Naked women's protest, July 1990:
'We won't fuck for houses'

SHEILA MEINTJES

On 12 July 1990 the Soweto municipal police, with the South African Police, arrived with tear gas, dogs, a casspir and a bulldozer to raze to the ground some 60 'illegal' shacks erected in no-man's-land between Dobsonville extensions 1 and 2, a 'spanking new high-cost residential area' in Soweto (*City Press* 15.07.1990). The shacks had been erected some two weeks earlier by a group of homeless Sowetans, mainly women, who for years had lived precariously as highly exploited tenants in shack dwellings in the backyards of those with rights to possess houses. The eviction of the newly settled squatters from this empty land in the cold winter of the second week of July was witnessed by neighbouring Dobsonville inhabitants, the Dobsonville Civic, a group of women and young activists from Mshenguville, a squatter settlement alongside White City, Jabavu, members of the national and international press and, later that evening, television viewers across South Africa and the globe. The reason? The women had stripped off their clothes as the police moved in to bulldoze their shacks. The squatter settlement had been declared illegal and the Dobsonville town clerk, Tony Roux, acquired a court order to remove the squatters. The squatters in turn had tried, through the Soweto Civic Association (SCA), to get a court interdict to prevent the demolition of their shacks. The erection of shacks on this piece of land was part of a deliberate strategy by the women involved to draw attention to the plight of the homeless in northwest Soweto. The strategy had been accompanied by squatter pickets outside the town council offices (*Sowetan* 13.07.1990). The press reported the details of the negotiations and the protest action and were present on the expiry of the deadline for squatters to remove their shacks. The process was a public spectacle.

As the police moved to dismantle their shacks, the younger women shack dwellers stripped off their clothes, taunted the police, ululated, shouted in anger about their plight and their pain, sang and danced, and held up printed placards demanding homes and security of tenure. That evening national and international television networks featured this action in news headlines. The next day, photographs of the women naked and semi-naked adorned the front pages of *Sowetan* and *The Star* and appeared in other newspapers

countrywide. What raised comment and was so unusual about this event and acquired such publicity was not just the fact that squatters were being moved, an event common in black South African urban life at the time, but the particular form that the protest took. It was relatively peaceful, with only a few incidents of stone throwing by youths from the neighbouring shanty settlement of Mshenguville. At Phola Park and in Thokoza on the East Rand during the same period, squatters and police had used firearms and people had died. Notable, too, was that women dominated the protest with men as bystanders. But perhaps most significant was the women's strategy of stripping off their clothes in an effort to fend off the police, hoping to chase them away and stop them from demolishing their shacks. Above all their strategy was to draw attention to themselves.

The women's protest was against their homelessness and the impediments to acquiring housing, despite having Section 10 rights (discussed later). Instead, they spent years on council housing waiting lists. The women invaded land owned by a mining company and set up their shacks. Some believed that this was where they would settle. Others saw it as a means to an end. When the local authority ordered them to vacate the land and sent bulldozers, with police and dogs in tow, to flatten their shacks, the women stripped off their clothes. The symbolism of their identity as women and as sexual beings was a central aspect of their action. The particularity of their actions drew attention to, was a signifier of and was, at the same time, a challenge to their status as social and sexual dependents. Their action challenged both men and the state. The claims embedded in their action were specific – for the substantive right to housing. Access to housing provided the basis on which they would be able to nurture their families and provide a launching pad for them to create sustainable livelihoods. For the women, the right to housing also called for recognition of their specific responsibilities as women citizens.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s lack of housing was critical. Apartheid policy in the 1960s had sought to limit urban settlement to those who had permanent roots in towns. Influx control had made it difficult for newcomers to acquire urban rights but, significantly, the system had also stalled the provision of adequate and sufficient housing, even for those with urban rights. Housing protests were widespread. Unlike many protests about the lack of shelter and urban rights at that time, the Dobsonville women's protest was still remembered 15 years after the event by ordinary people. It was remembered precisely because the women protesters stripped and stood naked, baring their most intimate, private selves in a public gesture of protest. The particular form that the Dobsonville protest took raises questions about how women engaged in struggles over fundamental material needs, including housing. Was there a connection between the mode of these women's protest and their place in civil society? What significance can a feminist analysis give to the sexual symbolism expressed in the women's actions?

In the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the 1990s in South Africa, new spaces for both ordinary women and for women's organisations to make material claims opened up. People's actions around everyday needs and interests were inserted

Nthabiseng Hlongwane outside the creche that she built with the community.

indirectly into the discourse about what an equal and democratic society should be. The Dobsonville protest presents a particularly stark moment in which gender, class and civil status come together. It also enables an analysis of the combination of conditions under which women were politicised and the processes which led to their public participation during a transitional period in South Africa's history.

In this chapter,[1] I attempt to present the layers of meaning embedded in some of the narratives of different groups involved in the protest action to show how gender, that is, the construction of sexual difference, is both contested and yet operates to allocate specific political roles and power to women and men. The narratives that I bring to the surface are, first, those of the research process itself, in which we, the researchers, framed questions to probe the social constructions of gender relations that determined women's civil status. The second of the narratives explores how the press reported the events, showing how gender stereotypes operated to present an androcentric (male-centred) view of gender power and authority. This androcentric interpretation is bolstered by the third narrative, that of the men who were involved in the action, who saw themselves as the leaders of the action. The final narrative is that of the women protesters, whose claims formed the subject of the research. Through the narrative analysis, I weave the story of two local activists, both of whom were part of the women's housing protest and land occupation in Soweto in June and July 1990. The story recounts the lives and struggles of Maria Thiko and Nthabiseng Hlongwane, who were leading protagonists in the land action. After this action, the community – including the women who had engineered the protest – acquired land for settlement from the local (apartheid) authority at Doornkop, near Dobsonville in Soweto.

In presenting the story of the event in this way, I hope to show the diverse forms in which women's agency and social location, their needs and political responses, shaped their lives, which were mediated and controlled by other actors. While they were active agents in the protest, their actions also portrayed the ambivalence of their position. In many parts of Africa at different historical moments, women have expressed protest through nakedness, using their bodies to 'serve as condensed symbols of female power' (Ardener 1973: 16). The relationship between women's status and power seems to be a key variable in explaining the use of the body in this way. In the Dobsonville protest, women used their bodies to shame the authorities into responding to their needs. Significantly, the outcome was that land was allocated to those on the Dobsonville housing waiting lists. The message seemed to have got through to those who had the authority to allocate land.

Background to the housing struggles of the 1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, housing was a central arena of struggle (Grest 1988). Lack of housing in urban areas arose from the apartheid state's attempts to limit black urbanisation during the 1960s and 1970s. The Group Areas Act segregated different racial groups from one another and private ownership was denied to African people. Urban Africans could only access houses if they had urban rights under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act. Section 10 rights involved being able to live and work in white urban areas if a person was born or had lived in the urban area for more than 15 years. Moreover, the right to housing was confined to male heads of household. Women were defined as minors under customary law and thus dependents of men. So single women, widows and divorcees could not access housing in their own right, as every woman was defined as subject to a man. The effect of these policies was to exclude single women from the right to rent their own homes. They were forced to become tenants in people's backyards, where they lived in appalling, overcrowded conditions in tin shacks, colloquially known as *umkhukhu*, literally, chickens or chicken coops. Running water was limited and sanitation was poor.

Waiting lists for houses, even for legal residents in black townships, were long. The administration of these lists became notoriously open to abuse, as evidence from the cohort of women who engaged in the Dobsonville protest revealed. Moreover, for single women and men migrants who did not fall within the rights established by Section 10, life was lived in the twilight zone of illegality and insecurity. Those without Section 10 rights were forced into informal or illegal employment and subject to arbitrary police swoops, the law courts, fines they could ill afford and, finally, endorsement out of the urban area. So while all black South Africans were secondary citizens with limited rights, women and migrants experienced a double exclusion. Although influx control and the housing regulations changed in the mid-1980s, women's access to housing

continued to depend on connection to a man. The women's action of stripping symbolically protested against this dependency.

The SCA had formed in 1979 to demand rights for homeless people, especially for legal tenants (Seekings 1988). The SCA organised against the Soweto Community Council, members of which came to be seen as surrogates of the apartheid state at the local level, especially when rent and service charges were increased. Opposition to the council and councillors crystallised around their control over access to housing. In theory, as housing became available it was given to those at the top of the waiting list. In practice, councillors gave it to those who paid. More notorious were those councillors who provided housing to women in exchange for sex. Several of our informants deeply resented the sexual power asserted by one councillor in particular. They suggested that there were several women in Dobsonville who had acquired houses through this form of transactional sex. The women protesters chose to use their bodies to draw attention to their homelessness, as much as to make an ironic statement about the sexual contract involved in acquiring houses as to focus on nakedness as a symbol of how the system had stripped them of their dignity as human beings.

In response to growing problems of overcrowding, and the growth of shanty settlements on the periphery of urban townships, the SCA spearheaded the launch of Operation Masekane for the Homeless (OMHLE) in 1990. This initiative sought to confront the Soweto council's unwillingness to address the issue of housing shortages and the plight of the homeless. Despite government recognition of the permanence of the urban African population, measures to limit and control informal urban settlement had continued. Indeed, as Ann Bernstein of the Urban Foundation argued at the time, the Guide Planning Process, which determined land settlement planning, limited the release of land for black settlement (Bernstein 1989). Bernstein argued that government policy was still geared towards influx control and that the reality of the greater concentration of people in urban metropoles was not being addressed. In 1989 estimates put two million people living in informal settlements in the Pretoria–Witwatersrand–Vaal area. The SCA knew this – and its leaders were intent on securing more land. Land invasion was one strategy to force the hand of the local authorities.

With the unbanning of the ANC and other organisations in 1990, the opening up of the political process to democratic competition provided a 'window of opportunity' for the expression of popular demands. The constitutional talks occurred simultaneously with mass political mobilisation and the emergence of new forms of party competition and organisation. Thousands of people died in the political violence that erupted as the once banned political movements surfaced to challenge apartheid structures and collaborationist parties. Ordinary people became involved in life-and-death situations. This violent context was also the moment when the desperate needs of people for shelter, for jobs and for adequate schooling came to the fore in popular protests. These demands articulated claims to rights.

Women led some of the community protests about lack of housing and other services

in townships in the early 1990s. Housing in particular was a basic requirement for the well-being and welfare of families and communities. Temma Kaplan, an American feminist, argues that the political and community struggles undertaken by women in different settings should be seen as citizenship claims (Kaplan 1997). A citizen is defined as a member of a country who has certain inalienable rights by virtue of birth or naturalisation. These rights are embedded in the fundamental laws of a country, which in South Africa is the Constitution of 1996. The local protest actions, such as that of the women in townships like Dobsonville, informed the broader context of national organisation and intervention. This interplay between local and national demands helps us to understand how different spheres of action informed the general discourse about rights, gender and power rights during the transition to democracy and the first democratic period in South Africa.

The demands of women, such as those who took part in the naked protest, informed the wider claims interjected by a coalition of women's organisations formed to ensure that women's voices were heard during the constitutional negotiations. The Women's National Coalition (WNC), as it was called, became the vehicle for voicing the hopes and dreams of women from very different class, race and cultural backgrounds and enabled them to find common cause through these differences. The outcome of their joint action was the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, which provided a template of the substantive claims to gender equality that came to be reflected in the Constitution and subsequent gender policy and legislation. The strategy was to present a single 'women's agenda' that would constitute women as a coherent constituency, yet also locate their difference at the heart of that agenda (Albertyn 1994; Cock 1997; Meintjes 1998). Popular struggles against apartheid laws (still in place in the early part of the 1990s) that restricted access to social services and benefits, housing, land and economic opportunities both reflected and shaped these claims.

I was a member of the WNC Research Supervisory Group (RSG) and our intentions were to ensure that the voices of all women would be heard and reflected in the new democratic order. The campaign to elicit demands from women undertaken by the WNC during 1993 occurred through widespread and novel forms of consultation at local levels, leveraged by four provincial coalitions and national women's organisations that made up the WNC, and collated centrally by the WNC Research Office. In the RSG, we estimated that more than two million women had been consulted during the six-month campaign. The outcome of the campaign was the Women's Charter for Effective Equality that spelled out the specific needs and interests of women in South Africa. The negotiations period in fact saw the WNC stake claims that pointed to the need for action around the very nature of citizenship itself. In the struggles over the content of the Bill of Rights, for instance, the WNC showed that citizenship was not neutral, but shaped by gender, class and race relations in society. The case of access to and rights to housing provides one of many prisms through which we can trace the way women's claims were made.

Exploring the meanings of the naked protest

The research process

Our research into the women's protest action at Dobsonville began at the end of 1991. Our intention was to undertake a study of the naked protest in order to understand the symbolism and meaning behind it. Two undergraduate research assistants, Belede Mazwai and Letabo Maleka, both residents of Soweto, went to Doornkop with a few clues to find the women who had been involved in the July 1990 protest. We followed up people who had been quoted in the press reports, including the reporters and photographers, members of the SCA of Dobsonville, the Doornkop Civic and the chairperson of the local Doornkop ANC branch.[2] Significantly, none of the women protesters had been interviewed by the press. Reporters simply recorded their actions. Even the World Television News journalists had not attempted to give voice to the women, except to visually record their naked protest for all the world to see. More than 18 months after the event, it proved quite easy to find some of the women. The squatter invasion of land in 1990 and successive protests by the same women had been successful in prompting the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA) to establish a large settlement area on land released for controlled site-and-service schemes next to Dobsonville, which came to be called Doornkop, also known as 'Silver Town' or 'Snake Park'. Most of the women who had been involved in the Dobsonville action had been granted sites in the new scheme. The TPA had been forced to provide sites or face illegal land invasions in response to the demands and threats of the SCA. In this sense the outcome of the women's land invasion and the protest of July 1990 and its sequence were singularly successful in providing the women, and the community in general, with access to land.

The month of December 1991, when we set out to find the women, was one of the hottest months in years and South Africa endured one of the worst droughts in living history. Most of the participants were then living in Snake Park, in *umkhukhu*. The shacks were unbearably hot in summer and in winter, as we found out later, they were unbearably cold. The streets were neatly laid out at angles from a number of central open fields. A single tap serviced each street of about ten sites. Each site was also provided with a long-drop toilet which, in the heat, created a pervasive sweet-sour stench throughout the area. Rubbish was collected once a week at first and each site had been provided with a rubbish bin. Two years later, mobile tips had replaced the weekly service. Tips were then located at various points throughout the settlement and collected at intervals. This service was organised by members of the civic who were paid a retainer for this work by the TPA. This became an arena of contention, as those who held office in the civic were accused of using this as patronage.

The settlement of about 5 000 stands lay close to where the squatters had originally set up their shacks in 1990, between Dobsonville extensions 1 and 2 and the uncovered mine dumps of Rand mines. When the wind blows, which it did much of the time we

spent in the settlement in 1991, 1992 and some of 1993, the place became a dust bowl. More than ten years later, though some effort had been made by the mines to cover dumps with grass, the fine, pale sand of the dumps still crept through every crevice to coat every surface, to cover one's skin and hair, and to get into one's eyes and mouth.

In late 1991, when we met up with some of the women who had been involved, a few, especially the younger women, were pleased to have been sought out and wanted to record their experience and their histories. Our reception was not an unambiguous one, however. Some of the older women thought we had come to provide them with houses. They thought we were from the TPA, and had no idea what a university was or what research meant. Some of the male members of the civic to whom we spoke, questioned our intentions. They mentioned the problem of researchers' using information for their own career purposes without providing any benefit to the community. One person was so antagonistic that although he could speak English, he initially refused to speak to me directly. He said that when whites put their noses into black communities, they caused trouble of one sort or another. The context of these suspicions was significant, for in the early 1990s political competition for authoritative power had spilled out into dangerous conflict – with the state, between competing political movements and within communities. Gender power cut across many of those conflicts. We had tried to explain that our intention was to promote the needs and interests of women through writing about their experiences and linking them with the WNC. In introducing ourselves and the project to individuals and to broader meetings, we explained that we were researchers from the University of the Witwatersrand. We explained that we hoped, through the work, not only to make their needs as women more widely known and addressed in public policy, but also that we wished to bring to wider attention the effects apartheid had had on their lives. We also spoke about the opening of the negotiations and the constitutional process. We informed them, too, about the formation of the WNC, a coalition that had been formed specifically to inform the new Constitution-makers about the conditions, problems and needs of women like them.

At the local level, we found ourselves in the midst of a fairly complicated power struggle, in which the Dobsonville Civic Association claimed that the Doornkop Civic was merely a branch of the organisation. We were summoned through one of our informants, Nthabiseng Hlongwane, to report to the Dobsonville Civic. Doornkop Civic members whom we spoke to, although suspicious of us, were incensed that the Dobsonville leaders believed they had authority over them. They argued that they alone needed to be informed. The Doornkop Civic, though not an elected grouping, refused to accept a subordinate status and argued that they were independent. They told us that they had played a key role in negotiating the establishment of the settlement and that they continued to liaise with the TPA in allocating sites to new applicants. Our approach to participants in the protest had been through members of both civic bodies. It became clear from the beginning that the research process itself would need to be carefully monitored for how it interrelated with these ongoing and sometimes tense

relationships. Present concerns also mediated the way in which people narrated the past to us. The research process itself became a dimension of the complex interrelationships of power that formed the context of life for the women we interviewed. Our entry into the community became an additional resource in the day-to-day power struggles and survival strategies of the women whom we interviewed.

The public story: the press

The most public and perhaps the most oversimplified of the narratives was that offered by the press. The Dobsonville squatter action can be traced most clearly through the columns of Sowetan during the months of June and July 1990 (*Sowetan* 07/08.06.1990, 07/13/17/18/26.07.1990). In June, there were articles on the whole issue of informal settlement and squatting in South Africa. Accounts of the Dobsonville action and subsequent demolitions were merely descriptive and lacked analysis. When 15 people were arrested for trying to rebuild their shacks, the media blindly and negligently refrained from naming or identifying in any other way the actors in this action. Our research identified all of these actors as women. However, press interviews were limited to comments from members of the council, the SCA and the local ANC chairperson, few of whom were identified by name either. There was no probing of the whole squatter invasion as a broader strategy to force the authorities to release more land for housing developments. Yet this had been part of the discussions at the meetings of the SCA, which the women had attended. This aspect of their plans emerged from our research, particularly from our detailed interviews of the women participants.

Although some journalistic accounts touched on the plight of the homeless, there was little clear analysis of the complexity, either of the housing crisis facing South African urban government, or of the particular plight of the women participants. Moreover, any focus on the perspective of the leading protagonists in the event – the women, the civic members, the Dobsonville council and its representatives, or the police – was missing. A case study of the negotiating parties in the affair, namely the Dobsonville Civic, the women squatters and the council, would have offered an insight into a much broader set of political objectives in the ongoing struggles in the urban areas around changes in urban government and improvement in urban life. In particular, there could have been some focus on the agenda of civic leaders, who challenged the legitimacy of the authority of the community councils. A more careful disaggregation of the different participants would have led to a focus on another central aspect of the struggles – the different approaches adopted by men, women and the youth.

The men's story

We interviewed several men who had participated in the meetings and actions that led up to the Dobsonville land invasion. The views of Japhta Lekgetho – who was a member of the SCA and also the founder of the National Environmental Awareness Campaign

(NEAC), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to cleaning up Soweto, with its headquarters at an environmental centre in Dobsonville – were particularly interesting. He presented a view of the protest as one orchestrated by the SCA, though OMHLE played a leading role. Lekgetho was a leading figure in the negotiations around squatter struggles in Soweto and elsewhere. It was very difficult to obtain a sustained meeting with him in 1991 or in the first quarter of 1992, because he was preoccupied with negotiating with the TPA and other authorities about the future of the Zevenfontein squatters further to the north. However, we did manage to meet him for more than an hour in January 1992. During the course of our discussion, his view of the naked protest event was that the idea of setting up the shacks between Dobsonville 1 and 2 had been his and that the women were conduits for a broad strategy of land invasion to draw attention to the plight of the homeless (Lekgetho interview). One cannot dismiss this view but, as we shall see, it tends to diminish the strategic direction given by the women themselves.

The view that women were deliberately used in the land invasion as a 'strategic ploy' was confirmed by Benson Banda, a member of the Doornkop Civic. Banda argued that the strategy was to get the women to take action, because it was felt that 'women are more listened to than men in the Commissioner's office' (Banda interview). More importantly, Banda argued that the women's protest strategy of stripping naked had utterly failed. He made no connection between this startling method of protest and the fact that most of the participants in the protest action, including the men who had helped to set up the shacks, were subsequently provided with sites by the TPA.

Our male informants, who were members of the two civic bodies, claimed that they were the driving force behind the action. This does not mean that they did not admire the women. When prodded, they all acknowledged how brave and strong the women had been. But it was quite clear that they believed that without their intervention nothing would have transpired. It was they who entered into negotiations with the councillors, with the town clerk and with the police. They also all believed that the desperate action of stripping naked had not achieved its objective. In their view the objective was limited to shaming and chasing away the police. The women's story was different.

The women's stories

The perspective of the homeless women themselves offers a very different version and set of priorities in relation to the problems and struggles that motivated the strategies and actions of people on the ground. The overriding concern of all the women involved was to have a place of their own, where they would have security of tenure and no longer face a precarious existence as sub-tenants, subject to the will of landlords. Without a secure and permanent home, all the women spoke of the difficulties of sustaining jobs and of maintaining their families intact. Shelter was seen as the basis for life itself.

The interpersonal dynamics of how the women came together straddles questions about the gendered nature of civil status. Individually, women had heard about the support which Lekgetho and the SCA gave to people through Operation Masekane. Often this arose from chance encounters with members of the civic. Each person came with her own desperate history of homelessness, of living tenuously for years in backyard slums, subject to exploitative landlords. In 1990, conditions were conducive to a more organised and strategic campaign around homelessness. Meetings of the homeless people were hosted by the Dobsonville Civic and although civic members were present, it certainly appears from our collective evidence that it was the homeless women themselves, in particular Maria Thiko, who decided on the strategy of invading open land and putting up shacks. Another woman, Nthabiseng Hlongwane, at the meeting the night before the authorities were due to dismantle the shacks, came up with the idea of stripping. She drew on ideas and discussions she had heard from her grandmother (Hlongwane interview). The tradition of African women using nakedness as a signal of anger and as a means of cursing perpetrators for unacceptable behaviour has a long history. It is hard to imagine men using their bodies in a similar act of protest and I can think of no masculine example. Certainly there are historical examples of men going to war naked and one could equally subject this to a gendered analysis, as a statement about the nature of militarised masculinity and virility. In the women's naked protest, the gendered construction of subjectivity and its relationship to rights comes across in what they said as much as in what they did. The women chanted, 'We also have the "thing" that other women give you! You can come and fuck me now!' in a little veiled allusion to the bribery of officials, who they accused of demanding sex and money for houses. Any rights they might have had were mediated by their womanhood and sexuality. Women's access to state-provided resources, such as housing and welfare, was tied to their status as wives or mothers.

Maria Thiko, who first mooted the idea of building shacks on the open veld in Dobsonville at a civic meeting, had spent years moving from one site to another in Soweto. After an abusive and violent marriage, she had obtained a divorce. In the process she lost her home and all her belongings. As a single parent with two children, her life was dominated by the needs of her family. Without education, her jobs were always in poorly paid domestic service. She managed, nevertheless, to buy a tin shack, which was rather like a mobile home because she moved it from one backyard to another. However, she was constantly on the lookout for a permanent home and had put her name down on the Dobsonville council housing list from as early as 1979. She haunted the council offices whenever there were rumours of houses or hostel accommodation being made available. She made sure that the councillors got to know her. She described how the mayor constantly made promises to her about housing, and made appointments with her at times when he was unavailable. She would wait for hours at the offices and often arrive late for work as a result. Her employers became frustrated with her, accusing her of holding down two jobs. Eventually they stopped believing that she was looking for a

home. After weeks of being late, waiting for hours for councillors' promises to materialise, Maria was sacked. Without a job, with school fees to pay and children to feed and clothe, she was in desperate straits. But her resourcefulness in the face of the need to survive was boundless. She found a job in a shop which kept her financially afloat.

She joined the Sofasonke Party in Mshenguville, the party which dominated the council, in the hope that this would provide access to shelter. After two meetings, Maria was elected as an organiser. But when all the party offered was a place at the distant Orange Farm settlement, she turned her attention to Dobsonville, where it was rumoured that land would be released for settlement. She explained: 'Sofasonke was launched in Dobsonville. I became active, anticipating that a place to stay would come up soon' (Thiko interview). The councillors again made promises to provide basic services on open land. Months went by, but nothing happened. Homeless people had given considerable amounts of money to one councillor in particular, to secure building sites. Maria parted with all her savings of R564 for the deposit. But she became suspicious when nothing came of the councillor's promises and demanded her money back. She had to wait for a month before it was returned to her, during which time she was made redundant from her job. She set off to find work in Roodepoort and there she met Charlie, a member of OMHLE and the Dobsonville Civic, to whom she explained her problems. He suggested that she come to the offices at the environmental centre, where plans were discussed. That evening, her landlady gave her notice. 'I said to myself, if the civic does not take any action I will take my shack – even if I put it in front of the office – because in reality now I no longer have a place to stay' (Thiko interview).

That was how she found herself at 'Lekgetho's place' (NEAC) at the end of June 1990. In her view, there was no longer an alternative to land invasion. Others at the meeting were in similar circumstances. All were determined that they had come to the end of their life as sub-tenants.

> On Monday we had a meeting and we stressed that we should take our shacks to any open space. They asked which open space did we want and we said 'the one between Extension two and old Dobsonville'. We asked the executive to be at hand because the white language (*isikungu*) would be needed and we did not know it because the country belonged to the whites – they had taken it... (Thiko interview)

The shacks went up on 25 June. On the same day Maria went to collect her belongings, only to return to the area to find 'my shack flying in the air because they [the police] were removing them'. She rushed up to her shack, 'I was crying now, saying: "Oh, my Lord, when will we ever get a place to stay." ' Members of the civic interceded at this point with the town council and the town clerk, Tony Roux, to try to halt the demolition. Maria remembered that when they left she was standing on her zinc roofing and Roux laughed derisorily at her. 'I said to him "You laugh because you're better off. You have the whole world at your feet. You make a laughing stock of me, who does not

have any world" ' (Thiko interview). But she and the other women were determined to create their own world. This was but the first in a series of three such actions. The women simply rebuilt their shacks each time. The final action occurred on 12 July. This was when the women stripped off their clothes.

Nthabiseng Hlongwane was born in the townships but, like many children, was sent to the countryside to be brought up by her grandmother. In Witsieshoek, or Qwa Qwa as it came to be called, she lived in a mud hut in straitened circumstances. A few chickens, a vegetable plot and her grandmother's meagre old-age pension kept them alive. But as a 'borner', she had Section 10 urban rights and came to the city as a young woman to seek work. As with many women, her education was minimal and she had learned no more than the three Rs. She had met and married a man in her early twenties and rapidly bore three children, but the marriage was abusive. Her vision for her children was for a different and better life, so she left her husband. She found employment in a bakery, where she learned the fine art of icing cakes. Like many women, once she was without a husband she lost her home and was forced into squatter tenancy in the backyards of exploitative landlords. Like many lonely women, she sought a partner in life, to provide her with love and financial support. But she often spoke of the difficulty of establishing a meaningful and sustained relationship in the turbulence of township life. She was particularly concerned for the well-being and safety of her children. She also wanted a better life for herself.

Nthabiseng recounted how she became politically involved during the late 1980s. By chance she was walking along a road in Roodepoort and saw a piece of paper with the ANC colours on it. She picked it up. Not long afterwards she was stopped by a policeman, who searched her and came across the pamphlet. He hauled her off to detention. There she met another woman, who was well connected with the liberation movement. Through her, she met 'Ma' Albertina Sisulu, who arranged for political education classes. She then became a political activist and interacted with community leaders in her own area. She saw salvation for her own life and that of her children in the kind of future envisioned in the Freedom Charter. It was this vision that drove her desire to struggle against the corruption of the local community council.

Meanwhile, she had met a good man who lived with her during the period of the late 1980s. However, during the township struggles against rents and lack of services, her boyfriend disappeared. She was afraid and recounted to us her agonising search for him. She visited prisons in the neighbourhood, she visited local mortuaries, all to no avail. Then she heard that when bodies were unidentified, they were put on special 'funeral trains' and taken around the country for rural families to identify. She followed one of the trains and found her partner. She then took him back to his family in the Transkei. The loss of her partner was a disaster for the family, because he was the breadwinner. Meanwhile, like others, she had put her name on the Dobsonville area housing list. She described the frequency with which officials offered her a house if she 'would love them'. This she refused. She joined up with Japhta Lekgetho and OMHLE and this was

how she ended up in the same meetings with Maria Thiko. Between them, they provided leadership for the many women at the meetings. She spoke of how they asked the men to provide moral support for their land invasion. But she was clear that they had asked the men to keep out of the action. Their belief was that men tended to be violent and thus reverse any possible gains that might be made.

Nthabiseng was a leading figure in the July event. She bravely stood naked in front of the bulldozers as they moved towards the shacks. She and more than 40 other women danced and shouted, 'We want houses.' They knew that their shacks would be razed and that they would probably lose their belongings. However, the bulldozer was forced to pause because the naked protest forced negotiations for a reprieve. But the police were adamant that they had orders to remove the shacks. Not even the presence and negotiating skills of Sam Shilowa – one of the SCA leaders at the time, a consummate trade unionist and a decade later to become the premier of Gauteng – altered the situation. The women's belongings were confiscated and despite many efforts by the Johannesburg Legal Resources Centre to reclaim their goods, they disappeared. No compensation was ever paid to the women for their losses. When the women regrouped that evening, a few of the more militant women, led by Nthabiseng, were arrested. This was part of the women's strategy. It forced the authorities to interact with the women. Following this sustained series of actions the TPA released land adjacent to Dobsonville, in Doornkop, for the establishment of a site-and-service settlement. The women had won.

The above series of narratives shows how gender shaped the perspectives, the discourse and the needs and interests of different actors during the events of July 1990. For the women, their action was a last desperate act where they staked all they possessed on getting the authorities to notice them and their homeless plight. Their narrative was particularly poignant and brought into sharp focus the experience of women under apartheid's urban policies. It also suggests that women established networks on the basis of circumstantial need. These were easily formed, but equally easily demobilised. The collective protest action brought a group of women, who had previously not known one another, together. It grew out of a shared need for access to land on which to establish their homes. Their desperation, vulnerability and anger as women were expressed in the form of the protest. Stripping naked was not an easy option and demonstrated how their circumstances had driven them into 'madness'. It was a last resort. Although men were involved behind the scenes, offering support and their negotiating skills, the women had collectively asked them to keep a low profile.

For more than a month this particular cohort of women developed a close network in order to devise their invasion and squatter strategy, and together they faced police harassment and arrest. For three months after the event, they continued to harass the council and demand houses. Interestingly, during this period Thiko joined the ANC. Hers was a pragmatic assessment of which political force would best meet her needs and interests. In 1990 and 1991, she looked ahead to those she reckoned would be able to provide access to the newly released site-and-service scheme of Doornkop. This is

where she and the others who had participated in the protest were at last allocated sites.

When our research team met the women in 1991–92, they were settled on their plots. Without exception, the women felt they had won their place through their struggles, with the support of the civic. In Doornkop, their network continued to operate through 1992 as they established themselves. But the pressing need for collective action had dissipated and the women retreated into fending for their families. However, at moments when issues of collective significance arose, as in the arrest of members of the civic when they set up an embryonic self-defence unit in 1992, it was the women's networks which were activated within an hour to protest the arrest. The mobilisation of women appears to be deeply embedded in their immediate social networks, and is the key to an understanding of the manner in which their politicisation occurs.

The intersection of local and national demands: the WNC

In the Doornkop naked protest, grassroots women acted on their own behalf. Their interpretation of success was different from men's. They believed that their actions had won the land for the community. Many joined the ANC and the ANC Women's League (ANCWL). Through the representation of these two organisations, women in Doornkop believed that their interests would be served. The ANCWL was a central player in the WNC, and this connection brought the women of Doornkop and other communities into the national political arena. The WNC in the period of negotiations was crucial in asserting and bringing into the national debate the idea of distinctive women's interests and the need to include 'gender' matters in the debates. More than this, though, the WNC asserted claims to substantive gender rights that defined gender equality as against formal equality rights.

In 1993, for instance, there appeared a moment when gender equality for women subject to customary law might be compromised, even by the ANC, as traditional leaders asserted their right to continue to govern by hereditary right and to trump the new Constitution in the making. The WNC intervened to mobilise a broad constituency of women activists and confronted the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa, the ANC aligned organisation of chiefs, in public debate. Famously, Nomboniso Gasa challenged Chief Nonkonyana in a television debate, calling the patriarchal bluff of so-called progressive chiefs in a debate about their power and authority in customary law, particularly over women. The outcome of the intervention ensured that gender equality was included in the political discussions about equality and a Bill of Rights. The definition of substantive equality that emerged out of the negotiations thus embraced the idea of gender equality that was the focus of the WNC's political and media campaigns during the negotiations for an interim Constitution.

The transition to democracy presented women's political organisations with particular challenges which forced them to address the question of commonality around

the 'woman question'. The ANCWL and the ANC Emancipation Commission had led the process of bringing a 'woman's perspective' to the negotiations about South Africa's future. It drove the agenda of the WNC. The launch of the WNC in April 1992, after widespread consultations and preparations, was a historic moment – it saw women from different class backgrounds, race groups, political parties, from different kinds of women's organisations, including the church, welfare and the health sectors, rub shoulders with one another. They found much to agree upon in the search for common experiences. But their commonalities were based upon a recognition of the diversity of culture, race and class – this constituted the strength and achievement of the WNC. It moved away from the essentialism that had dogged feminist initiatives elsewhere in the world (Cock 1997; Hassim 2002; Meintjes 1998).

On 27 September 1991 the first of a great number of conferences, workshops, seminars and consultations was held with 30 women's organisations to discuss the aim of drawing up a Women's Charter of equality. At this meeting the delegates found common interests and concerns on a number of key areas. They agreed on the fact of gender oppression and that in diverse ways it affected all women in South Africa. They agreed, too, that fundamental change had not only to eliminate racism, but sexism too. Frene Ginwala's opening address pinpointed the objectives of the WNC: 'Women will have to make sure that the constitution goes beyond a ritualistic commitment to equality and actually lays the basis for effective gender equality' (Ginwala 1992).

Women's interests in the first ten years of democracy

The effect of the WNC's charter campaign had dramatically altered the visibility of women during its height between June 1993 and February 1994. The campaign transformed the profile and discourse around women and gender relations. It gave substance to the shadowy notion of 'non-sexism' and asserted the importance of women's particular disabilities in the debate about human rights in South Africa. It provided a template through the Women's Charter for Effective Equality for changes to policy and the law. It provided a strong cohort of women political leaders from different parties who went into Parliament after the first democratic elections with a specific 'woman's agenda'. The champions of this process ensured the development of a woman-friendly state.

In Parliament, a critical mass of women Members of Parliament (MPs) had been nominated to the electoral lists of all parties – not through any formal quota system, but through the lobbying of committed women members. A Joint Monitoring Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of women (shortened here to Joint Monitoring Committee or JMC) was set up, initially ad hoc and without a budget, but later institutionalised through the championship of Pregs Govender in particular, who had been the manager of the WNC. During the next few years, Parliament legislated on reproductive rights, outlawed rape in marriage, offered protection from domestic violence for women,

illegalised discrimination against women, regularised the status of customary marriage and attempted to ensure that the maintenance system was improved. These changes signalled the success of women's campaigns for their rights, even in the private sphere. The WNC campaign had engaged the whole of South African society in questioning its norms about women's status and women's citizenship.

An Office on the Status of Women (OSW) was set up towards the end of 1996 in the office of the Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki. After the 1999 elections, the office moved with him to the Presidency. The OSW was mandated by Cabinet to establish mechanisms to promote gender equity in government and to define national gender policy for the state. However, the office was slow to develop this policy so that by the time it was finally completed, the legitimacy of the structure had been questioned, both by national departments and by civil society. The effectiveness of the OSW was hampered by the lack of a proper authoritative role throughout the state. Although mandated to develop national gender policy and monitor its implementation in government departments, the OSW essentially played a consultative role without any line function or authoritative relationship with government departments. It had no role in appointing gender focal points inside national departments or at provincial level. Thus its influence depended upon the finesse of its officials. In practice, the OSW initially took a defensive position and struggled to establish an effective modus operandi, nor did it establish partnerships with civil society, the JMC or the new Commission on Gender Equality (CGE).

The CGE was the third institution to be set up, this time in terms of the Constitution itself. During the dying hours of the final negotiations in 1994, a Commission on Gender Equality was provided for under Chapter 9 of the Constitution, to be one among six independent statutory bodies to promote and protect democracy. Act 39 of 1996 established the CGE to promote and protect gender equality, and provided it with considerable powers to undertake public education, take complaints and investigate, acquire information, propose policy and even initiate legislation in the course of its work. In the first months of its existence the CGE engaged in a process of widespread consultation with women's organisations and government departments in order to find a role for itself. At the provincial level, the CGE set up satellite offices, usually headed by a national commissioner. Dogged at first by insufficient funds to fulfil its mandate, subsequent problems arose in relations between commissioners and the staff, which threatened to implode the organisation not two years after it was established. Part of the reason was to do with a conflict between a commitment to promoting gender equality and a political commitment to political parties. Purportedly independent, the process of appointment of commissioners in fact invited political accountability – the fact that commissioners were interviewed not by a panel of independent experts but by an ad hoc Committee of Parliament, meant that MPs, and especially ANC MPs, were able to choose their preferred nominees. Whilst in the law the Act stipulated that the commission was to act 'without fear or favour', in reality the CGE curtailed its own sphere of action to deal with symptoms rather than causes of gender equality in state

and society. It identified poor rural women as the litmus test of progress – a focus that tended to eschew challenges to the broader androcentric, or male-defined, nature of power in society, and to focus on development strategies that were palliative rather than structural. Its interpretation of its role was limited to public education rather than to significant challenges arising from a deep gender analysis of the macroeconomic and political environment (Meintjes 2005; Seidman 2003).

Would the gains made in the early 1990s for a woman-friendly constitutional dispensation that spoke of substantive gender equality and spelled out the object of 'non-sexism' be confined to mere discursive (reasoned and argued) features of citizenship, rather than becoming real, substantive gains? The real struggles for gender equality resided not in the discursive terrain, but rather in the everyday struggles of women's lived reality, where paper rights would only have meaning if they met the real needs of people's lives. The transition to democracy was the first step in a much longer road, where society remained substantially male dominated, and where the holders of real power in political affairs were men. The transition to democracy provided the setting for women across divides of race, class and culture to come together to seek the commonalities of their subordination under patriarchy. The real test would come in the period when democracy was put into practice.

While the WNC withered away, other issues had come to the fore around which women organised. Activists engaged in combating violence against women found considerable support from women previously involved in the political struggle and who had acquired political office. In the transition, there were signs that women had become the target for the frustration of men whose lives did not change in the new South Africa. As women began to acquire more confidence and to play a more public role, so individual women appeared to come under physical attack in the form of sexual assault. Nthabiseng Hlongwane, for instance, found herself brutally attacked by her ex-husband in 1998 for refusing to reconsider living with him. He and three men pretended to visit her, abducted her, and took her to an abandoned mine, where they raped her for four days, and left her to die. She was fortunately discovered and taken to hospital. Her survival has left terrible scars. But this horrific story supports the hypothesis that politically engaged and confident women constitute a threat to the patriarchal controls of men in society. Lashing out violently against strong women is one means of trying to undermine any gains made for women in society.

Organisations that offered services to abused women and children formed a national network and collaborated with former activists now in Parliament and in government. The effects of institutionalising the issue of gender-based violence resulted in an annual nationwide campaign – the Sixteen Days of No Violence Against Women. This brought civil society and the state, which included the departments of Justice and Constitutional Development, Correctional Services and also Population Development and Welfare, into a significant collaborative relationship. Indeed, the new Domestic Violence Act passed in 1998 was very much the creature of civil society (Albertyn et al. 1999). However,

gender-based violence did not die down significantly. Indeed, the laws to deal with sexual offences exist in the breach – while there was certainly more publicity about gender violence, evidence suggests increasing levels of violence, and that perpetrators and victims are getting younger and younger. Clearly the strategies adopted through policy and legislation did not get to the heart of the gender problems and were ineffective. Much more research needs to be done into why intimate family violence is so pervasive. The focus of research has, in the new millennium, begun to probe the constructions of masculinity and gender roles in society. Whether this will lead to a deeper understanding of how gender power is constructed and what changing roles will mean remains an open question. However, the institutionalising of the 'gender-based violence sector' tended to depoliticise the activism of civil society in the period immediately after the first democratic elections, as others have shown elsewhere (Meer 1999). Instead, action research tended to focus on the modalities of the violence rather than on the deeper structural reasons related to gender power in society.

The representation of women at the more formal level in Parliament reached what scholars elsewhere have termed a 'critical mass' early in the new democratic dispensation. It was at this level that the presence of women made a significant impact on legislation favouring women's needs and in national policy (Albertyn et al. 1998; Fick et al. 2002). The research shows that the difference may have altered perceptions about women's political capacities, but it has not led to substantive changes in the overall status of women. Men still dominate decision-making in all areas of public life. In private life, gender-based violence remains endemic. The fact that gender remains the defining difference in the life chances of women and men means that we have not been able to transcend the sexual contract first suggested by Carol Pateman – citizenship is not neutral and continues to create differentiated citizens with different rights and entitlements depending on their sex (Pateman 1989).

Critical questions for political activists involved in anti-apartheid community struggles throughout South Africa in the early 1990s included how the popular demands for land, housing and other social needs reflected in the Freedom Charter were to be translated into constitutional rights. The immediate living conditions of people shaped their subjective needs and immediate political demands. The gender politics of the struggle had itself defined how women conceived of their civic role. Women's earlier organisational struggles had challenged the idea that women were mere appendages to support men in their political work. Women in opposition, at least, whether in the United Democratic Front or in the exile movements, saw themselves as equal actors. The separate organisation of women was an indicator that women believed that the only way that they could articulate their needs and interests was in mobilising as women, but at the same time joining broader political parties and political movements (Hassim 2002; Kemp et al. 1995). In the 1990s, when it seemed that women might be excluded from participating in the constitutional talks, the ANCWL brought together the broad coalition that became the WNC to define the specific demands of women in the country.

The agenda of both local and national sexual politics took the form of demands for rights that took account of the gender differences between women and men.

The narrative of the women's naked protest linked the symbolism of their action – they stripped naked – to a sexualised social contract that both reflected and challenged their position. Their action showed both the agency of women at grassroots, their instinctive and strategic understanding of their position in society, and how they used this to recast their rights and to make claims for the state's responsibilities and duties towards them. Their claims were about practical needs embedded in a particular set of gendered relationships of power. Strategically, they mobilised their vulnerability as a political tool – using their cultural and social capital of sexuality to make claims on the state. Subsequent events have shown that the gains that were made, both in terms of legislation and of decision-making, have not easily translated into improvements in women's lives. A new kind of battleground opened up around gender power, gender roles and the status of women. In the early twenty-first century we are made more aware than ever of the need to confront gender transformation in ways that will not see the continued brutalisation of women by men who are unable to deal with the idea of gender equality.

NOTES

1 This chapter draws on both published and unpublished research that I have undertaken over the last 15 years. The argument I present in this chapter constitutes a fresh interpretation and use of some of that material. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my research assistants, Belede Mazwai, Esme Magwaza, Letabo Maleka and Lulu Sibeko in undertaking the interviews. The transcriptions and translations were undertaken by Nontobeko Lugqola, Esme Magwaza, and Lulu Sibeko. This chapter is written in loving memory of Belede Mazwai, who died in 1992, and Sheila Hlongwane, who died in 2005.

2 We interviewed about a third of the participants in the protest. All the interviews were conducted one-on-one in the vernacular. I was present at virtually all of the interviews which were conducted by my research assistants (Belede Mazwai, Esme Magwaza, Letabo Maleka and Lulu Sibeko). I followed the discussion with difficulty, but was able to interject questions. My role was to observe reactions and to note body language. Together with translated transcripts, these form the basis of the women's narratives.

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