

Feature Article

Terms of Engagement: South African challenges [1]

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“You always need women who can walk in the room in the right way, talk in the right tone of voice, who have access to power. But you always need a bottom line” (Adrienne Rich).

Introduction

In the past two decades, feminist activists and scholars in both older democracies and postcolonial states have begun to pay much closer attention to the ways in which the formal institutions of liberal democracies have failed women. After a period of intense debate, alongside a cynical view of institutions such as national machineries in Africa, we have recently witnessed renewed engagement by women with political parties and the state. As Aili Mari Tripp argues elsewhere in this issue, this stems in part from regional and global influences on women's organising, which have foregrounded a rights-based approach to women's mobilisation. This has involved a “diffusion of norms to increase women's political representation” (2005: <http://www.feministafrica.org/>).

Increased representation in decision-making bodies – rather than the ghettoisation of gender politics within national machineries – has led to massive campaigns for electoral quotas. Women's representation in African parliaments has increased sharply as a result of a deliberate strategy adopted by many women's movements to support the use of quotas, as well as (in some cases) the extension of systems of political patronage to incorporate women. [2] Women's movements have joined the international campaign for increased, even equal, representation of women within legislative bodies, including the African Union, which has adopted a fifty per cent quota for women.

These strategies are based on the view that if properly constituted, African democracies can overcome the historical legacies of women's subordination and that new relationships can be built between state and civil society, based on democratic participation, the development of policies that are responsive to the needs of poor women, and accountability of elected leaders to citizens. The demands to break down the barriers to equal political participation reflect an important tone in contemporary women's movement politics in Africa, as women's movements on the continent begin to take formal politics and political institutions seriously. They signal that there is room for women's agency to shape politics, and that formal political rights are an important precondition for advancing equitable social policies. The quota campaigns and the emphasis on representation are undoubtedly part of an important renewal of feminist activism on the continent.

Yet these developments raise a number of critical questions for feminists about the nature of contemporary political institutions, the possibilities for radical change through the state, and the kinds of processes within the women's movement that need to accompany state-focused political strategies. In this article, I reflect on these questions as they have arisen in one context, that of the South African state since 1994. While South Africa is far from being representative of the continent as a whole, the dilemmas faced within the context of democratisation may resonate for other countries. In many respects, South African processes of democratisation have also been very important in modelling the shift in emphasis to the formal sphere of the state in the African context. The movement of large numbers of gender activists from women's movement organisations into parliament and the bureaucracy in 1994, and the creation of an expanded and inclusive national machinery (Hassim, 2003), opened up the possibility that traditional deadlocks barring women's access to power could be broken. This particular combination of political will, institutional

development and linkages between activists in the state and in civil society suggested a different trajectory to the usual forms of engagement between the women's movement and the state.

To what extent have these expectations been borne out, and what effects have engagement with the state had on the women's movement? I begin by presenting a framework for analysing the challenges facing any women's movement as it seeks to engage the state, contrasting the emphasis on inclusion with the goals of transformation. My discussion then moves towards a consideration of the current shape of the South African women's movement, laying out its contours and borders, as well as the relationship between the women's movement and other social movements.

Inclusion and transformation: dilemmas of engagement

In this section, I contrast a “transformational” feminist approach with an “inclusionary” feminist approach, in order to elicit a set of criteria by which to assess the challenges of the South African women's movement. In defining the transformational approach, I draw on Maxine Molyneux's conceptual distinction between “strategic gender interests” and “practical gender needs”. She defined “practical gender needs” as those which arise from the everyday responsibilities of women based on a gendered division of labour, while “strategic gender interests” are those interests that women share in overthrowing power inequalities based on gender (1985). While Molyneux acknowledges that these distinctions might be difficult to pin down in practice (1998), her conceptualisation of women's movements recognises the diversity of women's interests while still allowing feminists to distinguish those strategies likely to lead to radical change. According to her approach, the task of feminism is to examine the particular ways in which power operates within and between the political, social and economic spheres of specific societies – in effect, it is a political project of transformation.

The inclusionary approach defines women's interests as more limited, focusing only on their relationships to formal political institutions. In this view, the most stable interest that cuts across the range of differences between women is their exclusion (or marginalisation at the very least) from the political arena as this is conventionally understood (Baldez, 2002). Regardless of race, class, ethnicity, and so on, women are consistently defined as political outsiders or second-class citizens, whose entry into the public sphere is either anachronistic and short-term, or conditional upon their maternal social roles. Here the emphasis is on women's interest in accessing arenas of public power, and less on debating the policy outcomes of such engagements. The task of feminism, in this more constrained approach, is to challenge exclusion. The political projects that are associated with this approach are, for example, women's enfranchisement, struggles around women's representation in national parliaments, and the emphasis on electoral systems, quotas and other mechanisms for breaking political-systemic blockages. Inclusionary feminism – or equality feminism – may be seen to create some of the necessary conditions for the removal of gender inequalities, but it is reluctant to tamper with the structural basis of inequalities. This reluctance stems partly from a strategic imperative to maintain minimal conditions for unity among women, and partly from the ideological underpinnings of liberalism, which regards family and market as lying outside the realm of state action.

Like the distinction between women's practical needs and strategic gender interests, the transformatory and the inclusionary approaches to defining women's interests are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they need to be seen as part of a continuum of women's struggles for full citizenship. These may take a linear historical form (that is, a shift from inclusionary demands to transformative demands over time), or may be present within a single movement at a given moment, with some sectors pursuing alliances with political

elites for inclusionary purposes and others insisting on a more radical set of demands. As I will discuss below, in South Africa both these approaches have been used in order to advance gender equality claims, at times with striking synergy.

However, although these approaches may co-exist within women's movements, there are many ways in which they are in tension with one another. It is important to note that each approach has long-term implications for what kinds of political alliances are built, which may in turn impact on internal relations within the women's movement.

In the case of the inclusionary approach, women's movements need access to political power to pursue the interests of representation effectively. Although they can gain this access through effective mobilisation, they also need linkages with power brokers within political parties in order to ensure ongoing engagement with the political system. Consequently, there is a tendency for inclusionary politics to become increasingly allied to elite groupings. Transformatory feminism, on the other hand, is more likely to be conducted in alliance with other social movements aiming at structural transformation, such as social movements of the poor. This kind of politics may bring certain sections of the women's movement into contestation with elite and party-oriented members, as it is more likely to be confrontational over party manifestos and the content of state policies. The outcome of such alliances may result in these actors being pushed to the margins of the state and political parties.

The inclusionary approach in South Africa has its most immediate roots in the strategic approach adopted by the Women's National Coalition (WNC) during the early 1990s. A lasting consequence of the transitional period was the emphasis by women's organisations on the issue of inclusion, and a gradual marginalisation of the politics of transformation. In the WNC, both strategies were held together as complementary and indeed mutually dependent. This was most clearly exemplified in the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, adopted by the WNC in February 1994, which called for increased access to arenas of decision-making, as well as structural transformation. The strategy of inclusion had broad support among women activists, as it was seen as a means towards the goal of changing the conditions of women's lives. This strategy involved an implicit questioning of the extent to which non-elite groups could expect that democracy would increase their access to power; demands for inclusion also involved a substantive questioning of the assumptions that the transition would result in grassroots citizen participation in political institutions. The demand for quotas was supported because it was seen as an instrument that would facilitate women's access to decision-making and create a political space in which to articulate a transformatory ideal of citizenship. Representation was not conceived of as an end in itself, but as part of a broader agenda of redistribution of social and economic power.

For these reasons as well, the women's movement participated in shaping the design of the national machinery for women, a set of institutions inside and around the state that would create the mechanisms to articulate women's particular policy interests and hold the state accountable to its broad commitment to gender equality. In the 1990s, the South African women's movement thus exemplified the strongest and most progressive version of inclusionary feminism. However, the new emphasis on the state had contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, loss of leadership and strategic vision weakened the structures of the women's movement. On the other hand, the move into the state undoubtedly created room for integrating gender concerns into key law reform and social policy processes. In the section that follows, I will first examine the impact of the institutionalisation of gender on the women's movement in the post-apartheid period, and then examine some of the longer-term consequences of state-centric politics.

Mapping the women's movement in post-apartheid South Africa

One of the most notable changes in the landscape of the women's movement in the post-1994 period was the fragmentation and stratification of women's organisations in civil society. The political centre of the WNC did not survive, as the top layer of the leadership of women's organisations shifted into positions within the state and bureaucracy. The new stratifications that emerged reflected a disaggregation of the movement into a diversity of arenas, some of which – those closely tied to policy-making processes, for example – were strengthened by new approaches to civil society within the state, whereas others reverted to the more familiar community-based forms of organisations.

The post-apartheid women's movement can be characterised as having three distinct arenas: the arena of national policy advocacy; the arena of national and regional networks and coalitions; and the arena of women's everyday organising in community-based organisations. Two aspects of women's political activism fall outside this characterisation, but are important to analyse, given my definition of the women's movement as a broad umbrella encompassing diverse organisations and occupying a variety of spaces. The first set of activities is the highly prominent participation of women in political parties in the period since 1994. The second lies at the other end of the spectrum – women's participation in other social movements, albeit as members rather than as leaders, and albeit that the mobilisation of their gendered identities is muted (which is not to say that it is not a valid explanation for why women have joined those movements). I will return to these arenas below.

National policy advocacy: There has undoubtedly been a strengthening of NGOs that act as advocacy agents and which are tied into state policy processes (for example, the Gender Advocacy Programme in Cape Town, the Nisaa Institute for Women's Development in Lenasia, Johannesburg, and the Gender Research Project at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand). These organisations have the expertise, and in a relative sense, the funding, to intervene in legal and policy debates and public consultations. They remain extremely active in public debate and have found spaces in the new governance system. Their primary role is to ensure the implementation and elaboration of the rights-based democratic framework, in itself an important political task, given the advanced formal rights that were secured in the new South African Constitution of 1996.

At this level, organisations can make effective links with other allies in civil society, such as the gay and lesbian rights movement, to mutually reinforce democratic agendas and share strategies. They are also easily accessible to actors in the state as well as to the donor community, and may be seen to play a strategic rather than a representative role in civil society. Indeed, one concern that has been raised about this level is the tension between the relatively high degree of access to decision-makers and the growing distance from constituencies of women (particularly poor rural women). However, organisations at this level are challenged to keep performing “reality checks” to ensure that what they are advocating is likely to be meaningful to the constituencies they seek to assist.

This kind of relationship is difficult to achieve when funding and gender expertise are thinly spread, making it hard to “listen” to how interests are being articulated at the grassroots level, or to ensure that information about what is happening at the advocacy level flows downwards to constituencies of women who are directly affected by particular policies. Although some NGOs in other sectors have developed this kind of relationship with a mass base (one thinks of the relationship between the Aids Law Project and the Treatment Action Campaign, for instance), this has not happened within the women's movement. As a result, the discrepancy between the high level of access to information and awareness of women's rights among the urban elite and the more marginal political position occupied by poor women is exacerbated. Even where victories are achieved, for example, in the passage of

the Maintenance Act, poor women do not always know that the law has changed in ways that might benefit them, or, as a legal activist at the Women's Legal Centre in Cape Town has pointed out, government departments do not immediately implement the new rulings (interview with Sibongile Ndatshe, 6 April 2004).

Operating in this relationship to the state, women's organisations at this level employ tactics that do not rely on mass mobilisation or confrontation. Rather, tactics, demands and rhetoric might be moderated to fit the discourses of the state in order to make incremental gains and retain hard-won openings into the state. A number of crucial legislative and policy gains have been made as a result of this strategy. A notable example is the success in decriminalising abortion, despite the deep opposition to this both in civil society and in the rank-and-file membership of political parties. Using a carefully argued strategic approach, feminists were able to frame the demand within the more acceptable terms of health rather than as an overt right to bodily integrity. Even so, it was only the ANC's strong support for the Termination of Pregnancy Act, and its refusal to allow its MPs a free vote, that made possible the passage of the legislation in 1996. In this case, an alliance between women's advocacy organisations and a strong political party resulted in an undoubted victory for women, entrenching women's reproductive rights in ways that are still not politically possible in many older democracies.

The alliance between political parties and advocacy groups is a form of upward political linkage. Equally important are downward linkages between advocacy groups and other social movement allies. There have been relatively few cases in which advocacy and mass mobilisation have effectively joined forces around common issues. In one of the few examples of women's collective action in defence of their interests in the past ten years, poor women (organised under the banner of the New Women's Movement) mobilised against the Lund Committee's recommended reforms of the state maintenance grant. Their allies were experienced advocacy activists in the Black Sash. Interestingly, however, they were opposed by the ANC Women's League in the Western Cape, which argued that organisations such as the New Women's Movement and the Black Sash represented the interests of relatively privileged Coloured women. The ANC Women's League stood by the ANC Minister of Welfare, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, under whose aegis the grant cutbacks were being proposed. The opposing alliance of women's organisations was nevertheless successful in ensuring that child support grants were increased fairly rapidly (although not nearly enough to have a poverty-reducing effect). This example shows that pressure from below can strengthen advocacy work and act as a crucial lever in reshaping the priorities of the state (Hassim, 2003a).

However, the need to retain allies in political parties and the state (the upward linkage) can at times work against the process of retaining downward linkages within the women's movement. One of the political costs of working primarily with parties and the state is the emergence of gaps between advocacy groups and those constituencies of poor women who seek to demand their rights to basic services (such as water or electricity) through direct action. Direct action tactics have tended to bring social movements into conflict with the state in ways that have created new fracture-lines in the political terrain. In certain cases, particular forms of direct action (such as informal reconnections to the electricity grid) have been deemed criminal by the ANC government. In this context, the choice to maintain credibility with state actors may, over time, reinforce the elite bias of this level of politics, as access to decision-making via party-political and bureaucratic allies becomes more important than pressure from below. The moderate feminist discourses that characterise this sector, and which allow access to political decision-making, can thus act as limits to the women's movement, by gradually constraining the range of potential strategies (and, possibly, citizenship claims) that are considered legitimate.

National and regional networks and coalitions: At the next level, there are a number of new, issue-based networks which have emerged, and which coalesce around common issues (such as the Network On Violence Against Women and the Reproductive Rights Alliance). These networks straddle the advocacy and policy roles of the first category, but are more likely to have identifiable constituencies. Like the advocacy organisations, the networks tend to be urban-based, with a bias towards location in Cape Town and Johannesburg. While they are primarily funded by foreign donors, many have also gained support from the local business sector for specific campaigns, particularly in the area of tackling violence against women (for example, the white ribbon campaign). The remarkable aspect of these networks is that they are characterised by attention to issues that would in the 1980s have been regarded as “feminist” (and therefore problematic) – in other words, issues of women's sexual and reproductive autonomy. This may be a function of the discursive shift from nationalism to citizenship as exemplified by the Constitution, as a result of which women's organisations feel less constrained in the types of issues that they can take into the national political domain. The new democracy, despite its weaknesses, has opened the door for women's organisations to take up issues that are outside of the conventional definitions of political action, and to demand that the state pay attention to issues that states have generally been reluctant to regulate (that is, regulating and mitigating men's power in the private sphere).

However, it has been difficult for these networks to hold together, as their members are in some respects competing for similar resources and operating on the same terrain. While they are most effective when they speak with one voice on issues of critical concern, such as gender-based violence, and are able to articulate and lobby for policy alternatives, they are the hardest type of organisation to keep alive. They often lack the funding to support a networking office, or, when they are well funded, their constituent members may feel resentful that more funding is not being channelled down to the actual work on the ground. Coalitions are by their nature fragile structures, constantly having to negotiate the terms of the relationships between members. Where there are scarce resources, or where there is jockeying among organisations wanting to be seen as the representative voice on an issue, coalitions are at their most vulnerable. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the most experienced activists in this sector are white and middle-class women, while black women activists entering the field of gender-based violence, for example, have come up against relatively well-established funding and advocacy networks. As a result, there has been considerable racial tension in this sector. It is therefore not surprising that such networks are the most unstable forms of organisation in the women's movement.

Community-based organisations: Least visible but most numerous are the layers of women's organisations at local community level. Women's organisations have always existed at this level, but have been weakly tied into national networks. The early 1980s were exceptional for the extent to which community-level organising was incorporated into a national political project, and women's organisations were shaped by the political visions of feminism. However, twenty years later, women's community organisations appear to have come adrift from any politically cohesive project. Despite this, community-based organisations are still the most numerous type of organisation in civil society, according to the Johns Hopkins University study of the size and scope of the non-profit sector in South Africa (Swilling and Russell, 2002). The bulk of the non-profit sector is made up of organisations or clubs concerned with culture and recreation, social services, development and housing. These areas are also gendered, and “according to anecdotal evidence, these types of activities tend more frequently to be carried out by women” (Swilling and Russell, 2002: 26).

Women's organisations at this level have been the most distant from the state, and even from women's NGOs and networks that engage the state. A major part of their work addresses women's practical needs, particularly in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis. It ranges

from welfare work, caring for the ill, organising and financing funerals to mobilising at community level against rapists (and particularly men who rape children). In a number of respects, it is women who have been the shock absorbers for high levels of unemployment and the failure of the state to provide a comprehensive and efficient system of social security and health care. The emphasis on the cultural value of caring in government policy frameworks – such as the White Paper on Social Welfare – in effect shifts the burden of caring for the young, the sick and the elderly onto women (and increasingly onto children as well), without financial compensation for their time, and without effective back-up by the state. Yet these increasing burdens are not without political opportunities. In caring for people dying of AIDS, women often have to cross cultural barriers of privacy and respect, renegotiating cultural and traditional practices and redefining social roles in the process. These everyday negotiations challenge the commonplace assumption that women are simply victims of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

At the community level, women have also discovered other forms of agency. Many are participants in the emerging social movements that are challenging the cost recovery basis on which basic services are delivered. In response to perceived weaknesses in the justice system in dealing with violence against women, they have at times effected “citizen’s arrests”. Although direct actions such as marching to police stations with rapists in tow are not widespread, they occur often enough to remind observers of the enormous degree of agency vested at this level. Political ideologies in this arena may be characterised as falling within a maternalist tradition, in the strong and positive sense of maternalism. Perhaps ironically, the most vibrant and creative forms of collective solidarity are emerging at this level, as women seek to address everyday crises with few resources. Yet community-level women’s organisations seldom have the time, expertise or resources to address decision-makers, and women within other social movements do not as yet appear to have inserted a gender analysis into the conceptualisation of their struggles.

These three levels within the women’s movement should ideally add up to a strong and diverse social movement. In a democratically effective state, they would work together to ensure that poor and vulnerable people are an important constituency for politicians; that there is accountability in public spending; that the constitutional values of equality and social justice are upheld; and that both the public and private spheres are increasingly governed by democratic norms. This has not yet happened in South Africa. Instead, we may be in danger of developing what Amina Mama has referred to as a “women’s group movement” rather than a women’s movement, in which feminism, “defined as a coherent praxis dedicated to the liberation of women, is not integral to popular struggles” (2000: 13).

In the next section, I explore reasons for this, refocusing attention on the balance between inclusionary feminism and transformatory feminism. I argue that the most visible forms of gender politics have centred on issues of representation (that is, equality/inclusionary feminism) rather than on policy outcomes. The challenge is to create the necessary synergies between the different levels – a difficult task in the absence of a mobilised feminist component within the movement. In the following section, I analyse the possibilities for stronger versions of feminism in the context of the current environments of social movements and the state.

Relationships between women’s movements, other social movements and the state

The binary opposition of state and society is a difficult one to sustain from a feminist perspective. As Mama has pointed out, in Africa neither the state nor social movements have been entirely welcoming spaces for women (2000). Looking firstly at social movements, the conception of these arenas as fundamentally democratic and transformative is in many respects an idealisation that feminists have challenged for some time. Relations

of power within social movements have often been masked, and questions concerning who has voice and agency within such movements remain largely obscured. The new social movements that have emerged in South Africa since 1994 have very often relied on the mobilisation of women on the basis of their practical needs – for example, for electricity, land and housing – but have rarely linked these issues to the pernicious gender division of labour. Internal tensions of race and gender within social movements have rarely been directly examined. As Dawn Paley (2004) has pointed out, more than half of the activists in the Anti-Privatisation Forum are women, “yet it [was] men's voices that overwhelmingly dominated” at a meeting she recently attended. She asks: “How is it that black women can make up the bulk of the membership of the movements against neo-liberal policies and be so marginalised in the functioning of these organisations?” One of her informants suggests boldly that women are being used.

This is not to suggest that social movements are arenas of action that should be avoided by women. As demonstrated above, there is a long tradition of women organising in alliance with other progressive political forces, and there is much to be gained strategically from linking struggles against class and race oppression to those against gender oppression. However, it needs to be recognised that social movements in South Africa are profoundly gendered and unequal. As yet, they are far from inclusionary in their practices or even their visions for transformation, to the extent that these do not explicitly address male social and cultural power.

But if the women's movement's relationship to other progressive social movements has always been fraught, its relationship to the state is equally contradictory. The period of transitional government, leading up to the first national elections in 1994 and into the first two years of government, was a time of great optimism in South Africa. Many gender activists who moved into the state saw their new roles as an extension of their activism into a new arena, rather than an abandonment of the women's movement, and many described the new relationship as a form of partnership or synergy. As gender activist and former ANC MP Pregs Govender commented, “[I]n the first few years, many of us in the ANC were very clear about the mandate and priorities that our budget needed to reflect. It had been the right time to assert the interests of poor women...” (2004). Thenjiwe Mtintso has also argued strongly that women need to be present in parliament and the state:

Women have got to challenge the socially constructed divide between the private and the public spheres. Entering Parliament is one way of making the private political. Consistent and conscious efforts have to be made to bring women and gender interests to centre stage in decision-making spheres like Parliament (2003: 577).

For the democratic state, too, civil society remained important, albeit in a new guise as the third partner in the development triad of state, market and society (Greenstein, 2003). Reforms in the mechanisms of governance reinforced this new view of the role of civil society as development partner. The new democratic government changed the nature of public decision-making to incorporate a high degree of public participation and consultation, including women as a distinct constituency. These governance reforms were driven by the view that civil society has a role to play in the development process itself, both in service delivery in the context of a state whose institutional reach has been limited by apartheid, as well as in ensuring government accountability in periods between general elections. Drafts of policy, in the shape of the Green and White Papers, are formulated with the involvement of key “stakeholders” in civil society, often drawing on the expertise of academics and lawyers from outside the state. Portfolio committees in parliament, responsible for oversight of government departments, have regular public hearings on particular aspects of administration. Parliament itself is open to the public at all times. Access has been created for women's organisations and the national machinery to debate the content of policies and

examine their gender sensitivity at early stages in policy formulation.

It is clear that in many respects, women in particular have benefited from the new institutional and procedural arrangements in the state. Women are treated as a constituency with special interests that need to be represented in policymaking. The national gender machinery was designed to provide a bridge between different sectors of the state, as well as between state and society. Thus, in formal terms, the state has been made more permeable to the influence of organised constituencies of women. In practice, as is the case with national machineries worldwide, the South African institutions are elite-driven, under-resourced and dependent to a high degree on donor funding (Tsikata, 2000). Gender-mainstreaming expertise within the state is poorly developed. As a result, many of the gains made in relation to gender equality are in those areas where policy addresses women directly as a category (for example, termination of pregnancy and maternal health), while those aspects of policy in which the relationships between women and men need to be addressed (for example, matters of customary law and land ownership) have been much harder to define (Walker, 2001; Albertyn and Hassim, 2003; Hassim, 2004).

Inclusion of women in the formal institutions of the state, and of the term “gender equality” in policy documents, has not led to redistribution of resources and power in ways that change the structural forces on which women's oppression rests. Inclusion has rather been an avenue for reinforcing elite women's access to the formal political system while not (as yet) translating clearly into policies that address the needs of poor women.

The reasons for this are complicated, and have their roots partly in the tense relationship between feminism and the nationalist movement, and partly in the elite biases of the democratic model adopted during the transition to democracy. Key actors within the state, as well as the women's movement, remained suspicious of the intentions of middle-class (mostly white) feminists. In addition, they were (correctly) concerned with enabling a far more diverse set of voices to be heard in defining policy goals. The combination of these factors meant that experienced feminist activists were often bypassed in order to reach poor women within communities. However, as Tsikata points out, we need to be careful not to let the emphasis on the basic needs of poor women and their children displace issues of gender relations and power (2000: 6).

There have been several cases where state openness to gender equality has facilitated progressive outcomes. Within the constraints of the terms of reference set by bureaucrats, [3] feminists have been able to make long-term gains in embedding gender equality in overarching policy frameworks, and ensuring that in many cases, the details of legislation (such as the Employment Equity Act and the local government policy framework) specified gender equality as a criterion. Catherine Albertyn notes that “by 2000, women in South Africa enjoyed unprecedented political and legal equality in the form of political participation and entrenched human and legal rights” (2003: 604).

This form of feminism sought to change existing unegalitarian laws and policies, and to entrench the notion of equality in new frameworks. This emphasis coincided with the emergence of a critical mass of women in the new parliament at the very moment that a wholesale legislative reform, seeking to overturn racist laws, was implemented. However, the emphasis of equality feminism on engaging the state had three key unintended and unforeseen consequences for the women's movement.

The first lies in the impact of institutionalisation of interests on the politics of interest articulation. Creating a set of specialised institutions for the consideration of gender shifted the issues of gender inequality out of the realm of politics and into the technical realm of policymaking. As Mama argues, these kinds of institutions have “not been at the cutting

edge of women's struggles" and their projects "have tended to replace more militant forms of struggle" (2000: 23). In the process of administration, gender equality concerns have fallen hostage to a range of institutional hierarchies and systemic blockages that are hard to deal with from outside the bureaucracy. The second consequence of the dominant focus on reforming the state is that very few women's organisations are dealing with issues of cultural norms and everyday practices, which may indeed limit the implementation and impact of legislative reforms. Finally, most activists who moved into the state assumed that public resources would be directed in a concerted fashion towards the reduction of the massive inequalities inherited from apartheid. Instead, anti-poverty policies have been mostly ineffective. While quotas for women have been written into state initiatives such as the Community Based Public Works Programme, the racial and gendered biases in the economy remain intact. Black women are still more likely to be unemployed, to be paid less than men when employed, and to perform unpaid labour (Seidman-Makgetla, 2004).

The most notable attempt to engage the state outside of the equality feminist considerations of political and civil rights was the Women's Budget Initiative, which sought to track the ways in which spending had gendered impacts. This project had real potential to raise fundamental questions about spending priorities, and to highlight the ways in which women were benefiting (or not) from particular policy approaches. However, within a few years, the Ministry of Finance, which had initially embraced the Women's Budget Initiative, downgraded the project, and it is now virtually moribund at the national level. Setbacks like these create tension for those feminists who entered the state on the assumption that it would be a site of strategic intervention. For Pregs Govender, former ANC MP and chairperson of the highly effective Joint Standing Committee on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women, the tensions between state and party constraints and her vision for transformation became untenable, and she resigned her seat in parliament in 2002.

These comments should not be read as meaning that engaging the state was a misguided strategy for the women's movement, or that alliances with political parties necessarily lead to co-option. Rather, what needs to be considered is how the state should be engaged, what kinds of legal and institutional reforms should be promoted, and how a women's movement should be built that is sufficiently mobilised to support a critical engagement with the state. Poor women in South Africa would undoubtedly be better served by a strong state with the infrastructural capacities to implement functional health, welfare and basic service delivery. Removing formal inequalities is also important, as this creates the normative and enabling environment in which women's claims to full citizenship can be pursued.

However, it is self-limiting for the women's movement to pursue inclusion in the state in a piecemeal and depoliticised fashion, seeking to include women into existing policy frameworks without questioning whether the overall policy directions are appropriate for poor women, or how new areas of policy or lawmaking should be placed on the agenda. For example, Seidman-Makgetla points to the limits of law reform in addressing economic inequalities. She argues that "the laws on equity ... did not directly address the economic context of high levels of unemployment and women's lack of economic assets. Nor did they engage persistent inequalities in homes, communities and schools." What is needed, she argues, is structural transformation "rather than just better enforcement of anti-discrimination measures" (2004: 1).

Conclusions

Changing inequities in social and economic power will require not just the increased representation of women within the state, but also the increased and assertive representation of poor women within the state, as well as a strong feminist movement outside the state. It requires that those elected into power pursue redistributive policies

and that a vibrant women's movement acts to ensure accountability to the interests of marginal and vulnerable groupings. The roles of interest articulation (rather than merely group representation) and accountability require a different form of social movement of women. The reduction of the women's movement to a "development partner" has long-term costs for democracy. Firstly, it reduces the ability of the movement to debate the underpinning norms and values of policy directions, as these are placed outside the terms of reference in many policy development processes. Secondly, the lack of emphasis on defining the specific interests of different groups of women compromises the ability of the women's movement to impact laterally on the political agendas of other social movements and in civil society more generally. The idea of gender equality is thus increasingly reduced to a vague set of "good intentions", which are rarely translated into meaningful policy and ideological demands.

Of course, changing social norms and values is a long-term political struggle, made more difficult in a context where there is a perceived need to protect indigenous cultural systems from the effects of colonialism and globalisation. Engaging society as whole on cultural issues requires careful strategic decisions, which in turn require a strong and self-confident women's movement engaging a diverse set of actors. Cultural inequalities can only partially be dealt with by more equitable and gender-sensitive policies; they often reflect power relations that cannot be "remedied" by state action. Rather, they demand that state policies be supplemented by a vibrant debate in the public sphere about the nature of society. They require a type of women's movement that is not merely seeking to make piecemeal interventions in the policy and legislative processes of the state, but is engaged with norm-setting at the broadest level. On these issues, the South African women's movement has much to learn from other movements on the continent, which may have made less impact on the institutional make-up of their countries, but are not afraid to engage issues of cultural power directly.

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Footnotes

[1] This article is based on a longer research paper commissioned by the Social Movements Project, Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am grateful to the project leaders for permission to use this material. The longer paper, as well as other project papers, is available at <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/socialmovements>.

[2] For example, in Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni actively supported the creation of reserved seats for women, but has since used women's votes in parliament to ensure that legislation supporting women's rights has been defeated (Goetz and Hassim, 2002; Tripp,

2003; Tamale, 1999). More recently, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe used the argument of women's representation to ensure that Joyce Mjuru was elected vice-president of ZANU-PF, thus keeping out of presidential contention his challenger Emerson Mnangagwa.

[3] An example of this is the ways in which the members of the Lund Committee of Enquiry, among whom were a number of prominent feminists, were restricted by a very narrow budgetary allocation for child support grants (Hassim, 2003).

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