



# Pictures to rewrite history by

*Women by Women: 50 Years of Women's Photography in South Africa*, published by Wits University Press, showcases photographs of and by South African women. The idea was hatched by Minister of Arts and Culture Pallo Jordan who approached photographer George Hallett to make the project a reality. Hallett approached journalist Robin Comley and photographer Neo Ntsoma to help him source and edit the spread of photographs. The most difficult task was to find the work of those no longer living and this involved archival work by the Iziko South African National Gallery's Pam Warne. The book aims to do several things: recover the work of women photographers of the past which has been forgotten; showcase the work of women now working in the profession and exhibit the captured lives of ordinary mothers, sisters, aunts and daughters as well as heroes and icons.

# Being woman

by Neo Ntsoma

Photography has the ability to change people's ideas and their minds as well as change their actions. I guess that's one of the things that keep us getting up in the morning and going out with our cameras. I've never had the luxury of taking a chance that could result in failure. I've always tried to play it safe in so many ways. I've done a lot of jobs that didn't interest me just to prove I could do the stuff that guys did. But this project gave me the freedom to exercise my rights and beliefs as a woman.

The first leg of the preparation process was the most challenging. From creating a database of all the photographers that have made a significant contribution in the 50 years of South African women's photography, to choosing relevant issues and subjects to be highlighted and celebrated, was the greatest challenge of all.

These decisions involved a lot of research and co-ordination and negotiations, and at times it raised a lot of unpleasant debates among the editorial team. By the end of the project, I had learned so much about myself and my role as a woman in the media industry and I had also gained an enormous amount of knowledge on a variety of issues affecting women in my country.

It made me appreciate my worth as a woman in this industry even more. There was obviously a constant reminder of the fact that what we were doing was much bigger than just putting together a book of photographs, but actually rewriting our history as women in this country. As we all know, it's practically impossible to try and accommodate or please everybody. We knew that there was going to be criticism of some sort at the end of the project, especially when dealing with women's issues.

I guess being a practising photographer as well as part of the editorial team, was also one of my biggest challenges. I knew that if anything was to go wrong, I was likely to be the first one to feel the heat from my colleagues. I really tried my best to practice fairness whenever necessary during the editing process. There was an obvious imbalance of race in the submissions we received and somehow we tried to balance that by including student portfolios of some of South Africa's upcoming black female photographers. I also felt somehow it was my responsibility to try and represent my sisters so they can also claim their place in the industry.

I'm grateful to all the photographers involved for contributing their work and trusting us with it. The book gives an insight into conditions affecting women in this country. Some of the pictures will bring a smile to your face, like Jenny Altschuler's picture of a black domestic worker kissing a white boy and Ruth Motau's picture of a Soweto woman pinning a poster of Nelson Mandela to a washing line in celebration of the ANC victory in the first democratic elections. Others will bring a tear to your



eye, like Debbie Yazbek's "A Fall of Sparrows" series of pictures showing the suffering of two HIV/Aids-infected mothers. All the pictures in the book will make you stop and think – as a photographer and as a person.

On that note, Penny Siopis says in her foreword: "This publication cannot be absolutely representative of photographers and subjects alike. No single book can." We just tried our best as editors to show a range of perspectives in both content and types of photographic practice by women photographers of South Africa.

**"It would have been fitting if the iconic image of the 1956 march had been taken by a woman photographer," says artist Penny Siopis, who wrote the introduction for the book, "it was not and this is too bad." But photographer Neo Ntsoma covered the re-enactment of the march in 2006. Ntsoma reflects: "Covering the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March was not only an honour, but an unforgettable experience. It was humbling to see thousands of women joined in one spirit to commemorate the day that made such a significant impact on our history. Women came from all corners of South Africa, just as they did 50 years ago, marching down the streets of Pretoria to the Union Buildings to hand over a memorandum to the President. United for one single cause, this time not against oppressive laws, but to ensure that every woman and every girl tastes the fruits of liberation."**



Above  
**Jenny Altschuler**  
Busride, 1998

Right  
**Debbie Yazbek**  
Tony and Evelyn, Auckland Park, Johannesburg

Far right  
**Tina Smith**  
Fancy Galata and Sylvia Mduyelwa, Cape Town



On Page 56  
**Jillian Edelstein**

**Fikile Mlotshwa, comforter and briefer, was employed by the TRC to help testifying victims.**



## Unrecorded, hidden or lost

by Pam Warne

The paucity of research on both black and white South African women photographers suggests that the lives of many female professionals and amateurs have remained unrecorded, their work hidden in archives or lost. But “the most telling absences” in our photographic histories, as South African National Gallery director Marilyn Martin has observed, are black women.

On the other hand, black women frequently found themselves in front of the lens, if not behind it. It is not without significance that the earliest extant photograph taken in southern Africa is the 1845 daguerrotype, *Native woman of Sofala-Mozambique*.

Black women were frequently stripped of individual identity and offered up as representatives of an exotic or inferior culture for scientific scrutiny or prurient attention. It was only when they became paying customers, as demonstrated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century studio portraits compiled by Santu Mofokeng in his project, *The Black Photo Album* (1997 ongoing), that they gained greater control over the manner in which they were represented.

One is bound to interrogate the intentions and power relations in photographic encounters where black men and women become the subjects of ‘art’ and portrait photography by white women photographers. For three women whose work is illustrated in this book, Constance Stuart Larrabee, Anne Fischer and Jansje Wissema, representations of the ‘other’ were primary in their choice of subject matter in their personal, if not in their commercial portrait work.

All three were immigrants. Larrabee and Fischer received photographic training in Germany in the 1930s, while Wissema was trained by Fischer. Their work reflects the influence of the new documentary style in Germany that coincided with the development of the first commercial 35mm cameras and the more professional, but compact, Rolleiflex camera, to which all three photographers had a life-long loyalty.

Between 1936 and 1949, apart from a period when she worked as South Africa’s first woman war correspondent in World War 2, Larrabee photographed the Ndebele, Sotho, Xhosa, and other peoples of South Africa. This work was not a scientific endeavour, but was motivated by aesthetic admiration: “I photographed the African people because they were wonderful looking and their culture was so interesting to me. It was just the most wonderful material for my Rolleiflex,” she is quoted as saying. Interestingly, the most intimate of Larrabee’s work is the 1947 series of the *Nagmaal*, the Afrikaner religious gathering that took place four times a year.

Anne Fischer (1915–1986) established a reputation as a very fine portrait photographer and master of lighting and, like Larrabee in Johannesburg, ran a flourishing commercial business. By the 1960s, Fischer was considered Cape Town’s pre-eminent wedding photographer. For her personal projects, she travelled alone to the former Transkei and Basutoland, probably during the 1940s and, closer to home, the mission village of Genadendal.

The lives of Anne Fischer and Jansje Wissema (1920–1975) intersected in 1947, when Fischer appointed Wissema as a trainee photographer and manager of her studio during a two-year absence. After Fischer’s return she worked freelance, undertook theatre photography at the University of Cape Town’s Little Theatre (as did Fischer) and even medical photography. Wissema is perhaps best known for her photographic celebration of the then soon to be demolished District Six.

In the silence surrounding black women photographers before the 1970s and 1980s, the name of Mabel Cetu (1910–1990) resounds like a bell. We are indebted

## Tribute, record, inspiration

by Robin Comley

As a tribute to the brave and pioneering women who have fought for this country’s freedom, *Women by Women* portrays them with respect and dignity. As a record of the immense talent among women photographers, it stands as the first publication of its kind. As an inspiration to young and aspiring women among us, it is an uplifting example of what is achievable. And as an exciting portrayal of our femininity, it is a sensuous and intelligent work of art.

Over 100 photographers were invited to submit work for the project commissioned by the Ministry of Arts and Culture to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Women’s March. The work of 75 women was selected and through these images we are able to glimpse some of the passions, fears and frustrations of these years. But the overall sense is one of women who know where they want to be.

Louise Gubb, one of the few women to have documented the violence of the 80s and 90s, makes very real in words and pictures the terror and hope of that era, while Gisele Wulfsohn’s elegant portrayals of women leaders present them in an understated style which tells us they are powerful individuals with nothing to prove.

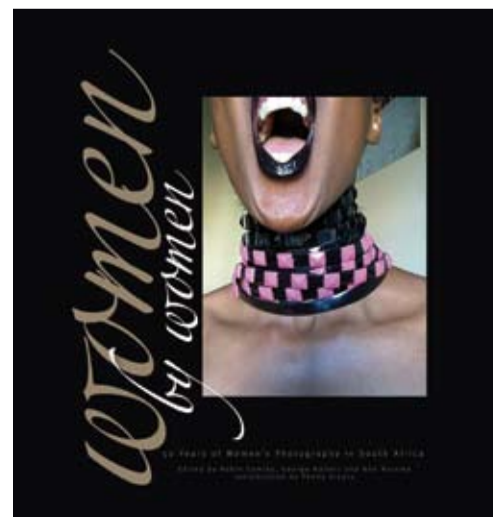
Neo Ntsoma, Nontsikelelo Veleko and Tracey Derrick are the edgy new faces of photography. Young, sexy and confident, they dare us to stand in their way.

Debbie Yazbek takes us on a journey beyond pain. Her Rembrandt-like image of a young daughter bathing her terminally ill mother is perhaps the most powerful in the book, steeped in compassion and sadness.

But for me the most inspiring image in the book is that of Dudu Zitha’s. She photographs a mother leaving her derelict basement home in Hillbrow carrying her tiny daughter who is dressed like a princess. Forced into unthinkable living conditions, this is a mother who will stop at nothing for her child. Courage, sacrifice, love and pride burst from the image ... a little speck of colour and beauty in a filthy dangerous street.

### Nadine Hutton

**Rosa Cooper and Cornelia Terblanche, a couple, live in a tiny wooden shack at Sonskuin Hoekie, a shelter in Pretoria North. Rosa is employed as a blockwoman at a butchershop but lost her sight when she developed cataracts. Now almost completely blind she cannot afford to travel to Johannesburg General Hospital to undergo a R70 operation. The same surgery in Pretoria would cost nearly R2 000.**



to the Port Elizabeth *Herald* columnist, Jimmy Matyu, for his affectionate recollections of the life and achievements of this photographer. He recounts how the Free State-born Cetu became a prominent figure in Port Elizabeth's White Location, first as a pioneering midwife and then as the first-trained, black woman photojournalist in the country, working for *Zonk* magazine. In 1958 she joined the *Golden City Post* and, although there is no record of her in the Bailey Photographic Archives, *Drum Magazine*. She later became a contributor to *Umsobomvu*, the Eastern Province *Herald's* weekly page, and the SABC's Radio Bantu. Widely known as Sis May, Cetu's social and political commitment to her community earned her the title Mother of the White Location. In 1978, the Khayamandi Town Council named the White Location Cetuville in her honour.

These women made significant contributions to the development of photography in South Africa and paved the way for the women photographers who have come after them. Many of them are remembered as remarkable women with powerful personalities and pioneering spirits. But others, in cities and in small towns across South Africa, remain either simply as names or are unknown, remembered only by friends or family. Much work is needed in order to remedy the absence of both black and white women photographers from the public domain in museum archives and history books and to reinsert their work into the history of South African photography.

*Excerpted from the essay in the book.*

Above right  
**Constance Larrabee**

Nagmaal, 1947

Below  
**Anne Fischer**

Untitled, Transkei, 1940s

Below right  
**Jansje Wissema**

Ruth, 1957

