

# Reflection

## We are all radical feminists<sup>1</sup> now: reflections on ‘A bit on the side’<sup>2</sup>

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We published this paper in *Transformation* 5 (1987) in the cauldron of a particularly volatile period in South African politics. The mid-1980s in Natal was a time of the most enormous violence and uncertainty, a time of civil war and states of emergency. Yet what strikes us most, reading this paper in hindsight, is the tremendous sense of hope and optimism that another world was not only possible but was, indeed, looming on the horizon. Moreover, as ‘academic-activists’ we saw our responsibility as being to help in shaping the nature of that future. Hubris? For sure!

We wrote with the aim of developing a theoretically robust and empirically grounded scholarly argument that at the same time engaged political debates within the national liberation movement. We offered a sympathetic insider critique of the internal politics of the United Democratic Front (UDF) (in which all of us were involved to a greater or lesser extent) and its relationship with the ANC (in which some of us were also involved), both internally and in exile. The ‘woman question’ position adopted by the ANC and linked to the movement’s adherence to the notion of ‘colonialism of a special type’ seemed to us flawed. Our objective was to highlight the weaknesses and limitations of this approach and to insist on the importance of bringing the private into the context of political struggle, experienced differently by women and men as gendered beings. We argued that this would determine not only the nature of politics but also policies, which were never gender neutral.

As activists we were extremely anxious about criticising the movement and in retrospect, consider doing so as having been something of an act of bravery. It was a critical and dangerous moment in South African politics

with the anti-apartheid opposition polarised between what were characterised as the ‘workerists’ and the ‘populists’. We went to extraordinary lengths to legitimise our credentials in the movement, and to construct our argument within the lineages of leftist debate, which explains why it is so carefully plotted and repetitive, to the point of turgidity!

The paper was given its first airing at the Association of Sociologists of Southern Africa (ASSA) conference in Cape Town in 1987. It was decided that as the only black author, Shireen would present it. We were terrified and, as it turned out, not without cause. We came under resounding criticism. When *Transformation* opted to publish the piece (Hassim et al 1987) we received a visit from a woman representative of the ANC who asked us not to go to press. When *Feminist Review* asked to republish the article (Beall et al 1989), once again a woman member of the ANC in exile prevailed upon the journal not to do so, again to no avail. What these events served to do was to confirm that we were on to something.

The first – and most damning – camp to which we assigned ourselves was that of feminism. For the next five years that made us targets of criticism from a number of directions in the ANC and the women’s movement. Critiques from the Western Cape, especially the University of the Western Cape, were particularly virulent and challenged our authority to speak at all. Responses from men were varied. For example, a UDF leader commented that our internal criticism was welcome and thought-provoking, while someone who at the time was of the ‘workerist’ persuasion said we had ‘rowed our boat’ to the middle of the river but now needed the courage to land it on the other side.

The most interesting response was silence. For example, the African Women Bibliographic Database, Africabib.org, hosted by the African Studies Centre in Leiden – does not cite the article or other published work of any of the three authors. Similar omissions can be found in many articles on gender written by South Africans that followed ours. Nor, we venture to say, have male writers (with a few exceptions) taken on board our argument that politics is gendered.

Does this mean the scholarship was of dubious quality or the analysis weak or irrelevant? The evidence points to the contrary. Although intensely local in its intentions, the article was by no means parochial. It referenced debates in a wide range of countries from Mozambique to Nicaragua to Cuba and Vietnam. It spoke to a growing awareness in global feminism circles that formal democracy was no guarantor of women’s freedom. It also spoke to the need to translate the theoretical insights of feminism into policy directions

that could/might be heard by comrades in civil society and the state. In this respect it drew on a surprisingly wide set of debates from Lenin to development theorists to the ANC – and that accounts for the clunky nature of the paper!

Still, perhaps as a result, the article has been widely cited internationally and continues to be regularly referenced up to the present, in several different arenas of debate. Citations relate to debates on feminist theory and feminism in the 'global South'; women's movements in Africa and in international comparative perspective; the role of women in politics; gender violence; women and war; gender, race and identity; and in journals, books and theses in the following disciplines: anthropology, comparative politics, cultural studies, development studies, education, sport; geography, health sciences, history, international relations, law, planning, political economy, literary studies, media studies, public policy, sociology.<sup>3</sup>

### **Debates on women and gender**

The starting point of the paper was our analysis of people's experiences, including their political engagement, as being gendered. It is an obvious point now but it was not seen in that way at the time nor has it been taken on board in mainstream writing on politics. Gender continues to be a 'bit on the side', alas. We emphasised the links between public and private and drew attention to the gendered effects of policy, and particularly of overarching economic policies. We argued for changing the gender division of labour, pointing out that the productionist bias of Marxist feminism and the representational bias of liberal feminism were both problematic and that you needed to look at consumption and redistribution as well. The concerns expressed by women in the trade unions about labour conditions and the division of labour were initially taken up by some sectors. For example, the Women's National Coalition's Charter lays out a manifesto for change that emphasises the need for social and economic redistribution. The Coalition made a significant impact on the Constitution, guaranteeing sexual and gender rights at least at the formal level. In the honeymoon period of articulating grand visions and policies (1994-1996) gender equality was routinely referred to as a goal of democracy and a responsibility of the state. Several policy documents which followed argued for gender mainstreaming, recognising that policy was not gender-neutral. A gender budgeting process, led by Debbie Budlender and Pregs Govender, placed South Africa at the forefront of progressive governments in explicitly considering the gendered impacts of policies (including key economic policies). It appeared to indicate a commitment by the ANC to a redistributive path with specific attention to

gender equality. Under the leadership of Francie Lund, social policy frameworks pushed against a conventional bias towards the nuclear family and gendered responsibilities within the family. Similarly housing subsidies were restructured to enable access by ‘person plus dependent’ as opposed to an assumed male head of household. An emphasis on basic service delivery (water, sanitation, energy, housing) has arguably alleviated the burden of housework for many women (although the benefits of the way in which such delivery has occurred is more debatable). And the expansion of social grants has made shifts in providing poor mothers with small amounts of regular income. However, huge gendered inequalities have deepened rather than lessened.

Massive unemployment and changes in the labour market that emphasise ‘self-employment’ (ie informal work) under increasingly tenuous conditions are part of the reason for this. The lack of jobs in the market, of course, affects both women and men; among men, several researchers argue that it has led to a crisis of masculinity, fuelling social exit, anger against women and children, and substance abuse. The extent of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic was not foreseen by many, but its impacts have been compounded by ANC denialism and policy gaps, as well as under-investment in health care. Women are more vulnerable to the disease, both by reason of biology and by their general social vulnerability. Dealing with the effects of this disease has put significant strains on a public health system that was inadequately developed in relation to the scale of demand. Rather than investing heavily in capacitating the public health sector, the government has evaded the responsibility by invoking arguments in favour of the more ‘humane’ and ‘dignified’ care that can be offered by communities and families. The consequence is that the management of the pandemic – the care of the sick, the replacement of incomes of affected members of the household, the ongoing care of children left parentless – falls onto women. The care deficit is thus caused not by a significant incorporation of women into the paid labour force, but by a combination of the weakness of their ability to earn an income and their vulnerability to violence and infection from HIV. Both the market and state bear responsibility for this reinforcement of a gendered division of labour.

Despite their responsibilities for maintaining highly-stressed families, women are the most vulnerable members within them, demonstrated by rising levels of gender-based violence. Data on domestic violence is not collected by the police as it is not officially listed as a crime. However, official statistics

for rape – widely believed by experts in the field to be under-reported – show a steady increase (Vetten 2007:429). In 1992, research by the Women's Health Project estimated that between 50 and 60 percent of marriages involve physical and sexual violence. In work conducted by the Medical Research Council in 1996, among a small sample of adolescent females in the Western Cape, a startling picture of these relationships is painted. The study found 'pervasive male control over almost every aspect of [the women's] early sexual experiences, and the male enactment of this in part through violent and coercive practices during sexual encounters' (Wood et al 1996:1). For women, the violence begins early in their lives. The study found that the first sexual encounters of girls occurred at the early age of around 12, with male partners being an average of five years older. Of the 24 teenagers they sampled, 22 reported being beaten by their partners on multiple occasions, primarily when the women attempted to refuse sex. Studies with larger samples of interviewees have confirmed these early findings. In a larger study of 1395 women attending ante-natal clinics in Soweto, conducted between 2001 and 2002, Medical Research Council researchers found that 55.5 per cent of their informants reported a 'lifetime history of physical or sexual assault by a male partner' (Dunkle et al 2003:2). This finding is corroborated by men's own accounts of their attitudes and actions towards women. A 1999 study of 1394 male workers of all races in Cape Town found that over 40 per cent of the men reported that they had physically or sexually assaulted their female partners within the previous ten years (Abrahams et al 1999:1). Chillingly, 25 per cent of the men who did not abuse nevertheless said that it was 'acceptable to hit' women in certain circumstances (1999:8). The main reasons given by the respondents for why they hit women were their perceptions that their authority was being challenged, or that their partners were not faithful to them. To the extent that social reproduction includes normative elements of collective life, then, the available models of masculinity and femininity are highly problematic and in stark contrast to the equality and dignity norms espoused by the Constitution.

In 1987 we were primarily concerned with trying to push feminism into the discourse for broader reasons of politics and policy and not just sexual politics. Yet we did so at the expense of paying adequate attention to sexual politics. Although we paid a great deal of attention to the linkages between the public and private spheres, in retrospect we failed to ask the pertinent questions about social relationships of gender. So carefully did we steer away from the bogey of 'radical feminism' that we unconsciously traded off

the need to make inroads into the movements' discourses on women and gender relations against a robust critique of sexual violence, especially within our own movements. Much later, Debby Bonnin's work on Mpumalanga township revealed just how embedded gendered violence was in anti-apartheid politics (Bonnin 2000), while the statistics above show the extent to which the private sphere remains ridden with crisis and, furthermore, how difficult it is to shift relationships from above and outside.

In 1987 we tread lightly on the question of culture, as did many feminists. Responding perhaps to ethnic and racial categorisation and the apartheid pathologisation of black cultures, we steered clear of questions of sexuality, polygamy, autonomy and choice. As a result, there has been a collective (by which we mean broadly across the left) failure to debate what was dismissively labelled 'lifestyle politics', and a corresponding legacy of underdevelopment in public debate on what is entailed in the *human* relations of democracy. While this is increasingly a matter of contemporary intellectual debate, it has not impacted much on the political and policy realms as was all too evident during the rape trial of Jacob Zuma and in debates on land, customary law and marriage for example.

Our concern in 1987 that reducing gender concerns to entry into positions of power is problematic remains with us today. The last two decades have seen a major shift in gender debates away from redistribution questions to representational questions and 'bourgeois feminism', that exclusionary label often imposed by the ANC, has been vigorously promoted by the ANC in practice. The obsession with quotas and with symbolic politics has acted as a kind of decoy away from the harder questions of changing relations of social and economic power. The irony that for many years South Africa was in the forefront of indices of women in power but languishing at the lower end of league tables on maternal mortality was not lost on feminists. We shared a certain conviction on the left that control of the state would give us at least some of the levers of power if the right government was in place; in retrospect we underestimated the difficulty of changing institutional practices and cultures and of carrying through new agendas, as well as the corruptibility of power.

Why *did* the project of gender equality falter, then? We could blame political will, the inevitable gaps between policy intentions and policy implementation, patriarchy. All would be valid but our intuition in 1987 that a relatively autonomous women's movement was a central prerequisite for change strikes us as key. When we were writing in 1987, we were first hand

witnesses to the power of grassroots women's organisations (having been part of the Natal Organisation of Women and the United Women's Congress) and to the dangers that masculinist political practices could undermine the agendas of women's organisations. As the 1980s developed this became scarily evident; the rise of the UDF swallowed up women's organisations and halted the development of alternative political practices. In the 1990s the ANC Women's League asserted its hegemonic position, cutting a swathe through the fragile organisations still standing. Within no time at all, women's organisations had been decimated and leading feminists who congregated around the ANC became marginalised and disillusioned. We might then have been more attentive to radical feminist arguments about separate women's organisations, although we remain committed to the need for those organisations to develop alliances with other democratic movements.

## **Conclusion**

We still proudly own the thrust of our argument about the gendered nature of politics and policy – that gender cannot be delinked from class although they are not equivalent concepts. Although what we characterised as socialist feminism we now see as a wider waterfront embracing social democracy, the substantive premises hold, particularly at a time when we are seeing the triumph of liberal feminism globally, with its focus on creating opportunities for and the representation of often more privileged women, and its neglect of distributional issues, often in the context of a rise in populism, including nationally.

## **Notes**

1. Our original paper (Hassim et al 1987) was in part located in debates between types of feminism. We use these types of feminism in the following way in the paper. While liberal (or bourgeois) feminism focuses on formal equality between women and men (especially in law), radical feminism locates women's oppression in male domination, in both public and private spheres (particularly in relation to sexual politics), and requires women to organise autonomously. The classical Marxist perspective – the basis for the 'women question' position – was that women's oppression (arising from the sexual division of labour and their exclusion from the public sphere) would be eliminated in the transition to socialism (Hassim et al 1987:3). Thus separate women's organisation was unnecessary, and in fact women would be empowered through engagement in struggles in the public sphere. A similar point was made about national struggles. Socialist feminism attempts to combine the insights of radical and Marxist

feminism, arguing for eliminating both capitalist exploitation and male domination. Socialist feminists have generally argued for the development of separate women's organisations, although the extent of autonomy from broader social movements is debated.

2. The article was initially published in *Transformation* as Hassim et al (1987) and later in *Feminist Review* as Beall et al (1989)
3. Citations include, for example: Agyepong (2001); Ahikire (2007); Albertyn (1998; 1998-9); Baden et al (1998); Bannerji, (2000); Beall (1995; 1998; 2005; 2009); Becker (1995); Bonnin (2000); Bonthuys and Albertyn (2007); Bradfield (2010); Britton (2002); Boutin (1994); Connell (1998); Daymond et al; Fair (1993); Fish (2006); Geisler (2000; 2004); Ginwala (1990); Goldblatt and Meintjes (1996); Hassim, S (1991; 1993; 2003; 2006); Hassim and Gouws (1988); Jones (2003); Kabeer (1998); Kadalie (1995); Kaplan (1990); Kaganas and Murray (1991; 1994); Kim (2001); Kuumba (2002a, b); Makan (1995); Mangaliso (2000); McClintock, A (1990); Moosa and Kidd (2006); McFadden (1992); Meintjes, S (1998, 2005); Miraftab (2006); Moser (1993); Murphy (2002); Newaz (2003); Orkin (1993); Ray and Korteweg (1999); Rodríguez (1994); Rowbotham and Miller (1994); Seidman (1993; 1999; 2000); Seekings (1991); Shettima (1995); Sinclair (1998); Turshen and Twagiramariya (2001); Threlfall et al (2005); Todes and Walker (1992); Unterhalter (2000); Van der Walt, M (2002); Venter (1995-6); Vijayalakshmi (2006); Waylen (2007); Wicomb (1990).

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