

WOMEN'S STUDIES AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Shireen Hassim and Cheryl Walker

Introduction

This paper explores the enormously complex debates in South African women's studies about representation - who can speak and for whom.¹ At the outset, it is perhaps necessary to clarify what we are *not* doing in this paper. We are not addressing directly the important issue of what putting women on the research agenda means in practice: what the research gaps and lacunae are. We take as read that both gender and women's concerns are still, despite significant gains in the last few years, peripheral in mainstream academia. Inasmuch as research is becoming more gender-sensitive, it is still largely a matter of 'add gender and stir' to the basic, always potent, race/class mix, with the added irritant of 'women' and 'gender' now being regarded as interchangeable embellishments to the text. Here we are looking rather at the practice of feminist research: the who and the how, rather than the what.

The debate around representation in women's/gender studies is a complex one. It shifts between different levels and emphases and is often shadowed by unspoken political assumptions and positions. Although the issues are clearly all interrelated, in the following account we separate out what we see as the key elements:

The debate has three major strands:

- the under-representation of black women in academe,
- the issue of misrepresentation of black women's position/oppression by white women, this point often accompanied by the allied argument that only black women can properly understand and explain black women's lives and
- the question of who has the right to represent whom in the sense of 'speaking for', which leads to questions of mandates and the accountability of researchers.

These debates are not unique to the women's movement. They are however charged with a particular intensity within what may be loosely defined as the women's movement here. One part of the explanation for this lies in the importance that the struggle against women's oppression attaches to women 'naming their own oppression'. Another part of the explanation is that women's studies is currently faced with the need to redefine its relationship to the broader women's movement. Women activists are now demanding a negotiation of the terms of their relationship not simply with men within the national liberation movement but also with other sectors of the women's movement. Although still very weak in terms of its ability to challenge the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures at all levels of society, this fledgling women's movement off campus is more broad-based, more politically active and, critically, more feminist than anything that has preceded it. It is also more demanding of academics and researchers than before - *and* now it is marshalling feminist principles in its critical assessment of their practice.

The first strand of the debate is to do with numbers and status and is relatively easy to demonstrate. The solutions, too, are relatively easy to propose, if not to implement: affirmative action, training, democratising the research process etc. A recent study by UDUSA (the Union of Democratic University Staff Associations) confirms what we already know - that blacks and women and even more emphatically black women are severely under-represented among university staff (*UDUSA News*, Jan.1992) What is also worth noting is that few of the small number of black women who are academics appear to be engaging publicly with women's/gender studies in their work. They tend to be congregated in gender-specific but not necessarily gender-focussed disciplines such as nursing, library science, education etc. There is a new generation of younger graduate students but little of their work has been published to date.

The second aspect of the representation debate raises far more contentious issues, about the nature of research and of objectivity, the relationship between experience and analysis, and the social identity of both researchers and researched. It is more difficult to define and to resolve. There is no unanimity in the formulation of the criticism. The more moderate position stresses the importance of black women becoming researchers and bringing their particular cultural insights and linguistic skills to their training as researchers, to enrich/challenge/transform existing bodies of scholarship and to empower themselves. The concern is essentially about finding ways to redress current imbalances and include more black women in the research process. The more radical position insists on the impossibility of white women ever being able to represent black women's experience; black women have to speak for themselves. In this view, white women's work forms part of an active process of disempowerment and colonisation of black women.²

The third issue concerns the accountability of academics to political organisations, which tend to present themselves as the 'true' representatives of the women's movement and of ordinary oppressed women, and hence the arbiters of appropriate research. Dealing with this has fundamental implications for the way in which feminist academics do research, and for the nature and role of research in the women's movement.

In attempting to take these debates forward, we see the following as the key tasks for the women's movement.

Confronting Racism

First of all, it is absolutely essential that white intellectuals recognise the legitimate anger of those who have been marginalised in academia on account of their colour, and the validity of a critique of complacency and arrogance among the privileged. White feminists need to confront and acknowledge the power of racism in the construction of social relations in society, including within universities. This may seem an obvious thing to say. Of course, we all know that apartheid South Africa epitomises racism. However, 'the race question' is suppressed in much intellectual debate on the left - partly, it seems, because of the racial make-up of the intellectual community (predominantly white), partly because of the hegemony of the political

tradition of non-racialism, and partly because of the Marxist insistence on class as the fundamental contradiction, with its associated critique of the liberal insistence on 'race'.

This denial of 'race' can become dangerously self-serving for whites. It is too easy for progressive intellectuals who are not black either to blame structural forces ('the under-representation of black/African women in universities is not my fault') or to dismiss race ('a power play by the emergent petit-bourgeoisie') and thereby to put their own practice beyond scrutiny.

However, there are major problems with the way in which 'race' is being used by some black feminists. There is an assumption that black academics will automatically and unproblematically be sensitive to and understand all struggles of all black women. The assumption that there is an automatic sisterhood among black women, based on a common experience of oppression under apartheid, is no less fallacious than the by now discredited notion that sisterhood is global. There are very important cleavages of class, language, ethnicity, and geographical location, to name but some of the most salient, that cannot be brushed aside.

In the claims around a common 'black' experience there is often a confusing sliding between 'black' as a political category embracing all those who have not been classified as white under the apartheid system, and 'black' as a pseudo-ethnic category that embraces those classified as 'African' under the apartheid system. Many of the claims made on behalf of black women in the first sense - that only black women can understand the experience of the majority of women in this society, for instance - in fact assume a linguistic and cultural community that cannot possibly include Indian and 'coloured' women, and is also dubious for African women as a group.

If women's studies are to develop in a dynamic way, it is essential that the reality of significant divisions among black women be acknowledged. Black feminist academics and activists need to display the same degree of self-reflection as they are demanding of white feminist academics.

Whites have spoken for black women

In confronting the power of both racism and racialised identities, it is useful to reflect briefly on the relationship between feminist academics and intellectuals (predominantly white) and women activists (predominantly black). That white women *have* 'spoken for' black women is indisputable. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the writings of white feminists began to give voice to a hidden history of women's political activity, and highlight the oppressive and exploitative conditions under which black women lived. These writings were trying to provide positive examples and inspiration and to 'correct' analyses which treated women's activities as insignificant or non-existent. At this time, some white women working in the trade unions engaged in a 'recovery' exercise, getting women workers to share their experiences in books and pamphlets. Many of these black women were illiterate; books such as *Vukani Makhosikasi*³ gave them a forum in which to be heard. In a context in which male voices were dominant, and in which women's political role

still revolved around 'catering and entertainment', much of this work was empowering for women.

In retrospect, however, this process did not adequately challenge problematic aspects of the relationship between black and white women. The overarching concern was always the struggle against apartheid: for national liberation. There was widespread hostility to feminism within the national liberation movement where empowering women was interpreted primarily as empowering women to join the national struggle. For women 'working together' in the struggle meant that relations of power and privilege between black and white women were rarely openly confronted. The relationship between black and white women was not a negotiated one. At the same time, because 'the struggle' was defined as pre-eminently one against white domination, patriarchal gender relations were not highlighted, and the very areas where black and white women could have found they had certain gendered concerns in common, were overlooked.

One key issue concerned the relevance of feminism to black women. This went hand in hand with the question of political control - the distrust of feminism within the national liberation movement, and the fear that white feminists were attempting to foist on black women an alien theory that was somehow linked to maintaining white dominance. Feminism seemed to many activists to deflect energy away from challenging apartheid and to create disunity in the ranks of the national liberation movements. For black women, this was also an issue of identity - there was a concern that by privileging their gender identity their identity as blacks (and its consequent political implications) would be de-emphasised. The widespread dependence in left analyses on the notion of the triple oppression of black women didn't help, since this treated identity as consisting of a set of discrete phenomena, additive rather than integrated: one was black, one was working class, one was female, with the racial identity being seen as the fundamental one. Despite many examples of women finding common political cause across the racial divisions, the dominance of nationalism weakened the potential for feminism to emerge.

There was also a failure on the part of white women in the national liberation movement to examine critically their own role - to look at the script which history had assigned them. They did not actively use their location in women's organisations to examine their own contradictory position as both privileged (being white) and subordinate (being women). Their subjective experiences became subsumed and subjugated to an essentially black nationalist struggle, rather than informing a larger struggle to transform society.

What was missed was the opportunity to define a more honest and solid political relationship between different groups of women. Ironically, although there were concerns about white women controlling women's groups, the agenda of the struggle was always defined by black women, in the context of national liberation. Many issues which were profited by white feminists, such as abortion and rape, were sidelined and not made part of the mainstream of the women's movement, despite the fact that they were issues which concerned all women. It is only in the 1990s that this is changing.

Experience is Not the Only Source of Understanding

Feminist academics do need to examine their own practice carefully, to see to what extent, in the pursuit of personal goals of publication and promotion, they are guilty of 'speaking for' those who could and should speak for themselves. There are two aspects that need to be emphasised here. Firstly, it is a key tenet of feminist methodology that conventional sources silence and/or distort women's activities in society and that a major way of challenging this is by giving 'ordinary' women voice. Secondly, the insistence that 'the personal is the political' demands that feminist researchers find ways of uncovering the relationships and experiences that are hidden in the so-called private sphere of the domestic. Thus, a feminist research practice has to integrate women's experiences into its theoretical analysis.

However, we believe that feminist academics have to challenge the claim that only the oppressed can speak about their lives or, alternatively, that only researchers with a shared racial identity can do so. Fundamentally, the first is a claim that there is only one 'true', authentic understanding of social reality/history and that is *the* view from below. While we argue for the need to validate women's experiences, we are concerned with the absolute privileging of experience as the sole arbiter of knowledge. For one thing, if taken to its logical conclusion it invalidates the entire research process, and not only for those researchers who can be defined as 'privileged' or white. It leads to the sort of absurdity that only a white bourgeois male can understand the ruling class; alternatively, if it is only the oppressed that have the right to speak for themselves, that white bourgeois males can never say anything useful about oppression. This position must even call into question the validity of the research that is organically generated by communities as part of political struggles, because such research is also 'mediated' by the interventions of more literate members of communities. Furthermore, the experience of a condition does not guarantee insight into where and how it fits in larger social relations. The emphasis on experience is appropriate for a central task of a women's studies project: that of recovery, not simply of what women have done but of how they have understood what they have done. By itself, however, it cannot provide a theory of gender relations.

It is not simply common experience or language skills which produce good research but a combination of a whole host of attributes, including the ability to think critically and work rigorously. A skilled researcher from outside the researched community/subject may mobilise fresh insights precisely as a result of her outsider status: relationships and processes which are shrouded in familiarity for the insider may be arrestingly transparent to the outsider. Furthermore, 'insiders' are not autonomous subjects. Who is defined as insider, and what the insider view might be, is constantly being shaped and reconstituted in relationships with the outside. 'Insider' and 'outsider' are not fixed categories.

Furthermore, academic training is so infused with concepts and assumptions developed in European languages and European intellectual traditions, that their imprint on analysis is not simply a problem for white researchers. Given the dominance of European intellectual traditions, as well as the linguistic diversity in

South Africa, it affects the analysis of black researchers too. Those who argue that the experience of a condition, and linguistic competence are sufficient qualifications for research are working with an overly naive understanding of the nature of research.

Feminism is a Political Project

Feminist academics do need to examine their own practice carefully. Feminist research must aim to be part of the process of empowering women in their political struggles. A research project that is simply appropriating women's oppression as the 'raw material' for purely intellectual exploration is not feminist. However, and we want to emphasise this point, engaging with the political cannot be understood simply as uncritically reflecting a 'party line' or necessarily subordinating one's academic work to the demands of off-campus political activism and needs. Academics are not the fieldworkers/ research assistants of 'the struggle' although they may well, and often do, want to meet specific commissions from political organisations, and engage in political work as members of/supporters of various political organisations.

Thus, the demand by activists for accountability of academics needs to be carefully examined. A central question which has haunted the women's movement is, to whom should feminist academics be accountable? The diverse grouping of organisations that make up the women's movement? Specific organisations? If so, which ones? Or is it to activists in organisations?

Accountability cannot have the same meaning for academics as it does for political activists, who are bound by the organisations they work in. The demands of political discipline and the need for collective action place special constraints on political activists. Furthermore, there are appropriate democratic constraints where activists are elected and mandated by their constituencies.

Intellectual work, however, depends partly for its success on a different set of principles: rigour and clarity, intellectual honesty and adventurousness. These principles require a context of relative autonomy from the immediate political imperatives, even though they may be informed by broader political projects. Some of the most creative insights into the complex nature of patriarchy and of the contradictions of women's strengths and weaknesses, emerge out of feminist readings of novels and poetry. Where would such work be placed in relation to the narrow demand for accountability to a political line?

Feminist academics must open their work to the scrutiny of the women's movement. But by the same feminist token, the practices and strategies of the women's movement must be open to assessment and critique.

The University is a Site of Struggle

In asserting that feminism is a political project, we believe it is also necessary to affirm the importance of the university as a site of struggle within the broader women's movement, and a legitimate focus of academic feminists' political work. For one thing, challenging the under-representation of black women in academia

requires a political challenge to the university establishment.

But there is more to gender struggles at the university than this. It is true that there are somewhat different conditions of production of knowledge for black and white academics. However, the elision of white with academic, and academic with privilege, obscures the rather different conditions under which all women academics work compared to men (their burdens of child and family responsibilities being the most obvious). As powerful and important as the focus on racism is, it ignores the very real dilemmas that women academics face in their work, and the gendered nature of their struggles in combining an academic career with domestic and political responsibilities. It defines 'struggle' in a one-dimensional way; ironically, the gender struggles of women academics is made 'private' and personal. The failure to confront this will certainly set back the struggle of black women to break into academia.

One important impact that feminist academics have made in challenging the university has been to validate the importance of women's/gender studies. Despite problems associated with the status and funding of women's studies programmes, this is perhaps the most successful outcome to date of feminist engagement in the university. However, feminist academics need to be wary that these programmes do not become an 'alibi', both for the administration as well as for feminists, for not engaging more forcefully and critically with structural issues of gender discrimination. In the same vein, while it is true that the university is a site of gender struggle, it is also true that women academics have until very recently made only feeble attempts to organise and mobilise around their concerns.

Taking the debate forward

Feminists have to recognise and work with difference. 'Difference' is fast becoming the new buzzword of feminist theory, and is possibly in danger of becoming a cliché as drained of meaning as 'triple oppression'. Yet it does represent an important theoretical and political advance, one which the South African women's movement needs to assimilate fully. 'Difference' needs to be understood not simply in racial (and ethnic) terms. Class, too, is a critical aspect of difference and class cleavages correspond less and less to the old, familiar apartheid cleavages of 'race'. At the same time feminists should not overstate difference to the exclusion of an appreciation of how gender oppression provides a common point of reference.

We need to work with this difference in creative ways. While sisterhood is not a useful concept, solidarity on the basis of common goals is. What this means is that the women's movement constructs itself as an alliance, a political alliance between different groupings of women, united around many issues but experiencing different social, economic and political contradictions. However, for the alliance to be politically effective, the terms of the alliance and the processes of working together - the reality of difference - need to be honestly and openly negotiated.

One part of that alliance comprises feminist academics, engaged in feminist research and engaged in the transformation of the university. The women's movement must acknowledge both the legitimacy *and* the limits of academic work. There needs to be a space for academic debate; it is not the driving force behind the

transformation of actual gender roles and relationships.

Finally, academic feminism has to construct itself as a political project: not in the narrow sense of following a party line, but in the broad sense of engaging with the issues of power and of gender struggles in our society. We need to take the challenges this poses us in our work very seriously.

If feminist academics fail to engage with political practice, their theories, however sophisticated, will be largely irrelevant. Theirs will be the reject, if not the abject, script.

NOTES

1. This is a summarised version of the paper that was presented at the symposium.
2. See for instance Dabi Nkululeko (1987).
3. Jane Barrett et al (1985)

REFERENCES

- Barrett, J. et al (1985) *Vutani Makhosikazi : South African Women Speak* (Catholic Institute of International Relations: Johannesburg)
- Nkululeko, D. (1987) "The Right to Self-Determination in Research: Azanian Women' in Christine Quinta (ed) *Women in Southern Africa* (Skotaville: Braamfontein)

DISCUSSION

BILL FREUND: What do we mean by research? On the one end of the spectrum, we have individuals maybe doing biographies, maybe doing art history. They're not taking any money from anybody. Perhaps they are academics, but they are effectively doing their own research; they are doing it for an intellectual community. Universities have plenty of people doing that kind of work. It's actually very vital.

At the other end of the spectrum you have people maybe getting large amounts of research. They develop it into social science empires - research assistants, training, large budgets. All over the country people say, 'Oh yes, he or she, that's the one who knows all about this.' And then this really becomes power, and then you're talking about resources.

MALA SINGH: In connection with the whole question of experience, the role of experience in the future of research. It's certainly a problem that confronts intellectuals who are engaging in policy research. And that is the question of how to mesh, how to link, the knowledge of resistance, which is the knowledge of the experience of large numbers of people in this country, against the forces of domination, with the knowledge of reconstruction, which is the area where intellectuals find they are really making an input.

BALEKA KGOTSILE: We have found that even with research that has been commissioned by the ANC and COSATU, researchers are not focusing on women. They are not bringing out facts and useful data that can make sure that policies are going to be gender based.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER: It seems to me that the real issue is the relationship between research and power. There arises an obligation to transfer power to the

people, a power which resides in the skills of research. One thing is to place greater emphasis on research techniques, proliferating those as widely as possible. And the universities obviously have to play a big role in that. And the other is an affirmative action programme, where those who now have the skills regardless, incidentally, of their colour, but those who now have the skills, begin to train others as a systematic and deliberate policy. We're asking business to do this, for example; we're asking people in economic spheres to do this; in education and other spheres, health and so on. We have that obligation as academics, people who are working at universities or other institutes.

MALA SINGH: I emphasised the importance of policy education, the role of intellectuals in making policy debates accessible and using university policy research and training units to do that. But to what extent does even this attempt at democratising access to information privilege those who are literate or would have a certain measure of literacy, and who are able to understand English? There is an enormous problem in getting around the whole question of how we address the rural poor, for instance, the illiterate, the people who are unable to have access to this type of information through the medium of English.

HASSAN LORGAT: I think intellectuals don't often look at how they're disempowering their constituencies.

PATHORN: I think it is important to look at the dynamics of power and researchers within that dynamic. What is really awkward is when you confront a power relationship (not in relation to the system or capital or the state) within progressive circles. Siphon talked about the fact that white people involved in research for transformation, do monopolise power in certain ways. I don't agree with the idea that we must raise these issues more gently or more sensitively. I don't think one can raise them sensitively enough. Because people do hold onto the power that they have unconsciously, or with the best of intentions, or whatever it is. You cannot raise sensitively enough to someone that you are working with that they are holding a position of power and not relinquishing. And in holding this position of power they are oppressing a whole group of people that are not able to be involved in a transformation. I think that the problem with saying to researchers or academics, 'You know, you must be terribly sensitive,' is that it can have the effect of people being a bit scared to say something contentious. A bit scared to say something if it's going to anger activists. I think that the people who have to be sensitive are the people who are implementing things. At the level at which you are putting forward research, you are going to hopefully have a debate which is going to lead to something practical, I don't think you have to be so sensitive. But of course when you implement things, then you have to make very, very sure that you're not going to alienate the whole population who suddenly find something imposed upon them.

Siphon said that one of the ways in which researchers can try to deal with this issue is to engage with organisations that have been fighting the resistance struggle. I think in relation to gender domination, it's much more difficult because those organisations are not as well developed, or as aggressive, maybe, about the issue of gender domination as we are on the question of race.

MOSES NGOASHENG: I'd just like to pick up on a point that was made by Mala around the issue of the relationship between intellectuals and other intellectual organisations. I just want to ask in terms of Mala's presentation -- I had hoped that she would not only deal with the issue of intellectuals as located within the universities only but the role of those intellectuals located within organisations and what are the kinds of problems that arise in relation to those intellectuals. Because the issue of autonomy, the issue of the ambiguity and the incompatibility that exists in terms of work and activism, exists within those organisations. On the question of the production of knowledge, is it in fact necessary, or do the people who are in fact the producers of such knowledge have to be the same individuals who engage in the dissemination of that knowledge in a much more accessible way?

Can we say that different roles and therefore different skills are required for those processes? And if there are different roles and different skills required, what are the implications for research that is done outside organisations by people who are outside those organisations? And how do they relate to the disseminators of that information who might be in fact people who run workshops or organisations and so on?

LINDA CHISHOLM: Mala said that it was the responsibility of the intellectuals to make their policy debates accessible. I have a problem with that because it assumes that policy formulation is a specialised task that is the responsibility of intellectuals. In the 1980s all of us as individuals constantly struggled for a certain position [in] our relationship with the mass movements and our work in every single way wasn't an uncontested relationship. At the moment our position is uncontested. We've been privileged in this unbelievable position of being responsible for policy formulation and making it accessible to people. I just feel extraordinarily uncomfortable about it.

MALA SINGH: I had this uncomfortable sense that I was actually depicting a rather unpleasant division of labour between progressive intellectuals who would do the research on account of their expertise and the rest who would benefit from this, who would have this made accessible to them. But the whole question [is] how to mesh the kinds of skills and expertise that intellectuals undoubtedly possess and bring to the policy generation process at the moment, with the kinds of knowledge that come from the experiences of the people, within organisationally driven concepts. How does one feed information that comes, for instance, from the knowledge of resistance? Because it seems to me at the moment that agendas are being set in rather problematic ways, in interactions between leadership and intellectuals. Perhaps the whole question of generating policy agendas is in fact a fairly elitist type of phenomenon. But the issue is: what happens to that agenda, and what happens to the products that flow from that agenda? How can that be democratised? And what context and what organisationally-driven social forces can actually force those agendas to become more democratised? If we get stuck with certain patterns of policy generation that are in fact elitist and are in fact problematic in a variety of ways, those are going to become quite well established. And it's going to be an incredible struggle then to dismantle.