Women's Movements in South Africa, Past and Present

Iris Berger

In April 1994, the entire world watched expectantly as millions of black South Africans stood in line for hours waiting to vote in the country's first democratic elections. Until then South Africa was known primarily for apartheid - the political system in place since 1948 by which a small white minority controlled the lives and movement of the vast majority of the population. In the midst of the excitement over this remarkable transformation, a product of many years of internal struggle combined with active international pressure, commentators rarely noted that the elections were a remarkable step not only towards racial equality, but also towards gender equity. Indeed, only a few years earlier, Albie Sachs, a prominent South African legal figure had called patriarchy one of few established nonracial institutions in the country.

Until the 1980s, black women were legal minors, while white women, once married, were under their husbands' protection. Regardless of race, women had no right to open bank accounts, take out mortgages, or sign official documents in their own names; for many years, female teachers who married had to give up their jobs. Yet, despite this dismal history, after the 1994 election women claimed 106 of the 400 seats in the new Parliament. South Africa jumped from 141st to seventh place in the world in the national representation of women.

But the women's victory was not handed to them; rather it was gained only through concerted and well-planned, strategic resistance. This outcome raises important questions for historians, women's studies scholars and activists – of why and how such dramatic change occurred. First, was there anything about women's movements in the past that would have foreshadowed such positive election results? And second, what aspects of women's organizing prior to the elections helped to create this outcome?

Answering these questions requires turning back to the early twentieth century, when modern women's organizing began. This essay will argue that while the outcome of the elections reflected important continuities with the past, women's remarkable success required a decisive shift in emphasis that did not occur until the late 1980s. In addressing these points I will examine several phases of protest: women's movements early in the century, their organizing under apartheid, and finally the dramatic transformation in the late 1980s that led to such a decisive political change.

Early Twentieth-Century Women's Movements

Although relatively few organized protests occurred during the early twentieth century, one dramatic, and ultimately successful, episode provided a model and inspiration for later actions. This event occurred in 1913, when women in the conservative town of Bloemfontein organized a campaign of passive resistance. Drawing their inspiration from the tradition of non-violent civil

disobedience among South Africa's Indian population led by Mohandas Gandhi and from the militant women's suffrage movement in Great Britain, they took to the streets to protest plans to make women carry passes. While adult men had to carry these identity documents with them at all times, women, who rarely held jobs in the formal sector of the economy, were spared the harassment and humiliation of routinely being stopped and searched for their passes.

In one of the campaign's most impressive demonstrations, hundreds of women marched to the police station and burned their pass books. Reflecting their awareness of British women's struggle for the vote and their belief (however unwarranted) in the justice of the empire, they carried the British flag, the Union Jack. When routed by the police, many women fought back and were arrested. As reported by historian Julia Wells, one sympathetic newspaper boasted:

> On that day the Native women declared their womanhood. Six hundred daughters of Africa taught the arrogant whites a lesson that will never be forgotten. Sticks could be seen flourishing overhead and some came down with no gentle thwacks across the skulls of the police, who were bold enough to stem the onrush. "We have done with pleading, we now demand," declared the women.[1]

These actions led to a lengthy court case that women actually won – though they achieved this victory largely because of the conflict between local and national policy; provinces outside the Orange Free State exempted women from the pass laws. Regardless of the reasons for their success, these protests provided a continuing example and inspiration to which women looked back for many years to come.

Soon after black women were spared from the pass laws, white women won a victory with mixed results. Having gained the right to vote in 1930, their franchise diluted the power of the elite black vote in the Cape Province for a brief period - until Parliament abolished all African voting rights in 1936. Furthermore, with their citizenship newly recognized, white women rarely exercised this right in ways that questioned the established order of either gender or racial hierarchy.

Women's Movements under Apartheid

When the National party came to power in 1948, implementing a form of racial domination known as apartheid, crucial changes occurred in women's organizing in response to the new political environment. Unlike earlier patterns of racial oppression, apartheid was not simply a form of segregation and discrimination, but a system of strict control over the labor and movement of all black people, dictating where they could live and work, whom they could marry, and even with whom they could have sexual relationships.

Under the pressure of the new political environment, women's protests became more sustained and systematic, producing an ongoing organizational

structure and strong leadership. This movement also developed a coherent ideological orientation connected with the larger nationalist movement, portraying women as working alongside their men to end apartheid and racial domination. Though organizers such as Lilian Ngoyi, Frances Baard, Helen Joseph and Ray Alexander acknowledged that women had particular problems related to gender, they tended to trace most of women's difficulties to racial oppression by the white minority government, implying that an end to apartheid would also liberate women. Organized as the Federation of South African Women, this movement (though mainly African), included all racial groups among its members and leadership. To surmount the race and class distinctions among them, they emphasized their common bond as mothers. These women summarized their demands in an historic document, the Women's Charter, which became a model for the Freedom Charter adopted by the broader liberation movement in 1955.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the most important issue that the Federation confronted was passes for women. Under new apartheid laws, the state began to insist that all African women carry these identity documents. With larger numbers of women entering the formal labor force, primarily as domestic workers, passes became both a way to control women's labor and movement and also to allow only limited numbers to remain in the major cities rather than in the impoverished rural communities then know as "Bantustans."

In the most dramatic moment of this period, on August 9, 1956, 20,000 women marched to the capital city of Pretoria to deliver thousands of petitions to the Prime Minister calling for an end to passes for women. Although the Government cancelled the buses hired to transport women to the demonstration, they took trains, organized private cars and got there any way they could. When the Prime Minister refused to see them, a small delegation left the petitions stacked at his office door. After these representatives returned to the crowd assembled in the vast plaza outside the government buildings, the women reportedly remained silent for thirty minutes. They then burst into the song that became the symbol of their struggle, "Strydom [the Prime Minister], you have struck a woman, you have struck a rock. You will be crushed."

There were some drawbacks for the women's movement in being tied so closely to the African National Congress (ANC), the main nationalist organization at the time. Shortly after the demonstration, groups of women decided that they would refuse en masse to take passes, despite the risk of arrest. When the ANC leadership rejected the plan as too dangerous and too costly the Women's Federation called it off.

By the early 1960s, the entire nationalist movement was under serious attack. With the leading resistance groups declared illegal in 1960, many political activists decided that an underground guerrilla struggle would be necessary to dislodge the apartheid government. In 1964, Nelson Mandela and other leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment, and many organizers of the Women's Federation were arrested, detained and banned, bringing this period of women's intensive organizing to a close. Helen Joseph became the first person in the

country to be put under house arrest, while Frances Baard spent five years in prison, some of the time held in solitary confinement. Baard was then banished to a bleak, impoverished township outside Pretoria, thousands of miles from her lifelong home in Port Elizabeth.

When large numbers of ANC members fled the country and went into exile following the crackdown of the early 1960s, the group's renamed Women's Section retained a strong identity, continuing to emphasize women's support for the national liberation struggle. Emblematic of the period, one issue of their newsletter depicted a woman with a baby in one arm, and a machine gun in the other on its cover. When feminism began to influence international women's gatherings during the 1970s, most ANC women responded critically to theories or strategies that might divide women and men in the struggle against apartheid.

Recent Transformations

During the late 1960s and 1970s, new political organizations arose to replace those that had been banned in 1960. Most important was the Black Consciousness Movement. Originating among students at the segregated black universities, the BCM led in 1976 to the massive rebellion of school children in the Johannesburg township of Soweto. While their immediate demands related to the government's decree that Afrikaans in the schools (seen as the language of the oppressors), become a major language of instruction, the uprising also reflected anger at the low quality of apartheid education.

By the 1980s, a sustained revolt had been sparked that could not be crushed. This internal unrest, supported by widespread international sanctions against the apartheid government, eventually led an apparently unassailable white minority government into compromise and negotiations, culminating in the democratic elections of 1994.

Standard accounts of these dramatic events ignore the decisive transformation also occurring for women and for gender politics, especially during the late 1980s and into the 1990s. The main change was a shift from the prevailing idea that fighting against racial domination took precedence over gender oppression, to a new belief that women's issues must form an integral part of the nationalist struggle. As an indication of this shift, for the first time, many prominent leaders began to identify themselves openly as feminists.

This transformation came from several different sources. By the late 1980s, during the interregnum between apartheid and a new regime yet to be born, women began to realize that if they did not make their political demands known, they would be overlooked in any new political order that came into being. This approach rested on sources of change already in place. From the early 1980s, working-class women had begun to address openly the tensions in their daily lives. At a union-sponsored workshop in 1983, several women astonished the gathering by assertively confronting not only the double burden on women of working inside and outside the home, but, more provocatively, conflicts with men

over sexual demands and battering. They raised these issues not as extraneous to the "real" questions of trade unionism, but as political matters that the unions and the members ought to be addressing through their organizations and in their own lives.

By the time the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was launched in 1985, women's rights were clearly on the agenda and the founders of the organization incorporated a statement on women's equality from the beginning. Yet verbal professions of good intentions were insufficient to undermine established attitudes and patterns. The COSATU Women's Conference of 1988 adopted a comprehensive set of resolutions incorporating both a range of traditional union issues and detailed statements on sexual harassment, childcare, parental rights, violence against women, cervical cancer and contraception, abortion, child abuse, domestic inequality, and sexual assault. Yet as of 1991, while 36 percent of COSATU members were women, they held no national leadership positions and few lower-level posts; only 12 percent of shop stewards were women. Furthermore, COSATU refused to address the problem of sexual harassment of activists within the organization and its constituent unions.

Women continued to assert their interests, however, both through pressure to hire a full-time gender coordinator and by promoting women's and gender forums in the unions. With varying degrees of success, these groups acted as a vehicle for leadership training and for discussion of a wide range of issues such as women's health, sexual harassment, childcare, and procedures for running meetings. By defining their scope as "gender" rather than "women," some groups succeeded in underscoring the joint responsibility of women and men for transforming attitudes and behavior.

The emphasis on "gender" came from another of the important sources of new ideas during the 1980s, academic feminism. As women's studies scholars launched research on university campuses, they began to raise new questions about whether anti-female policies and practices such as unequal pay, battering, rape and sexual harassment would necessarily vanish under a new black-led government. This work also helped to provide the local theoretical context for transformations in gender politics within the country's political organizations.

Finally, the international women's movement, particularly the conferences held every five years that began in Mexico City in 1975, also helped to generate active discussion and debate among South African political activists, gradually opening them to new ideas and approaches. As invited participants at frequent international meetings, the women in the ANC Women's Section engaged on a regular basis with women worldwide who were grappling with how to transform women's lives in countries that, like South Africa, had large numbers of impoverished women who were struggling to feed and clothe themselves and their families.

By the time that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in February 1990, older attitudes concerning gender were being widely challenged. In his first speech to the country, delivered from the steps of the city hall in Cape Town and televised all over the country and the world, Mandela included sexism along with racism as part of the legacy of the past that the country had to overcome. As the focus of the ANC became negotiation rather than continuing military struggle for national liberation, women realized that without concerted pressure, their distinctive voices would not be heard. Women activists could cite numerous examples from all over Africa and other former colonial countries where women's organizations had remained closely tied to ruling political parties, and gender interests took a very low priority.

Though their actions did not emerge from a concerted plan, women in early 1990s ended up focusing their political energy in three primary areas: challenging male domination within the African National Congress; forming a new, independent women's organization; and challenging male control of the negotiation process and plans for national development. The first sign of a shift in women's position came in the famous quota debate at the initial ANC national conference in country, in July 1991. Before the conference, all regions had agreed that women should comprise 30 percent of those elected to the new National Executive Committee (NEC); at the time, only three of thirty-five members were female. The controversy centered in part on whether gender-based quotas too closely resembled the "group rights" that had provided the government's rationalization for apartheid and on whether a sufficient number of women were qualified to run the organization. Women disrupted the meeting by demanding that that they should make up 30 per cent of those elected to the new National Executive Committee. At the time, only 8 per cent (3 of 35 delegates) were female. Although this resolution was ultimately defeated, it served as a clarion call to the ANC that women were singing a different tune. Reflecting this sentiment, Mandela declared at the time, "The ANC will never be the same." He was correct. When women again raised the issue of gender representation prior to the elections, a 30 per cent quota was accepted. The main reason for women's parliamentary victory was that one-third of candidates on the ANC election slates were women. In the 1999 elections, the proportion rose to 39 percent.

A second strategy involved drawing up a new Women's Charter, which led to the formation of a new organization – the Women's National Coalition (WNC) - independent of all political parties. The group incorporated women from across the racial and political spectrum, including the National Party (which had imposed the apartheid system and had governed since 1948), Inkatha (an ethnic-based, primarily Zulu party strongly opposed to the ANC), as well as voluntary groups such as the YWCA, Planned Parenthood, academic organizations, the Disabled People of South Africa, and Rape Crisis - sixty groups in all forming a type of coalition never before attempted in South Africa. In its broad representation, the WNC sought to reshape the idea that women across racial

and class lines had common interests. Whereas in the past, this unity had centered on motherhood, women now were asserting shared forms of exploitation, exclusion, and victimization and a determination to alter this patriarchal context.

Based on testimony collected from women across the country, the Coalition drew up a new Women's Charter – calling for women's "full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist, democratic society." In the words of Steering Committee member, Pregs Govender,

> The process of drawing up the Women's Charter and the associated campaigns were part of breaking the silence women had long been confined to . . . . It shattered the illusion of a division between public and private, showing that 'private' issues women faced like rape, unsafe abortion and domestic hardship, all related to society and should be addressed at that level.[2]

Comprehensive in its focus, the Charter defined equality as encompassing the family, the workplace, and the state. While addressing numerous issues of immediate concern to poor women, both urban and rural, the document (which did not mention race) assumed a community of interest among all women. It recognized the importance of women's unpaid labor, condemned gender stereotyping of work in the home, and called for the decriminalization of prostitution and for protection against sexual harassment in educational institutions. It also demanded the "protection of natural resources to benefit women." In discussing family life, the Charter advocated the recognition and equal treatment of all family types, shared domestic responsibilities, and "the right to decide on the nature and frequency of sexual contact within marriage and intimate relationships." Finally, the section on health called, among other things, for women's right to control their bodies, "which includes the right to reproductive decisions."

This Charter, submitted to the negotiating parties and intended to form a blueprint for gender-inclusive policies in the new government, connected directly with the third aspect of this strategy - to insert women's voices (and women delegates) into the multi-party talks to negotiate a new political order and a provisional constitution. Beginning in December 1991, the talks continued up to the elections. At the preparatory meeting for CODESA (Conference for a Democratic South Africa), all sixty delegates from nineteen parties were men. Women countered – first by pressuring for the formation of a Gender Advisory Committee to review the gender implications of all documents from the CODESA working groups. Finally, after continuing pressure, including a major demonstration on April 1, 1993 at the World Trade Center where discussions were taking place, negotiators agreed to allow each of the twenty-six groups involved in negotiations to appoint a woman as an additional delegate.

While the ANC Women's League celebrated the presence of female delegates as a victory of inclusion, others questioned their impact on the proceedings, in particular, the difficulty of penetrating the dominant culture of "male bonding," "back-slapping and locker-room tactics" that dictated process and debate. Because few women had permanent status and even fewer served in the negotiating think tanks of their parties, "most of the women delegates fail to make constructive contributions in any area, let alone in the area of gender equality and women's rights." When Cape Traditional Leaders' delegate Stella Sigcau raised the controversial issue of how customary law oppresses women, no one in the negotiating council backed her and no party made an informed contribution. Nonetheless, half of the final negotiators for a provisional constitution were women and, constituted as a women's caucus, they were able to win significant gains in the final stages of the process: recognition that the principal of equality took precedence over respect for customary law, the creation of a council to oversee women's participation in the election process, and the formation of an advisory committee to track the gender implications of new government policies.

Although participants in the multi-party talks, including the ANC, seemed inclined to disregard women without constant reminders, the ANC's public position on gender was very strong indeed, a measure perhaps of the degree to which rhetoric (if not reality) had shifted. The guidelines adopted at the National Policy Conference in May 1992 were remarkable for their sensitive inclusion of women's issues throughout the document, reflecting a deliberate Women's League effort not to isolate gender. A special section on "Human rights for women" acknowledged that "women are discriminated against and subordinated in every area of public and private life" and that "We in the ANC . . . still have a long way to go in remedying this state of affairs." The section also included freedom from fear of assault and recommended outlawing rape in marriage. The discussion of Affirmative Action called for recognition of unpaid work in the home and for equal pay for work of equal value. Women also were assured of equal rights to land, of the right to control their own bodies, and of attention to the special problems of women workers.

This remarkable document attests to the political skills of the ANC Women's League in formulating coherent policies and getting themselves heard in regional commissions and at the national meeting. It also demonstrates the skillful way that women activists adapted the concept of gender to practical political concerns. With its emphasis on representations of women and men in any given conceptual system, an analysis based on "gender" rather than on "women" encouraged scrutiny of the gendered implications of all aspects of society and culture. Just as trade union activists had earlier relied on this perspective to initiate gender forums as well as women's discussion groups, the delegates here insisted that gender issues be considered in all areas of national life, not simply isolated in a separate women's section.

Not surprisingly, incorporation of women and gender into the language of discussion was smoother than the concrete debates over policy. The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Program, which became the basis of government for a short period after 1994, was a strikingly gender inclusive document, as was the new constitution finalized after the elections. Very much a product of the 1990s, the constitution prohibits discrimination not only on the grounds of gender and race, but also on the basis of sexual orientation, motherhood, pregnancy, ethnicity, age, and disability.

Elections, of course, are only a beginning. Despite these remarkable successes, enormous challenges remained after 1994. To take one example, after a record number of women had won election to the National Assembly, the new Cabinet initially included only two women ministers out of thirty. Under the new parliament, women focused their attention on a few key issues.

Among the most basic was how to establish a strong women's voice in government without ghettoizing women's politics. Concern for this issue led women activists to recommend not establishing a separate women's ministry, as many other nationalist and post-revolutionary governments had done, arguing that such a structure makes it too easy to marginalize women's concerns. Instead, they recommended a policy of gender mainstreaming in all government departments, mandating that all agencies of government diversify their personnel and establish gender-sensitive policies. An Office on the Status of Women responsible to the Deputy President was established to oversee this process, while an independent Gender Commission (a parallel body to the Human Rights Commission) was empowered to investigate and hear complaints.

Several key policy issues surfaced in the early years after 1994 that related to the high level of social conservatism in both black and the white communities. These conflicts crystallized in struggles over abortion rights and the status of customary law. Prior to elections, South African women suffered an estimated 300,000 backstreet abortions each year. Yet, at first the major political parties, including the ANC, were reluctant to a take stand. Pushing through a new law in 1996 affirming a women's right to choice required an active and aggressive strategy on the part of the women in Parliament, working effectively with such non-governmental groups as the Women's Health Project. The relationship of codified "customary law" to the equality provision of the bill of rights prompted equally fierce debates. At stake was whether protection granted to customary law and culture would be subject to the equality provision of the constitution. Some traditional leaders insisted that "human rights" was a foreign concept and, particularly in rural communities, should be subjected to customary law. The heated debate raised such questions as whether daughters should have equal inheritance rights and whether co-wives in polygamous marriages, normally ranked by seniority, had to be considered as equals.

Another issue that confronted gender activists was how to rebuild and sustain a strong, independent women's movement when so many politically

active women were now in Parliament. For a long time, some recently elected women, accustomed to an anti-government stance, had to keep reminding themselves that they were now the government, not the opposition.

Connected to all questions of transformation, not just those directly involving women, is the general scarcity of resources that often makes it difficult to implement the far-reaching programs necessary to achieve gender equality. Critical here is not only that the Gender Commission is under-funded, but the difficulty of moving quickly enough in such areas as housing, health care, water supply and electricity to transform significantly the lives of poor women.

Finally, in more recent years, health questions have come to the fore, especially HIV/AIDS and its implications for both women and men. South Africa is one of seven African countries with an HIV infection rate of over 20 per cent. For women especially, the question of government support for antiretroviral drugs to prevent transmission from mother to children has been contentious. Only recently, after intense pressure, did President Thabo Mbeki approve payment for these drugs, partially under pressure from the Treatment Action Campaign, a successful mass movement whose tactics are similar to those of the anti-apartheid movement in the past.

Conclusion

Like most countries worldwide, South Africa still falls far short of gender, or racial, equality; the country also continues to face tremendous problems of intense poverty, massive unemployment, and major racial inequities in education, health, housing, sanitation, water supplies, and access to a modern technological infrastructure. Many activists are critical of the government's neo-liberal economic policy, which places more emphasis on growth and foreign investment than on redistribution of wealth. But, looking back to 1913 and to the 1950s, women have continued to build successfully on the legacy of their foremothers. These efforts have generated remarkable changes that have helped to reaffirm the ideals outlined in the new constitution – of creating a more equitable society in which struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty are not just the domain of pressure groups working to influence the state – but, at least rhetorically, form an integral part of government policy.

END NOTES

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