, 372,158 whites, 72,832 coloureds, and 2,642 Asians.)

Population Density (persons/sq km): 21.7

Percent in urban areas: 73.7%

Labor force, 1993: 1.1 million

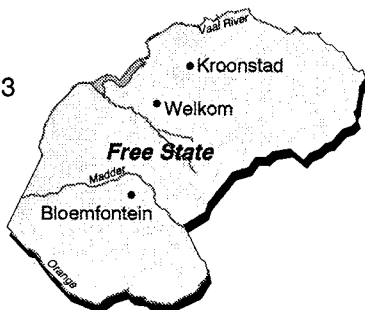
Unemployment rate, 1994: 24.4 %

Income per capita: R2,419 (U.S.\$550)

Percentage of total South African GDP: 7.2%

Adult literacy, 1995: 61.4%

Individuals living in poverty: 48%



There's more:

- An estimated **97.4** percent of white households in the Free State have running tap water, compared to **19.1** percent of black households.

- **10.2** percent of blacks have a home telephone, **80** percent of whites do.

- **99.8** percent of white households use electricity to cook. Most black households depend on wood, kerosene and coal; only **31.7** percent of black households use electricity.

- Most whites (**70.1** percent) have access to a medical aid benefit fund. Only **5.9** percent of blacks have a medical-aid benefit fund.



Institute of Current World Affairs

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an english teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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