Review

Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom (eds), *Gender in Popular Education: Methods for Empowerment*, Belville/London and New Jersey: CACE/Zed, 1996.

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In the last few years gender equality has become a widely accepted goal. This book makes a contribution to the realisation of that goal: firstly, by identifying how in the realm of adult and popular education it might be achieved, and, secondly, by challenging the notion that the state (or other top-down) initiatives can by themselves achieve gender equality.

The book contains 11 chapters and an introduction by the editors. The chapters cover experiences of adult educators in six different countries. Common feminist assumptions, methodologies or visions hold the chapters together, but the relationship between chapters is often unclear and unstable. For example, there are striking differences between the conditions of work of feminist popular educators in Canada, on the one hand, and the challenges facing adult educators in South Africa, India and Malaysia, on the other. These are not just differences of locale (north versus south/west versus east) but of class, space, resources and objectives. Put side by side, there seemed little that a person organising large numbers of homeless or jobless women against exploitation and powerlessness in India could gain from listening to a feminist talking about the liberating experiences of dance (drawn from a South American experience) applied to a small group of Canadian women. This book then, is not exclusively about popular education in the 'third world', though most of the contributions deal with this. It is a book which looks, in context-specific ways, at methodologies deployed and challenges faced by adult educators.

The message that comes through is that women across the world have problems which often are not addressed by existing programmes and which require special remediation and attention. Having said this, and the editors are particularly well aware of the dangers of gender essentialism, the book also shows how widely different are these problems and what a wide range of strategies can be used to improve the lot of women. These range from the collective impulse of educators working with large groups of women (for example in India and Malaysia) to organise and challenge existing power inequalities, to the more

individualistically oriented initiatives of educators in Australia, Canada, the United States and South Africa.

Whether to adopt an approach which helps individuals or helps the group takes one deep into hoary feminist debates. Not surprisingly, in contexts where resources are generously provided and the audiences are middle class, the approach tends to be towards individual liberation. In situations where living standards are depressed and women are battling to keep their heads above water, the approach tends to be collective. In between these two approaches are cases where a balance has to be struck between both approaches. In the case of an Australian project around the birthing rights of aboriginal women documented by Helen Myles and Isobel Tarrago, the focus is on individual (pregnant) women, but the implications go much further, involving minority and identity politics and claims for racial autonomy. Similar tensions are clear in two of the chapters which deal directly with particular popular education projects in South Africa.

The chapter by Michelle Friedman and Colleen Crawford Cousins is an impressive discussion of a week-long training workshop on participatory methods for community development held in Durban in 1993 (in the interregnum before the Government of National Unity was elected). Many feminist accounts of such exercises suffer from a tone of triumphalism, an assertion of universal sisterhood and a confidence that women shall overcome. Here, however, the authors relate, sanguinely, the difficulties of the workshop. Their own identities (white, female, English-speaking and middle-class) are made a central part of the story. The conflicts which emerge between black, mostly male, Zulu-speaking activists and the facilitators is brought into the open and analysed. There are no pat answers provided. Instead a candid assessment of what was achieved and the limitations which dog such workshops is given. And yet the chapter retains a sense of hope - something which readers struggling with grim images of crime and violence in South Africa today may appreciate.

The same optimism is present in Astrid von Kotze's piece on a writers' workshop, also held in Durban. Curiously, her chapter fails to say when exactly the workshop was held, though it seems to have been in the early-1990s. Von Kotze explores the tension between being a cultural activist and a popular feminist educator. She shows how gender differences function to misrepresent situations (when African, Zulu-speaking men write idealistically and uncritically about domestic comforts in the countryside which are created by the sweat of their wives) and to silence women. She shows how such misrepresentations can be debunked and corrected by citing women's views of the same situation: the countryside is 'a drunkard's paradise, where men come home to drink and lord it over women, only to leave them again, penniless and pregnant with another

child' (p157). Despite these gender antagonisms, von Kotze notes how racial solidarity and shared political allegiances can mute gender conflict - a point made long ago by Hazel Carby in the context of black communities in the UK, but well worth remembering now.

There is an uneasy tension through the book on how to discuss and present men. The prominence of gender in the title may give the prospective reader the idea that an inclusive approach is adopted, allowing for a range of viewpoints to be articulated which cover the positions, concerns and predicaments of men. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Men and issues of masculinity are seldom discussed. Homophobia, for example, rates only one mention. What is more serious than this omission, however, is the failure to use gender as a relational concept. The result is that the book is caught, on the one hand, between treating men as 'the problem' and , on the other, of treating gender inequalities as an issue which can only be tackled by an engagement with and between men and women. Some of the chapters consciously identify men as enemy - to be challenged, subverted, overthrown. The harrowing accounts of gender relations presented by these writers often seem to vindicate a politics of confrontation. Chang Lean Heng argues that anger was an important resource for organising Malaysian women factory workers to confront their passivity and domination (p205). Approaches that equate patriarchy with men see the overthrow of patriarchy as the climax of women's liberation. This is a politics of armageddon associated with radical 1970s feminists like Shulamith Firestone. It seems somewhat out of place in a world with more than its fair share of violent conflict.

Other approaches which do not proceed from a position of antagonism towards men are available. Rieky Stuart sets it out in her sensitive treatment of gender work in Canada. Refusing to position men as 'the problem', she argues that 'there are two ways to have a discussion about gender issues in development. One way generates heat, the other generates light' (p134). It may not always be easy in the context of a sexually-mixed workshop and working from a feminist position, to keep men on board. Friedman and Crawford Cousins working in South Africa found this out. They admit to being 'rudely shocked' by the hostility of African, Zulu first-language men to their attempts to pursue a policy of women empowerment (p71).

Empowerment is a major theme running through the book. One of the intentions of the book is to give this concept new meaning since it has been appropriated by 'a very broad range of political positions (and) has (been) drained of any clear referent and ... of its more politically transformative meaning' (p16). Not all contributors share the same understanding of empowerment as the nuanced and well-written introduction by Shirley Walters and Linzi Manicom

makes amply clear. Empowerment is sometimes theorised as bringing to light or giving status to subordinated (frequently experiential) knowledges (p15-16). On other occasions, it is treated as a process by which actors are brought to a new (and more powerful) condition. In this latter understanding, it would seem as though there are two basic kinds of empowerment. One involves a revolution of the self, an internal revolution such as that advocated by French psychoanalytic feminists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. The other empowerment, drawing heavily on socialist feminism, calls for women collectively to pursue liberation. These are not mutually exclusive and many of the contributions are sensitive to the complexities of empowerment, yet not one contributor seemed to question the concept of empowerment itself.

It is possible to suggest that a third kind of empowerment exists. This is an an empowerment to excess. I read this book at a time when the University of Natal in Durban was experiencing a turbulent period. Dissatisfied students were taking their frustrations out by smashing cars, breaking windows, intimidating those who disagreed with them. Those involved were mostly young, African male students. Still suffering the legacy of apartheid education, frustrated by the limits it placed on them personally and imbued with an expectation that transformation should be quick and radical, they chose to achieve their goals by violence. Of course, this type of empowerment is not the exclusive domain of frustrated revolutionaries. The same kind of empowerment was at play when young white male conscripts in the SADF went on cross-border raids. In its extreme form, it is the empowerment of men like Colonel Eugene de Kock of Vlakplaas, that enables people to act with impunity, to disregard moral considerations and to be a law unto themselves. This kind of Rambo empowerment is a highly gendered phenomenon. It frequently involves men with weapons, men organised into aggressive and self-confident groupings, men with a certainty about their physicality and its effect. How should education, popular/adult, formal and informal, deal with this kind of empowerment?

All forms of education, now in the process of being integrated into one system through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), must take account of masculinity, how it is formed and enacted. The project for gender equality must consider how violence can be contained and how the forms of gender identity which underpin it can be moulded, engaged with and made knowable as gender identities (as opposed to aspects of culture, race and ethnicity).

Secondly, the approach of empowerment should be framed within an overall sense of what is possible. Empowerment is often held to be the key to giving women back control of their lives (Carolyn Model-Anonuevo, p125). But nobody ever has 'control of his/her life' because there are always pressures

bearing down upon it, so many forces beyond the control of the individual. To give somebody the belief that s/he can control life beyond these social limits is to give a lesson in frustration or hopelessness. So, to return to the University of Natal example, when students are led to understand transformation as the complete removal of inequalities or obstacles to achievement, empowerment becomes a violent exercise in masculine display.

In thinking about ways to tackle gender injustice, gender theorist Bob Connell has recently pointed out that the efforts of movements like the pro-feminist men's movement have lost steam in the recent past. He points out that a range of new problems (HIV/AIDS, global environmental challenges) and old problems which are being reconfigured in the new politics of identity, require a new approach, a new politics. '[I]n some sense it must be a politics beyond interests, a politics of pure possibility. Though that is, perhaps, another way of expressing the interest all people on this planet share in social justice, peace and balance with the natural world' (1995:243). A politics beyond interest involves an education beyond the constraint of gender determinations. Educators, women and men, must become aware of the way in which their actions are gendered and infuse their teaching/facilitations with this awareness.

This book will be appreciated by adult (popular) educators working in South Africa where there is a dearth of local literature on the subject. Its comparative approach and its theoretical sophistication will be welcomed as well. In recommending this book to readers with an interest in gender, education and political transformation, I will conclude with the hope that the next book which claims to tackle gender issues will not fix its gaze solely on women.

REFERENCES

Connell, RW (1995) *Masculinities*, Cambridge: Polity.