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# GENDER, SOCIAL LOCATION AND FEMINIST POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Women bring life to this world and they have a duty to make sure that this life is preserved and protected. There is a need for us to come together regardless of our colour to look at the situation in the country and respond as women and mothers (Gertrude Shope, ANC Women's League President, April 1991).

Gender oppression is everywhere rooted in a material base and is expressed in socio-cultural traditions and attitudes all of which are supported and perpetuated by an ideology which subordinates women... Patriarchal rights, especially but not only with regard to family, land and the economy, need serious re-examination so that they are not entrenched or reinforced (Statement on the Emancipation of Women in South Africa, issued by the ANC National Executive Committee, May 2 1990).

Women have the added burdens of home-management and child-care irrespective of whether they are full-time housewives or employees. These two roles cannot be shirked by women no matter how much we cry for equality with men. There are special virtues God gave us as women to be effective home-managers and mothers - patience, tenderness of heart and insight (Abbie Mchunu, Inkatha Women's Brigade, 1985).

Opposition politics during the 1980s in South Africa has been dominated by organisations whose major objective has been to mobilise women for the national liberation struggle as opposed to mobilising them for women's liberation. In many ways, as I will argue below, this mobilisation process has the effect of reinforcing rather than challenging patriarchal relations of domination. Throwing the spotlight on these practices now is important because the transitional period has created the space for a feminist movement to emerge to challenge these existing forms of women's organisations for the first time since the 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

Since the unbanning of the ANC, SACP and PAC in February 1990, debates about women and politics have taken on a new dimension. It has finally become possible to extend the debate beyond whether feminism has any relevance to South African women's struggles, to what the shape of an indigenous feminism might be. This

paper is concerned with this issue, suggesting a conceptualisation of women's politics in South Africa which starts from the relationship between women's social location and their political identity. It also raises some key questions about the necessity and possibilities for a feminist core within the women's movement.

The first clear sign that such a shift was occurring was evident at the Malibongwe Conference, organised by the ANC and held in Holland in January 1990, just before the unbannings. This conference brought South African activists together with comrades from Cuba, the Phillipines and the PLO. Their experiences, combined with those of women in South Africa's neighbouring states, have provided crucial insights for South African women activists. In the wake of the Malibongwe Conference, women (at least within the ANC) have felt more confident about criticising the domination of the organisation by men and the marginalisation of women from decision-making. It has also become a cliché to claim that national liberation movements do not automatically guarantee women's emancipation.<sup>2</sup>

The Malibongwe Conference was followed in May 1990 by the issuing of a 'Statement on the Emancipation of Women in South Africa' by the National Executive Committee of the ANC (the 'May 2' document), the result of hard and energetic lobbying by feminist activists within the ANC. This statement recognises that

Women must take the lead in creating a non-sexist South Africa. They must move the ANC and the MDM to adopt policies and forms of organisation that facilitate the participation of women in the struggle that still lies before us.

This places the issue of the form and nature of women's organisation clearly on the agenda. For how can women 'move the ANC and MDM' (or any other political party, for that matter) if not by being strongly organised on the basis of their own *self-defined* interests? How can the ANC Women's League transform itself from being a vehicle for the greater involvement of women in the anti-apartheid struggle, to being a vehicle for the expression of women's needs *within* the movement as well as in society more broadly? But it must also be asked whether the ANC Women's League, as part of the likely future governing party, is an appropriate vehicle to 'take the lead in creating a non-sexist South Africa'?

With the return of the ANC from exile, and the evolving debate about constitutional forms and provisions, two conferences dealing specifically with the rights of women - organised by the ANC Constitutional Committee and by the Lawyers for Human Rights - were held in the latter half of 1990. In January 1991, the Gender Research Group at the University of Natal organised a conference on *Women and Gender in Southern Africa*.<sup>3</sup> At all of these events, the problems of the forms of women's organisation and the central issues dominated the debates. An important, perhaps even pathbreaking dimension of these conferences is that they provided forums for women to confront issues primarily as *women* (rather than as academics, or as activists, or as lawyers).

Together with the May 2 document, these conferences and the debates which they

have generated have for the first time provided feminist ideas and feminist issues with a significant entry point into mainstream politics in South Africa.

Feminism has only opened an entry point, of course; more conventional conceptions of women's role in politics continue to dominate political discourse. The re-launch of the ANC Women's League in August 1990 was a depressing affair for feminists.

It was hard to say what made it a women's rally. There were men speakers encouraging women, some men performers entertaining the crowd, lots of ANC fashion clothes, drum majorettes, and women doing their usual thing - cooking... There was little vision for the future role of women (Annecke, 1990).

Despite the May 2 document, the priority for the Women's League remains organising women for national liberation. At a meeting of the internal and external wings of the ANC Women's League in Lusaka in May 1990, 'it was agreed that the initial thrust of the Organisation would be to recruit members into the ANC. Thereafter women would be recruited into the League' (Ramgobin, 1990). Even more worrying was the suggested response to the violence. 'At the grassroots level children should be encouraged to write letters to Chief Buthelezi and President de Klerk about the violence' (Ramgobin, 1990).

Nationalism, then, continues as the major theme in women's politics. This means that the challenge to feminism is to confront not only patriarchy but also those women's organisations which remain committed to a more narrowly defined nationalist project. Yet it is no accident that feminism has begun to assert itself in the context of the broader political transition of the South African state. As Rosalind Boyd has pointed out in discussing the situation of Ugandan women:

There are periods in history when popular forces - workers, peasants and women's organisations - through their militation or struggle gain access to the state, which can act to facilitate their own control and authority within the political system. In other words, the state provides an opening such that the interests of the oppressed and that of the state can at least partially correspond, and the oppressed can draw advantages from that situation (Boyd, 1989:3).

Boyd is referring here to the fluidity associated with the Ugandan state in transition. Similarly, with the South African state moving towards non-racial democracy and with the ANC moving from exiled liberation movement to internal political party, I would argue that we in South Africa are in the midst of just such a historic moment: women, lacking direct access to decision-making structures, now have an opening to mount a challenge to their exclusion.

As Boyd points out, the openness of the transitional period is likely to be short-lived. As structures are established and processes become increasingly rigidified, these spaces disappear and the marginalisation of women again becomes entrenched. The history of national liberation movements elsewhere in Africa provides depressing evidence in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not South Africa is added

to this list will depend in good measure on whether a feminist movement successfully emerges out of the transition. A successful movement, of course, is one which is able to develop a mass base, rather than one which remains limited to a few intellectuals. However, an important factor in this process will undoubtedly be the shape of the indigenous feminism which emerges in South Africa.

### Triple Oppression and Nationalist Politics

There has been an implicit contract between women and the national liberation movement, that women's support for the movement would secure their emancipation (Kruks, Rapp and Young, 1989). Autonomy of women's organisations has been sacrificed in the belief that the overthrow of apartheid (and capitalism) would also overthrow patriarchy. Consequently, the literature on African women in politics has emerged out of the immediate political strategic imperatives of national liberation. The questions that have been asked continually and urgently relate directly to the need to draw women into a mass movement.

The argument that black women in South Africa are uniquely oppressed because theirs is a three-fold oppression as blacks, as workers and as women has become one of the clichés of progressive literature on black women (Gaitskell et al, 1984). It is on the basis of the hierarchy derived from this concept that liberation is to be achieved. Clara, writing in *The African Communist*, argues that 'the driving forces for women's emancipation... are the black women, led by the African working class women, the triply oppressed and most exploited South Africans' (Clara, 1989). I would suggest that the concept lacks depth, and works only at a very general descriptive level. Even as a framework for political action, the concept has severe limitations. These can be taken up on two points: the links assumed between race, class and gender; and the consequent analysis of gender oppression.

Instead of problematising the interaction between race, class and gender, the concept of triple oppression implies a purely additive relation between these different dimensions of oppression. While it is constantly argued that all three constitute part of a single identity, at a political level there is a prioritisation of African women's racial oppression. Triple oppression becomes a way of identifying a political constituency, rather than a means of understanding the specificity of women's oppression in South Africa. A corollary of the notion of triple oppression is thus to legitimate a women's wing so as to take account of women's extra burden, but only within the context of the broader national liberation movement. As Clara insists, gender oppression is in no way an argument for feminism, which 'cannot be adopted by a liberation movement committed to the liberation of the African people led by the black working class... Feminism is a reformist ideology...' (Clara, 1989:38-39). Women's oppression is defined by Clara as being a 'subordinate, less antagonistic contradiction'.

This theoretical approach, therefore, subordinates the women question to the national question and has underpinned the strategy towards women of the ANC and

the UDF. This has left little space or energy for an autonomous movement of women. Black women who have been politically active have tended to get involved in broader campaigns against apartheid, or in the trade unions, rather than take up women's issues *per se*. This position on the priorities of oppositional movements has marginalised issues which are central to feminism, such as the control of individuals over their lives and bodies, the insistence of a direct link between the politics of personal and familial relations with wider social struggles, and the critique of hierarchical, centralised decision-making within organisations.

At the same time, there has been a refusal by many organisations (including women's) to engage with feminism. As Kgositsile has argued, 'men are so comfortable with being waited on that many are not particularly keen to discuss women's emancipation even if they are supposed to be revolutionaries. Women, on the other hand, are so used to "catering" for others that they tend to hold on to the roles that retard their development' (Kgositsile, 1990). To begin to engage with questions of gender power relations is in itself to begin to break patriarchal chains. Mantoa Nompikazi says: 'As a black woman... I've had my fair share of suffering and fighting. One of the most difficult and serious of these fights has always been with myself. Centuries of women's oppression, African traditions and prejudices against women too, had left their indelible mark on me, resulting in an inferiority complex that needed a bulldozer to move' (Nompikazi, 1989).

Organisationally, women activists have always been tied to national political and union structures and agendas have been determined by national priorities rather than the priorities of smaller constituencies. As a result, even in those moments in which women confronted the male domain directly, they did not articulate their campaigns either in terms of a struggle between men and women, or an exclusively *female* struggle against an oppressive system. Thus even that most visible of women's political struggles, against the extension of the pass laws to women in the 1950s, was located within the context of a broader national liberation struggle and appropriated as part of that history, in which women were seen as part of a popular front, rather than within the history of black women. This is not to suggest that such a separatist history can or should be written; merely that the trajectory of women's resistance, whether against men or against the apartheid order, cannot be traced within a framework in which gender is regarded as insignificant or at best of secondary importance.

Turning now to the second dimension of the concept of triple oppression, its implicit analysis of gender relations is reduced to a strategic problem of the constraints on mobilising women, which have to be identified and overcome. The significance of class and gender oppression lies in posing a barrier to women's participation in politics, through the mechanism of the double shift. Women's burdensome obligations as both wage-earners and managers of families clearly limit their time and energy (Barrett et al, 1985; Meer, 1984; Lawson, 1985).

This article does not intend to deny the saliency of the double shift but to point

out that those who have linked it to the notion of triple oppression make no attempt to understand the sexual division of labour, or to draw out the implications better to grasp the mutually reinforcing connections between capitalism and patriarchy. To do so would lead on to the question of the continued existence of a sexual division of labour in the post-liberation context. But over and above this, the limiting of the understanding of gender oppression to the double shift excludes several critical issues which are pertinent to feminist politics.

To begin with, the isolation of women in the household, either their own, or that of their employers, has direct implications for their political mobilisation. As Marx has pointed out in relation to the peasantry, spatial isolation militates against the development of a common consciousness of oppression or exploitation. In Durkheimian terms, a lack of spatial density leads to an absence of moral density, defined as 'frequent interactions among similarly situated persons causing an intensified and rekindled awareness of the traits they possess in common' (Wrong, 1979:152). Similar arguments have been used to explain the problems of organising women in South Africa, particularly given the concentration of employed women in domestic work or other service industries. The organisation of women employed in factories into trade unions is seen by many activists as an important way of breaking this isolation and drawing women into broader working class political action.

The dominance of nationalist politics, buttressed by notions such as triple oppression, may itself have contributed to the reasons why women are so often silent. Within the nationalist movement, the dominant constructions of political actions have been essentially masculinist. Among the youth, for example, the assumption is that the amaqabane (comrades) are male, young lions who roar in anger, and who have the characteristics of warriors. Similarly, Inkatha's impis, the amabutho, carry spears, wear skins and take their identities from Shaka's male warriors. The macho nature of politics in South Africa is underlined during the current period of violence. Outside of the oppositional discourse, too, many examples can be gleaned of the ways in which 'manhood and politics go hand in hand' (Shanley and Pateman, 1991:3).

It is, therefore, little wonder that women have not been key political actors. Women are in general alienated from political processes. Issues that are important to women, such as women's reproductive rights, their right to control their bodies, their concerns about children and childcare, have been regarded in South Africa as 'soft' political issues. They have been defined as primarily moral rather than political issues. This has effectively led to the delegitimation of women's concerns in the political sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Fatton argues that in such situations of political alienation, marginal groups adopt a strategy of 'exit', ie withdrawing from the political realm as a means of expressing discontent (Fatton, 1989). This offers an alternative to viewing women's political quietism as passivity or conservatism (Groot and Reid, 1984). The concentration of

African women in non-political, exclusively female groups such as *manyanos* (church-based, working class women's co-operative groups) and self-help groups suggests a form of 'exit', or retreat into a safe space. A positive spin-off of such a strategy (unconscious though it may be) is that a 'women's culture' may develop within that safe space.

This type of supportive culture has in Britain and the United States provided women with skills and confidence, and allowed them to explore new modes of political as well as personal behaviour. Hilary Wainwright argues that:

women sharing common values of co-operation and liberation can be extremely supportive of each other, affirming their contributions, valuing their skills. It's not that this cannot be achieved through men - or that it is invariably true of women - but the tendency is for men to want one-way mirrors in their relationships with women... Until such relations of power are overturned, women need the space - the rooms of their own - to create an alternative culture, in which women's public activity is positively valued (Wainwright, 1990:5).

However, the 'safe spaces' that women have retreated into in South Africa have been truly 'safe', involuted, and detached from feminist voices which could make connections between such groups and wider politics. In reality, women in *manyano*-type groups have been excluded from the political vision of the national liberation movement because their concerns have been regarded as 'reactionary' and 'divisive'.

The notions of isolation and exit suggest the severe limitations of the concept of triple oppression. However, and this is true also of the notion of double shift, they also point to the need to understand the links between social location and political identity. The starting point for analysing these links from a feminist perspective is to abandon the stark separation between the public and private spheres of society and instead emphasise the continuities between them.

## Towards a Gendered Politics

Saskia Wieringa offers a broad but useful definition of feminism:

The meaning I attach to the word 'feminist' at this moment in time in my surrounding entails a transformation of the society in which I live in the direction of a feminization and democratization on the domestic, social and political level, as well as socialization on the economic level (Wieringa, 1988).

This definition allows feminism to take different shapes in different contexts. Not only is feminist practice historically specific, but feminists do not constitute a homogeneous category even at any one point in time.

Nonetheless, Wieringa's definition still makes it possible to raise specifically feminist questions. How is sexual difference socially and politically constructed? Does sexual difference imply that men and women have different political identities and interests? How are political interests constructed in a patriarchal system? What



is the precise nature of the relationship between the public and the private? Feminists would differ in their answers, but the very salience of the questions lies in raising a challenge to dominant (western) political theories, which have rested 'on a conception of the "political" that is constructed through the exclusion of women and all that is represented by femininity and women's bodies' (Shanley and Pateman, 1991).

Socialist and radical feminists make use of conceptions of the nature of politics which are very different from mainstream western tradition. This is particularly true in the emphasis on the continuity between the public and private realms of society. It was feminists who first made the link between people's 'inner worlds', their personal relationships and ways of living, and the organisation of society more broadly. Understanding that link is the key not just to understanding women's politics but, I argue below, also gives greater insight into the appeal of conservative values, in particular those of Inkatha, to women as well as men.

On the basis of this understanding of feminist politics, I would follow Saskia Wieringa in insisting upon a distinction between women's movements and feminist organisations or movements in the third world context (Wieringa, 1988). This distinction is useful because it avoids the problem of labelling women's organisations or being prescriptive about women's struggles.<sup>6</sup> A women's movement can be defined as women organising on the basis of their identities as women, in exclusively female organisations, taking up issues that they consider important. A women's movement can contain within it conservative elements that organise women from a particular social base but do not seek to question the power relations within that base, let alone within society more generally. Feminism, on the other hand, has a direct political dimension, being not only aware of women's oppression, but prepared actively to confront patriarchal power in all its manifestations. Socialist feminists would refuse to separate the struggle against patriarchy from struggles against capitalism (and apartheid).<sup>7</sup>

There is a women's movement in South Africa. Although broadly democratic and anti-apartheid in orientation, this movement is diverse, embraces many political agendas and has contradictory interests. We may conceivably include within it organisations such as the Black Sash (an organisation of white women concerned with human rights), Rape Crisis and the ANC Women's League. But a women's movement per se does not guarantee that women's position in society is being fundamentally challenged or indeed that there will be any impact on existing political organisations or parties, trade unions or policy-makers.

The feminist emphasis on the relations between the private and public spheres provides a basis for the notion of *gendered* subjects. The ways in which men and women operate in society is not natural and given, but is historically and culturally constructed and socially located (Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes, 1987). People not only confront, interpret and/or act on political events in terms of their class position or racial identity; their political behaviour is also shaped consciously or

unconsciously by gender.

The political identities of women and of men are constituted through different relationships with the public and private spheres. Patriarchy forms a barrier between these two spheres, a barrier which feminism attempts to break down. Women are defined primarily in relation to their location within the private sphere, roles defined in terms of the family. For men, it is the public role outside the family which is emphasised. The western political tradition has tended to limit its concept of 'politics' to the public realm, thus marginalising women. A wide range of issues, such as child care, family violence, which directly relate to the private sphere, are thereby excluded from 'serious' political debate, being labelled 'moral' concerns.

However, women's material and social location rooted in the 'private', has deeper implications, *shaping* the very way in which they view politics. While progressive political organisations have often been excluded from consideration as 'soft', a wide range of issues such as those concerned with the breakdown and reconstitution of the family, many women are fundamentally concerned about them. Those organisations, often of more conservative orientation, such as Inkatha or the British Conservative Party, which *do* make the effort to mobilise women on this basis, have proven very successful.

Gender identities are not constructed in isolation from other kinds of political and social identities. In contrast to the idea of triple oppression, 'gendered subjects' allows us to develop an understanding of the *interaction* and mutual determination of the processes of race, class and gender in the formation of identity. As the discussion on Inkatha below will hope to show, often it is the broader constitution of ethnic or national identity which helps to shape a particular construction of gender.

A critical element here is an appreciation of the significance of tradition in both creating and legitimating particular gender identities and hierarchies. As I have shown elsewhere (Hassim, 1991a), the appeal to 'tradition' has been a key element in the mobilisation strategy of Inkatha. Women have been accorded a special place in the 'reinvented' Zulu tradition, one which reinforces their subordinate political and social status. Feminist politics has to confront why women such as the members of the Inkatha Women's Brigade actively support such a discourse, and how feminist intellectuals can intervene to shape a new discourse.

The political discourse that would arise out of a conception of people as gendered political subjects would acknowledge that gender is an integral part of politics, in other words that most political issues have a gender dimension and therefore have a differential impact on men and women. The probability, or indeed the necessity, of gender struggle would also be acknowledged and accepted as legitimate. Gender politics would therefore go beyond women's political actions and encompass struggles between men and women. At the same time, the possibility would open up for more than one form of feminism to emerge, as women would discover through such action that not all women have identical political interests. It is also

not inconceivable that an alliance could develop between organisations such as the Black Sash, the ANCWL, the Inkatha Women's Brigade among others.<sup>8</sup>

### **Politicizing the Private**

Motherhood and wifehood are the very issues that draw millions of black women into church-based groups such as the mother's unions, sewing and other self-help groups. The political space that has been left by a failure to confront women's daily concerns, at least in Natal, has been increasingly occupied by Inkatha, through the Women's Brigade. Here I wish to draw out some lessons that a study of the Inkatha Women's Brigade holds for progressive women's organisations and more broadly, the implications of such a strong conservative tendency for the women's movement.

There are various reasons for the relative success of the Women's Brigade in organising women. A major difference between the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW), until 1990 the main progressive women's organisation in Natal,<sup>9</sup> and Inkatha lies in the constituencies that they target. NOW tried to mobilise women very directly for political ends whereas Inkatha politicises women (if at all) by first drawing them in on the basis of other interests such as the sewing groups. NOW's constituency was therefore far more limited and because of its direct and immediate political thrust, and consequent vulnerability to state repression, it was not able to take many women along with it into a long-term process which would build organisation as well as give members a base from which to develop a broader women's movement.

The Women's Brigade has implicitly recognised the political significance of issues such as women's relationship to their children, financial management in the household, etc. These issues have been appropriated by Inkatha but within a discourse which does not empower women or in any way equip them with the capacity to challenge social structures which oppress them, and even less the men who may keep them subordinate. Women in Inkatha have effectively been re-subordinated ideologically; traditional conceptions have been manipulated in order to legitimise an inferior status in society to women.

An important question to ask, therefore, is why Inkatha has had a constituency among women. For most women in Natal, struggles are about survival on a daily basis. The forces which keep them locked into poverty and subordinate as women and blacks are abstract and hidden. Given the importance of the family as a material and emotional support system, women are unlikely to act in ways which would undermine it. In fact, maintaining the family against the attacks wrought upon it by the apartheid state is in itself seen as an act of resistance by African women (Hassim and Metelerkamp, 1988). In the face of poverty, social dislocation and political inequality, the family is seen by women as empowering (Campbell, 1990).

It is evident that sexual identity and sexual divisions are deeply embedded in the cultural experience of African women (and indeed of all women). Pepe Roberts points out that '...they constitute the limits and substance of common sense. They

are the most difficult to challenge and change because they appear to be the most natural of all "human" traits' (Fatton, 1989:54). The male vision of the world is hegemonic and is reproduced in political structures and processes. This vision acquires a sense of omnipotence, in that not only does it appear 'natural', but women also do not see it as contradictory or challengeable. Thus it is not just men who oppose moves to change women's position in society, but also women. Stephen Lukes argues that subordinate groups may be unaware of their 'real' interests and may identify the status quo as being either desirable or inevitable, or both. This is because 'the bias of the system can be mobilised, recreated, and reinforced in ways that are neither conscious nor intended' (Stacey and Price, 1981:8).

My study of the Inkatha Women's Brigade bears out the strength of these arguments in the South African context (Hassim, 1990a). It has been argued, most powerfully by Gerhard Maré and Georgina Hamilton, that while Inkatha's roots lie deep within Zulu history, the organisation's particular interpretation of that history has been crucial to its successful mobilisation of a significant proportion of Natal's black population (Maré and Hamilton, 1987). My research on the Women's Brigade supports this compelling explanation of the ability of Buthelezi and the Inkatha leadership to inspire a cult-like loyalty among many of its followers. But there are also other powerful historical forces at play. African women in Natal accept a cultural self-definition that stems from a peculiar and complex combination of pre-colonial Zulu traditions and colonial Christian ideology. This continues to resonate deeply with women and *they themselves* seek to reproduce it. This self-definition, identifying women first of all as mothers and homemakers, is an affirmation of women's strength and solidarity while still reflecting a durable patriarchal world-view.

At the heart of the paradox is the central relationship between women's material location and their political power. The homestead was the cornerstone of pre-colonial Zulu society. Social and political relations flowed from the productive and reproductive roles that people took on within the homestead. Crucially, though, production and reproduction were intertwined and part of what Guy (1990) referred to as a value-creating cycle. The importance of women's labour, as well as their reproductive responsibilities, gave women crucial rights and obligations, particularly as they aged. However, as the nature of the homestead changed and as its status declined due to the rise, first of a centralised Zulu state and then of colonialism, women were marginalised politically. Capitalism introduced a notional separation of society into 'public' and 'private' spheres, women and women's interests being increasingly defined as outside the realm of the political. Colonial law reduced African women to the status of children, never able to exercise financial independence. In old age, where formerly they were regarded as honorary men, they now became dependent on male relatives. African women were furthest from the seats of power, in governmental structures or influence in black oppositional movements.

Women's reproductive responsibilities continued to define an abiding set of social and economic concerns. As mothers, they continued to bear the burdens of childcare. As managers of the household, they continued to be the shock-absorbers of economic crises. While these concerns were constant, their public expression differed historically as well as politically. In the *manyanos* and *stokvels* women found a degree of female solidarity which enabled them to make sense of a rapidly changing urban society. Women sought refuge in prayer, but also discovered practical ways of co-operating through which they were able to make household budgets stretch further. Some sought to take co-operation further, and joined together to resist attempts by local government bodies to curtail their economic activities. Others joined political organisations within which they fought to preserve their households and families.

However, the very concerns which led women to form their own organisations also constrained the extent of their activities within those organisations. It is this tension which is so clearly highlighted within the Women's Brigade and which haunts women within nationalist organisations. The family, and women's position within it, has defined the nature of women's politics. Despite this, no political organisation has yet confronted the implications of a politics constructed around the family for political campaigns or for future policy.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, motherhood has been used as a political force and a powerful political symbol. In the 1950s, the defence of the family against apartheid attacks inspired women to march to Pretoria. In the 1980s, once again, images of motherhood were invoked by both the ANC and Inkatha in a new political context dominated by the youth.

In Inkatha's discourse, and arguably in all nationalist discourse, mothers (all women) were the frontline in the ideological war. Through women, a specific political vision was to be passed on to the youth and social and political control was to be exerted over the recalcitrant. The legitimacy of its claim to a campaign against 'poverty, ignorance and disease' rested largely in its ability to successfully incorporate existing women's support networks into its political structures, with the promised reward for such networks of access to the material resources which Inkatha commanded through KwaZulu. The guarantee of Inkatha's political continuity thus lay in its ability to keep the support of women.

Herein lay the rub for women. The appeal to their familial concerns was a powerful one. Women's social and personal identities are deeply embedded in their roles in the family. When that institution is under threat, their identities too are threatened. Even though political activity stemming from this identity does in fact contain the potential to transform both the definition of women's roles as well as women's realisation of their capabilities, if it accords to motherhood a broader significance than a private and personal relationship, this potential has not been explored within Inkatha. Inkatha's glorification of motherhood as the epitome of womanhood has circumscribed the range of political activities available to women. It leaves little

space for women to take up struggles around issues outside this definition, and unsurprisingly no overt attempt to challenge the organisation's male dominated committees or attempt to mount campaigns around women's reproductive rights has taken place.

I have argued elsewhere that a discourse in which motherhood is the ultimate symbol of women's political heroism is in fact disempowering for women (Hassim, 1990b). It is a political sleight of hand, in which some women's legitimate concerns are identified as their *sole* concerns. At the same time, responsibility for the 'crisis of the family' is placed ultimately *on the women themselves*. For, bound up integrally with the notion that motherhood defines women's rightful role in society is a notion of what 'good' motherhood entails: good mothers have good children, good children support Inkatha. The rejection of Inkatha by African youth is a sign that women are not 'doing their job'. The fact that not all the women in Inkatha were seduced by this logic (as the collapse of the Chesterville branch of the Women's Brigade demonstrated) does not detract from its political significance.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, a politics constructed on the basis of women's role in the family can only be progressive for women if it seeks at the same time to confront and transform the social and economic context in which families are located. At the same time, the possibility that women can re-define their roles and create alternative social arrangements if they so wish can be held up to the membership. Inkatha's failure to do so results in women being reduced to political pawns; they receive little long-term reward for membership.

### Irreconcilable Differences?

The issues of representation and legitimacy are key questions in the women's movement today. The emerging possibility of a 'new South Africa' seems to have opened up another area of struggle, and transforming the slogan of non-racialism into reality is a new challenge. Racial conflicts within the progressive movement have not previously been open. Thus when tensions arose between black and white women at the conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa recently, the reaction was one of shock and dismay. Perhaps it is precisely because racism is no longer an official ideology and there is an official emphasis on reconciliation, that the anger of black women has begun to explode.

The slogan of non-racialism and the emphasis on unity has concealed cleavages in the past. During the 1950s, held up by the ANC as a period of heroic action and as an example of how struggles should be waged, non-racialism was overtly stressed in the movement, in order to subvert apartheid. This model has been important in shaping the vision of a women's movement in the present. A recurring theme in women's politics has been how to revive the Federation of South African Women, for example. The heroines of women's struggles are not just African, but also white and Indian: Helen Joseph, Ray Alexander, Amina Cachalia. Their class and race position was not regarded as problematic or even contradictory. Their ability to

organise African women in the townships was never in doubt, and their right to speak on behalf of all women never questioned, at least not in public.

The fact that gender identities are constructed in the context of forces such as race and ethnicity creates its own contradictions. There is a tension between commonality as women and the desire among many women to define themselves as members of Inkatha or the ANC. This tension is apparent around violence in Natal. Women on both sides claim that because of shared experience of being mothers they can reach out to each other across the political divides - and yet they do not. They remain divided not just because they are afraid of men in the organisations, but because they too construct their political identities around 'being ANC' or 'being Inkatha'.

Does focusing on gender identity obfuscate differences between women? Letlaka-Rennert argues that 'no matter how remote, white women are part of the oppression of black women' (Letlaka-Rennert, 1991:6). Does the fact that all women do not suffer the same kinds of oppression and that not all women are equally exploited preclude common struggle against patriarchy? If only black women can represent their experiences, should struggles on the basis of those experiences exclude white women? Do black middle class women have more in common with white women of the same class? Or does racial identity always override class identity? Taken to this logical extreme, it would seem that only very limited, if any, possibilities exist for joint and equal action between black and white women.

Certainly the ANC Women's League has not really confronted the political implications of racial cleavages and organisational differences. In her presidential address at the ANC Women's League congress in April 1991, Gertrude Shope foresaw unity as being eminently achievable. She argued that black and white women should work together, united by the force of motherhood:

We have something in common with white women. The blood of our children unites us. The blood of children in the townships and the blood of South African Defence Force soldiers should unite us... We believe all women suffer the same problems and we should all fight for the same problems (*Daily News*, 30.04.91).

The *unnuanced* use here of the notion of motherhood ignores the importance of culture and tradition in the construction of such elements of identity. In fact, motherhood has *different* meanings for the various racial-cum-ethnic groups. Appeals such as the one made by Shope could in this way actually reinforce racial identities, through their evocation of these varying (and antagonistic) histories. In contrast, locating the concept of motherhood in an analysis of patriarchy forces the acknowledgement (and potentially the transcendence) of differences. Concepts such as motherhood should not be excluded from political discourse. This would merely leave them open to be appropriated by conservative forces. However, non-racialism cannot be constructed by the denial of differences.

I would argue that the acknowledgement of difference can in fact strengthen rather than undermine women's organisation. Recognising difference forces women to

confront contradictions in their own self-definition. For example, while women might struggle jointly for the right to abortion, they would also have to acknowledge that access to health care and child care is more limited for working class and black women. And while they might fight for the right of all women to choose abortion, they might confront the degree to which some religious mores inculcated from childhood preclude it.

### Women and the State

I have argued thus far that the failure to comprehend the significance of material location in shaping political attitudes and concerns, as well as the failure to understand the power of patriarchally defined roles accorded to women (in particular motherhood) has had dire consequences for political organisation. However, it will also in the future have implications for the way in which the state formulates policy.

In the May 2 Document, the state is seen as the main vehicle for creating gender equality, given the fact that 'in the new South Africa women will not immediately have the education, skills and resources to claim the rights provided in the constitution and laws'. There are two issues of concern here: the first is the question of who will put pressure on the state to ensure that it keeps gender on the agenda. The second issue concerns the relationship of the women's movement to the ANC and, by extension, to the future state.

I would argue that we need to maintain a healthy scepticism about the ability of the post-apartheid state to meet the demands of women, or to anticipate policies which will empower women. This is not to suggest that we are necessarily antagonistic to an ANC government; however, we need to take heed from the experiences of women in other parts of the world. As women in Zimbabwe and Mozambique have discovered, despite the government's avowed commitment to gender equality, women are gradually pushed back into traditional roles. If they take on new tasks of 'building the nation', it must be in addition to their other burdens at work and within the household.

The question of how the nationalist organisation and the democratic state perceive women is central here. What kinds of citizens are women meant to be within the post-apartheid society? Clearly, in the 'new South Africa', a very different notion of 'citizen' will have to be constructed, one which abolishes apartheid definitions. It is not so clear, however, what significance sexual difference will have in this re-definition. In the western political tradition, 'citizen' has been regarded as a neutral, universal term. In reality, however, it has represented male and generally bourgeois interests. Shanley and Pateman argue that if anything, women have been 'second-class' citizens.

Can men and women be citizens in the same sense? Perhaps some answers can emerge from a consideration of women's position within political organisations. Looking at the relationship of women to the ANC for example, it is obvious that



men and women have played very different political roles, based on a patriarchal definition of 'women's sphere'. Although they are held to be equal members, women do not have the same access as men to decision-making within the ANC. These experiences would suggest that it is highly likely that women will in effect become second-class citizens, despite rhetorical commitments to gender equality. Mary Maboreke, examining the fate of women in post-independence Zimbabwe, warns that 'the political will to improve women's status... wane(s) when faced with the practical consequences of this...' (Maboreke, 1990).

Do women have special rights because they are women? If, as I have argued, the political concerns that emerge out of women's location in the household are seriously considered, does this imply that women's unequal reproductive burdens should be acknowledged in the law? And if they are, as was the case in Cuba for example, is this any guarantee that social relations will change for the mass of women? The Cuban experience suggests not.<sup>12</sup> Working class, largely illiterate women have limited access to the law, and they (and their households) are dependent on male incomes. These factors severely constrain legal action as an option and make it unlikely that working class women will challenge individual men. There are no easy answers.

One frequently offered is that women's organisations should be strengthened, and that through organisational representation women's interests will be secured (Sachs, 1990; Horn, 1991; Friedman, 1991). There is little historical precedent to lend support to this, however. Moore comments that in socialist societies: '... women's organisations are encouraged to operate as a mechanism of the ruling party by extending state policies into a female constituency, rather than as a separate pressure group which organises women independently and which encourages them to take an active role in asserting and defining their own needs and demands' (Moore, 1989:148). Similarly, Stephanie Urdang points out: 'In keeping with the OMM's perception of its role as a mass organisation of the party, it follows party direction of women's issues rather than initiating, intervening and pushing the party in its formulation of policy towards women' (Urdang, 1989). As I have suggested above, at this point the ANC Women's League seems to be headed down the same path.

As far as the state is concerned, despite absence of legal discrimination, women are not constituted as equal subjects. For example, while women may enjoy formally equal status with men, this does not guarantee that they will have equal access to jobs, or opportunities. Policies always have a differential impact on men and women; in formulating policy, women's specific needs are not necessarily taken into account.<sup>13</sup> Even in Mozambique, with its impressive record on gender issues, the government has failed to involve women in development planning, with the OMM remaining silent on major policies which disadvantaged women. The May 2 document, emanating as it did from the NEC, should have had a greater impact on other policy-related processes. Yet, for example, discussions of the Harare document on the future economy are largely silent on its weak references to gender

issues. Unless the Women's League begins to intervene actively in these debates, the possibility grows that women's concerns will be marginalised yet again.<sup>14</sup>

#### Notes

1. For the argument that there was a feminist movement in the 1950s see Walker, 1982.
2. Although not all women can say this confidently, Winnie Mandela states 'While the ANC accord women equal status, it is highly improbable that under an ANC Government, women will, in fact, enjoy equality of status with men' (Meer, 1990:9). Asked to expand on this at a National Women's Day meeting at the University of Durban-Westville, Mandela retorted that she had never said this!
3. For a fuller discussion of the Lawyers for Human Rights conference, see Hassim 1991b; on the Gender Research Group Conference see Hassim, 1991c.
4. B Kgosisile terms this a 'phobia for western feminism'. See Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes (1987) for a fuller discussion of this issue.
5. Charles S Maier argues that the redrawing of the boundaries of what constitutes the political is often accompanied by 'a changing intensity of what takes place within the perimeter of the political'. He points out that despite predictions in the 1950s and 1960s that politics would increasingly deal with non-controversial, administrative decisions, 'hard politics is back, at least as a theoretical possibility' (Maier, 1987).
6. Reviews of Cheryl Walker's book on the Federation of South African Women (1982) raised this debate in the South African context. See Budlender et al, 1984.
7. The distinction between feminist movements and women's movements should not be regarded as developing a new hierarchy, ie that being feminist is a 'higher stage' of women's consciousness.
8. At the Lawyers for Human Rights conference held in November 1990, a call was made for an alliance of all women's groups committed to a non-sexist, non-racial democracy in South Africa. However, response to the call was muted, partly because there was little time to discuss resolutions at the end of the conference. Questions were also raised about the feasibility of an alliance in which the ANCWL would inevitably be the dominant member, leaving smaller, non-aligned groups politically vulnerable. However, in the working group on Women and Political Power, the call was unanimously endorsed. Even Clara calls specifically for a 'class alliance of women, led by the black working class women' (Clara, 1989).
9. At last count in 1986 NOW estimated its membership at 1 000. Compare this to the Women's Brigade's claimed membership of 392 732 in 1985. NOW was affiliated to the UDF. In 1990, the women's group dissolved and its members joined the ANCWL.
10. This contrasts significantly with the way in which conservatives in advanced capitalist countries have used the family to put into place legislation which keeps women subordinate.
11. In 1983 women in the Chesterville (a township near Durban) branch of the Women's Brigade walked out of the organisation because they were warned that if their children joined the UDF they would be held responsible.
12. In Cuba, the Family Code attempted to enforce gender equality. Attitudes are slower to change than laws, however, and Cuban women found themselves unable to use the Family Code to force husbands to share housework equally. See Nazzari, 1990.
13. Discussion of gendered policy in South Africa lags behind even feminist politics. For early efforts, however, see Gender Policy Group, 1991; Ginwala, Mackintosh and Massey, 1990.
14. I would like to thank Stephen Gelb for comments and assistance.

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