

Local/Global Encounters

Experiences of Democracy in South Africa from a Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT *Shamim Meer highlights the need for ongoing organization in civil society in order to achieve the redistribution necessary to change unequal and oppressive social relations that continue to exist in South Africa despite the new democracy. She explores how and why shifts took place in South Africa from a liberation movement's dreams of socialism or at the very least social democracy, and an end to sexism, to a pragmatic acceptance that there is no alternative to a neoliberal economic and political order, as that movement became the ruling party in a new democratic order. She points to the need to engage in struggles over meanings of both democracy and feminism, at the same time as material struggles are waged.*

KEYWORDS *women; state; movements; political participation; demobilization; organization*

Introduction

The first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 marked the beginning of a new political era for the country. The horrendous system of racial oppression and exploitation, built on the back of colonial rule and capitalist extraction, had come to an end. But had it? While 1994 marked a moment of momentous significance in that for the first time all South Africans, no matter what their colour, could participate in the electoral system, the transition to democracy has not meant freedom from oppressive relations of exploitation for the vast majority of South Africans. Cleavages along the lines of race, gender and class spawned initially by colonialism, and later cemented by apartheid continue to be the fault lines along which South Africa is divided into that part which enjoys a first-world lifestyle of luxury cars and mansions and that which is homeless, jobless and barely surviving. While some black men and women have joined the ranks of the wealthy, for the vast majority their experience over the past twelve years has been increasing impoverishment.

The dreams that drove a vibrant civil society to resist apartheid and bring in a new order have not been realized. More than this, the very meaning of what we advanced as part of that dream – for some visions of socialism, for some of a social democratic order, where the new state would redress the wrongs of past systems – have not been realized. Dreams of women's liberation, of a society where women would no longer be

subordinated and subjected to patriarchal control by the state, in the community and in the home, have receded into the distance.

In place of these dreams are the thinnest versions of democracy and feminism.

People's participation is limited to regular elections in a representative democracy, where the focus is on the entry of women, workers and members of the communist party into untransformed institutions of the state and corporations – institutions that themselves produce and reproduce the very class, race and gender inequalities that socialists and feminists should be redressing. The struggle was about taking over the colonial state but did not sufficiently address transforming that state.

What is worse is that the dominant ideas of the time victimize the dispossessed. Whereas in the past systems of oppression and exploitation were understood as the causes of poverty and inequality, today exploitative systems escape scrutiny as the poor are blamed for their position and condition. So when the workers and communities demonstrate their discontent in acts of desperation they are labelled a third force or their claims are dismissed on the grounds that they are acting from a sense of entitlement – that they focus on rights but are not aware of the responsibilities that accompany rights. As in the case of conservative claims in industrial countries, there is an increasing clamour of voices in the public arena victimizing women receiving state welfare benefits through claims that they are deliberately giving birth to children in order to access state welfare.

Two challenges for democracy

All these signal that we have become a 'normal' democracy. And like feminists and social democrats elsewhere we too seem to be at a loss as to how to take up the challenges of the present.

The present raises two key issues of concern. The first concern is how quickly we made shifts in the realm of ideas so that bold revolutionary visions were turned almost overnight into a pragmatic acceptance of these thinnest versions of democracy and feminism, abandoning the ideas of the 'Freedom Charter' that the people shall gov-

ern, and contributing to the demobilization of vibrant civil society organizations.

Alongside an acceptance of neoliberal economic solutions there is an acceptance of a neoliberal democracy – framed by the view that there is no alternative to the might of global capital. So, despite lip service to community participation and ending poverty, the state acts to limit participation and does little to redistribute critical resources. Technical approaches take precedence over and delegitimize politics.

The idea of democracy that has taken hold stresses limited civil and political rights and does not include ideas of redistribution. There has been little redistribution in the new democracy and there is little space for meaningful participation by movements or women and men in the country as individuals. This is so despite the liberation movement's Freedom Charter of 1950s and the ANC election manifesto of the reconstruction and development programme, both of which promised redistribution, in addition, to a political order where popular organizations representing workers, women and communities would play a role in the new democracy.

The second concern is how quickly so many revolutionaries of the apartheid era became functionaries in a state that seemed to privilege capital, or became partners to the captains of business and industry in enterprises that by their very nature exploit the masses.

Following these two concerns the tasks that lie ahead of us entail struggles at two levels: at the level of ideas around meanings of democracy and feminism, and around building movements. Struggles over ideas enable us to dream of freedom once more – to re-imagine democracy and feminism in ways that make participation and an end to women's subordination more central. Struggles to build movements are critical as the organization of people to safeguard their interests has intrinsic as well as instrumental value (Sen, 1999). Within representative democracies existing, social relations enable and advance the voices and interests of the most powerful groups. Unless governments are pressed by less powerful and marginalized constituencies, existing social relations will remain intact.

Everyday life

Policies of the new ANC government follow neo-liberal prescriptions, which do not redress the wrongs of the past effectively. The everyday living conditions for the majority of South Africans have got worse since 1994 – the date of our first democratic elections. Poverty and unemployment have deepened, as have inequalities between the rich and the poor.

The poverty rate in South Africa is estimated at 45–50 per cent, and according to 2003 figures the unemployment rate was 41.6 per cent. As Habib (2005) notes, a similar situation in the industrialized world would have led to a declaration of the state of emergency. Yet, in South Africa state institutions do little to tackle this situation head on, and government's neoliberal policies only deepen the crisis.

Institutionalized racism and sexism result in a racial and gender dimension to experiences of poverty and unemployment, with black women experiencing a greater share of poverty and unemployment as compared to men. Despite the outlawing of discrimination based on race and gender post-1994, and despite constitutional requirements and laws promoting prospects for historically disadvantaged individuals including women, in early 2000, black women faced higher unemployment, lower incomes, relatively poor access to training and promotions, who were in poorly paid jobs and industries, and domestic work was the single largest employer of black women (Seidman Makgetla, 2004).

Black women continue to occupy the worst paid, most menial jobs, and predominate in sectors that face casualization, subcontracting (cleaning) or job losses (garment and textiles). In addition to this, these sectors are difficult to unionize. So while new laws (post-1994) promulgated a minimum wage of R800 a month for domestic workers, many still work for less than this – not being unionized they have not been able to make the new law meaningful in their lives.

Women in the informal sector occupy the survivalist end of this sector, where they eke out a living in desperation. Women in the former homelands continue to live in villages not ser-

viced, suffering the worst excesses of poverty and spending hours walking to fetch water and firewood. Women who lived and worked on commercial farms as farm workers and members of labour tenant families have been evicted off these farms in the past eleven years through evictions at the hand of farmers. In urban townships, women make up a large part of the communities who suffer at the hands of state agents who evict them and disconnect their water and electricity supplies. Millions are cut off from electricity, water and telephone systems because they cannot afford to pay for these services. Yet, the government continues with its privatization policies, which demand cost recovery.

Land dispossession, a cornerstone of apartheid, was to be addressed through land reform. Yet, there has been very little land redistribution due to an economic policy that rests on a market-driven process of land reform and a shift since 1999 away from the landless poor to supporting the creation of a black commercial farming class.

Liberal notions of citizenship are entrenched

As the dominant party with no effective opposition, the ANC sees no need to build support from below. Social movements have been co-opted, kept at a distance or turned into delivery agents of the state. There is limited room for citizens to shape policy and even COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the SACP (South African Communist party), organizations in alliance with the ANC, have been told that economic policy is not negotiable.

The government argues that it is there to work with all social partners rather than to empower ANC constituencies who are the workers and the poor (Seidman Makgetla, 2004). This surreal argument entrenches liberal notions of citizenship, which marginalize the majority of South Africans who are the very citizens whose interests the state should safeguard. Government policy in fact privileges business. As Habib (2005) notes, faced with two opposing sets of interests—investors with investment leverage and a citizenry with votes as leverage – the ANC chooses in favour of investors.

They do this because they are not threatened at the polls.

In the present context where avenues for people's participation are limited to regular elections and to unfruitful engagement with local bureaucrats, popular discontent has taken a range of forms – from community protests (reminiscent of the protests against the apartheid state) over lack of service provision, to burning of trains against poor public transport provision. Sporadic acts of resistance to poor delivery in local townships capture news headlines and incite comment from the government's National Intelligence Agency that this is the work of a third force. Protestors in the Free State province for example were held on sedition charges on terms of the new anti-terrorism laws.

What happened to the dream of freedom?

In trying to understand how quickly there was a shift away from dreams of freedom to a pragmatism framed by the view that there is no alternative to the might of global capital and to a practice where technical solutions take precedence over and delegitimize politics, it seems clear that not all of us struggling side by side had the same agenda, although we (perhaps naively) assumed we did. For some it would seem that the struggle was against the formal system of racial oppression, and now that we have got rid of racist laws we have reached normality. Efforts are now concentrated on the individual race to get as high up as possible within this system – either in politics or in economics – a race because given the nature of the system there are very few places at the top.

Only for a very few did the search for freedom include eradicating women's subordinate position resulting from patriarchy. For many, the task was to organize women, workers and youth, so as to ensure there were greater numbers in resistance organizations.

The dominant ideas we face today are that the struggle is over and that the tasks that confront us are technical. The technocratic vision of the ANC stands in the way of efforts to build local democracy and participation (Heller, 2001). In this scenario, the space feminists occupied in earlier

years seems to have been stifled by increasingly technicized gender talk – where gender comes to mean women and men minus an understanding of a patriarchal order which oppresses and exploits women.

The vibrant organizations of workers, students, women and youth no longer exist. COSATU, once a giant straddling workplace and community struggles in what has been termed political unionism, has become both compromised in its position of alliance partner with the ANC and too locked in old ways of thinking to take on the challenges of the present head on – challenges of a changing working class given higher employment, increased informalization and casualization. It has failed to come to terms with the shedding of industrial jobs and the shift of key union leaders into government, and its autonomy as a worker's organization is compromised by its membership of the tripartite alliance, which it shares with the ANC and SACP.

The strong women's organizations of the 1980s, such as FEDTRAW, NOW and UWCO, did not even have the opportunity to reflect on their role in the new democracy as they were disbanded when the ANC returned to South Africa following its unbanning and began to set up branches country-wide. Women in these organizations saw themselves as ANC members, who were now able to declare this openly and build the party. But this demobilization of existing organizations has been costly.

Organizations also suffered the costs of demobilization first as key leaders shifted their attention away from grassroots organizing towards the national negotiation processes that preceded and led to the first democratic elections, and then again as key leaders entered the state legislatures. The gains made in entering the state institutions thus meant a cost to the vibrancy of trade unions, women's organizations and civil society in general.

The cost of demobilization

The nature, the terrain and the possibilities for activism shifted from the time of the negotiations in the early 1990s and more so post-1994. The state started to be seen as a key terrain for action.

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For some this meant entering state institutions in political or bureaucratic positions. For others it meant influencing state policy and laws from organizational bases of networks or NGOs.

Bringing workers and feminist demands to the state also had a cost. While some policy and legal gains were made, at the same time as they engaged with state policy, feminist demands were often watered down so as to gain acceptability within state institutions. It meant that the personal got de-emphasized and that the grassroots became more and more detached from the former activists who engaged with the state.

Added to this, the approach that technical expertise had to be prioritized over participation from below, in order to influence the country's constitution, laws and policy in different sectors, meant that new actors were privileged. Technical experts, some of whom had never been in grassroots organizations and had never engaged in political struggles, became central in policy making. Technicized paradigms of gender came to predominate and took over earlier ideas of feminism and women's liberation in the new democracy.

Detached from a grassroots constituency and from notions of struggle, gains made in institutions and laws to safeguard women's rights have not reached the lives of the majority of the country's female population. In the period of negotiations and constitution-making, women came together across political party lines with women from faith-based organizations and community groups in an effective women's lobby – the Women's National Coalition (WNC). Activism by the WNC and the Rural Women's Movement resulted in gender equality taking precedence over culture and tradition, in the constitution of the country and in the enshrining of women's and gay rights. The WNC lobbied for an impressive array of gender machinery. Put in place of post-1994, these include an Office on the Status of Women (OSW), a Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) and gender focal points in line function departments.

Any gains?

100 To date, the CGE and the OSW do not seem to have achieved very much. Besides being poorly staffed,

the overriding perspective seems to be of service delivery rather than challenge gender disparities. The gender machinery, the policy advocates and the women in state institutions are all caught up within the dominant trend – that there is no alternative to the ANC, and no alternative to capitalism.

Like many of the key trade union, student, communist party and community leaders of the 1980s and the early 1990s, some key women's rights and feminist activists went into the various tiers of government and political office – into local, provincial or national government. As a result of successful campaigning by the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) that 30 per cent of the party's list to parliament should be women, the first democratic parliament saw one of the highest proportions of women worldwide. Many on the ANC list came from the key movements of the struggle – the South African Communist Party, trade union, and women's and students' movements. However, the great hopes that these interests would be privileged by the post-apartheid government were soon dashed. Coupled with this, the high number of members of these movements in parliament resulted in the movements being drained of their key leaders.

Women who went into the state had in a sense privileged the state as an arena for action and abandoned civil society organizations. They saw entering the state institutions as an extension of their activism. They did not, however, consider adequately the state's role in reproducing unequal social relations of class, race and gender, and they stopped focussing on how to continue their battles with the male-defined institutions and male leaders. The edge of activism developed by women in the 1980s was not visible, as women inside the state battled to understand the new terrain they had entered and as women outside focussed on ways to influence state policy.

While the electoral system based on party lists within a proportional representation system had served as an advantage to increase the numbers of women, trade unionists and communist party members in the national and provincial legislatures, it meant that women members ultimately represented the party and were accountable to it, rather than to a constituency.

Feminists belonging to trade unions and NGOs that had helped bring in the post-apartheid era became absorbed after 1994 with tasks of reconstruction. This meant in most cases working separately in sectors resembling government departments so as to influence policy. A few continued to work on specific women's issues in women's organizations, while others went into development NGOs, universities and research institutions.

Former activists in networks, NGOs and in the roles of independent consultants worked with state institutions and with gender focal points located in different government departments to help draw up gender policies, conduct gender audits and train department staff. However, given the government's unwillingness to be influenced not only from below but also by their alliance partners, eradicating poverty and inequality have not been governmental priorities. The government has not responded to the calls for a basic income grant to deal with poverty, nor has it prioritized AIDS treatment – an important issue for women given the high rates of HIV/AIDS transmission in South Africa – and instead committed large sums of money to buying arms. Women in parliament bound by party rules, as the ANC does not allow individual members to vote against the party, went along with these decisions with the one exception of Pregs Govender, the MP who chaired the Joint Standing Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women and who left parliament on the basis that she could no longer go along with these actions.

In the legal and policy arenas, feminists in civil society in the Reproductive Rights Network, the Network Against Violence Against Women and the Rural Women's Movement were able to work with a strong core of feminists in parliament to ensure legislation and policy change on maintenance, domestic violence, abortion and customary marriage. These legal changes should not be underestimated as they have enabled women as organized constituencies to bring attention to forms of subordination requiring redress. At a symbolic level, they have advanced women's rights and ideas of women's equality.

It was a combination of organization and the historical moment that enabled women to make

these gains. The struggle was about redressing inequalities and it was difficult for liberation organizations not to respond to women's demands for equality. However, these gains are being threatened as evidenced in recent challenges to abortion laws by the moralistic right, and in the treatment of the complainant in the rape trial of ANC leader Jacob Zuma (former Deputy President, presently supported by key COSATU and SACP leaders as their choice of candidate as the next President of South Africa).

It is clear that formal legal change is not a sufficient condition to ensure changes in women's lives. A key factor standing in the way of making these rights real is state budgetary constraints, which result in insufficient funds available to implement these laws. Women have attempted to intervene in budgeting processes through the Women's Budget Project. However, without a constituency that can apply ongoing pressure, this project has had to rely on research and has not been able to influence state economic policy or budgeting priorities.

More concerns

In considering legal and policy gains a further set of issues emerge. First, in many cases organizations lobbied for legal change on the basis that women were a vulnerable group requiring state protection. Such arguments entrench women's subordinate roles and status in unintended ways and do not necessarily empower women (Hassim, 2004).

A second concern with regards to legal gains is that in areas where men's privileges are threatened by women's claims – such as land reform – women have not been able to make headway. Women's rights to land have not been adequately addressed neither at the level of policy nor at that of implementation because too much was at stake for powerful interests to give up their control over land (Meer, 1999). Land ownership defines economic and social status and political power, and it structures relationships within and outside the household. Given this, there are enormous obstacles in the way of redistributive land reform for the landless, and even greater obstacles for the

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realization of women's land rights (Agarwal, 1996). Conflicts over land take place between powerful men—commercial farmers, traditional leaders and community leaders who do not want to allow the entry of women as new contenders. To allow women's entry would invite struggles against social norms and practices and lead to potential shifts in power imbalances in favour of women within the household, the market and the state. However, despite the deeply political nature of the demand for land, the government's land reform programme and the NGOs working in the sector tend to treat land as a basic need, depoliticizing land reform.

A third concern is that privileging legal changes has meant a shift away from women's every day experiences and away from dealing with social norms and cultural values that keep women subordinated. Prevailing patriarchal social relations in households and communities that limit women's access to information, movement and the ability to act make it difficult for women to act in order to make formal rights real.

New struggles in the new democracy

In the years of struggle against apartheid I was part of a movement which aimed to consciously build women's and feminist organizations. The idea was that such organizations would enable us as women to place our issues on the agenda of the workers' and national liberation struggles so that the new society would change women's lives not only in the country but also in the home. By locating our struggles as women within trade unions and black communities, we linked being women to questions of class and race. It was not only what we brought to our efforts but also the times we lived in which allowed us to do what we did during those years. It was a time where we could dream a different order – a socialist feminist future of equality and social justice. It was clear that the struggle was about political power and that the terrain was grassroots-based organization.

In the new democracy, demobilization has taken place in a number of ways. One way was when organizations of the 1980s disbanded to build the

ANC; another was when activists moved into the state legislatures and bureaucracies; a third one was when the ANC asserted its role as the only avenue for change, marginalizing the role of movements viewing civil society challenges as undermining democracy, and turning civil society organizations into development partners; a fourth one was the shift from struggle to technical mode; and final one was when activists within networks and NGOs shifted their efforts away from and abandoned grassroots links in engagement with the state in policy making and in implementing the state's agenda.

Perhaps the seeds of this demobilization were already present in the days of struggle in ways not evident then, but more clearly evident in retrospect. Within the country, debates in the 1980s took place in the context of growing community, trade union and women's organizations over how to organize – the two opposing views being grassroots-led organization *versus* organizations led by a vanguard. Sometimes the lines between the two views were blurred and what seemed to be grassroots led often degenerated into situations where a vanguard saw 'the masses' as transmission belts to the party and where the issues that concerned 'the masses' became instruments in increasing party power.

An authoritarian style of leadership seemed to become reinforced even as we struggled for democracy. Exiles cut off from their roots could not and did not develop a consultative leadership style. Internally, many working from an ostensible grassroots position had links with the ANC underground and operated in secrecy within a chain of command and control. The roots of a highly centralized ANC, which had little space for meaningful participation of men and women in civil society, go back to these times and even earlier.

A second debate was over what constituted appropriate political issues. This, particularly, affected women's struggles as male-defined notions of politics held sway within the main resistance organizations such as the United Democratic Front. The dominant view declared that women's health, rape, violence against women in the home and the experiences of women workers at work were nonessential and not political issues. But

some women within the country and within the ANC in exile contested these notions creating public debate on these issues.

New movements today

Today social movements such as the Anti Privatization Forum, the Soweto Electricity Committee, the Landless People's Movement and the Treatment Action Campaign represent challenges to the dominant discourse. They tend to stand in opposition to the state who they experience as repressive.

They take up actions against the effects of government's policies of privatization of water and electricity, and around demands for AIDS treatment. These movements hold some hope for re-energizing a sense of community and joint struggle but face tremendous challenges. The base of these movements are unemployed women with little organizing skills, little social power, no natural point of congregation – all of these make organizing difficult. Local actions do not turn into organizational gains because of high affiliate turnover, difficulties in sustaining local struggles and increased state repression (Benjamin, 2004).

Added to this, women are marginalized and men dominate within these movements.

A commentator (Paley, 2004) notes that for the male leadership of the APF being revolutionary is limited to actions in relation to the state, and not in relation to oppressive cultural practices or oppressive thoughts and actions by individual men. Male leaders of the APF dismissed efforts to start a women's collective within the APF as fracturing the movement. While women were more than half of those who attended APF workshops, most did not speak. A woman activist within this movement noted that women were being used by men looking for power within the social movements.

This is not new. Like the left elsewhere, the South African left has not easily recognized women and their interests. Women had to wage battle within the trade unions, in community-based organizations and within liberation movements such as the ANC to get their voices heard in the 1980s. Often women had to struggle to defend gains made as earlier gains were constantly threatened (Meer, 2005).

Current struggles need to consider ways of questioning the limited neoliberal versions of democracy and the technocratic version of addressing women's subordination at the same time as they need to seek ways of building organizations.

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