Organising against Gender Violence in South Africa

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South Africa continues to top international rankings of incidence of reported rape and sexual violence. Rooted in the patriarchies of oppression found in colonialism, apartheid and the Cold War, these deeply ingrained patterns of sexual violence did not end with the transition to democracy. Many fear the level of gender-based violence may be increasing because of a backlash against the constitutionally-enforced gender equality of South African women. In response, one of the most viable parts of the women’s movement in South Africa is the movement to end violence against women. Organisations in this sector have become the primary contract agents for the government, yet many women’s groups remain thwarted by the complexities of their new bureaucratic relationship with the government institutions they used to oppose during apartheid. This article examines how organisations concerned with violence against women are redefining their mission, securing effective leadership and utilising new methods of activism. Organisations are fighting to maintain their autonomy rather than become ‘technocratic handmaidens’ for the new government; they are attempting to engage masculinities within ‘feminist’ frameworks, and they are witnessing the growing institutionalisation and NGO-isation of the South African women’s movement.

Introduction

The year 2004 marked ten years of democracy within South Africa and ten years of a national commitment to gender equality. Women have long been involved in political action in South Africa, and their efforts were invaluable in the transition to and consolidation of democracy. Yet, as is often the case, the changing nature of society necessitates a new form of political activity. Since the end of apartheid, South African women have continued to redefine leadership, feminism and power on their own terms and in their own cultural contexts. For every significant gain women have made in the national political arena, however, there remains a parallel challenge or obstacle to their advancement. Most notable, perhaps, is the continuing high rate of gender violence that threatens to blight other achievements of the post-apartheid state, which may undermine the support for gender equality in the South African constitution.

South Africa continues to top international rankings of occurrences of reported rape and sexual violence according to Interpol.\(^1\) Exacerbated by the violence of apartheid, the social consequences of the migrant labour force, and the impact of patriarchal authority, violence against women has become one of the most visible and destabilising vestiges of this complex history. During the colonial period and throughout the apartheid era, rape was used as a weapon to ensure control, obedience and interracial conformity.\(^2\) The increased availability


of small arms since the end of the Cold War has exacerbated the level of conflict within Africa and has specifically worsened the incidence of sexual violence continent-wide.3

The reported incidence of rape increased with the democratic dispensation, and South Africa has consistently had the most rapes reported per capita in the world. Anti-rape activists argue that these levels of violence against women seem to be increasing rather than decreasing, even though the South African government now reports a modest decrease in the number of rapes per year.4 The South African government stated that 52,733 rapes were reported to the police for 2003, a fall from the all-time high of 52,891 of 1999/2000.5 Even with these startlingly high levels of reported rapes, the South African police have long estimated that only 3 per cent of all rapes are actually reported,6 and more recently the South African Law Commission has estimated that ‘there are 1.69 million rapes per year, but on average only 54,000 rape survivors lay charges each year’.7

South African levels of domestic violence are also some of the highest in the world. For example, marital rape was not recognised by South African law until 1993,8 and some estimate that it occurs in as much as 60 per cent of marital relationships.9 There are, of course, several problems in assessing the level of violence, including the dramatic under-reporting of crimes and the constraints of a patriarchal society. Rape Crisis South Africa’s response to this obsession with statistics on rape has been consistent: it does not matter what the reported statistics are or what multiple is then used to determine the ‘actual’ number of rapes; whatever the number, it is simply too high.10

After the release of the 2003/4 statistics, President Thabo Mbeki and anti-rape activist and rape survivor Charlene Smith presented opposing viewpoints on gender violence in the national press, in which Smith claimed that rape has become part of the way of life in South Africa and that the crime statistics do not reveal the extent of the crime or how rape has become increasingly linked to HIV/AIDS. Rape victims are younger and younger each year, with SAPS reporting that 41 per cent of rape survivors are under the age of twelve.11 Mbeki responded that rather than recognising the modest advances in the figures, Smith is trapped in the ‘psychological residue of apartheid (that) has produced a psychosis among some of us such that, to this day, they do not believe that our non-racial democracy will survive and succeed’.12 Mbeki’s accusation that Smith’s privileged class and race status have affected her interpretation of crime further complicates the debate about how to fight gender violence. Here we can see different ideologies and alliances come into conflict. The African National

10 Ibid.
Congress (ANC) has consistently advocated that they are a party committed to anti-racism and anti-sexism. Hence, government leaders and gender activists should be fervent allies. Yet, when faced with the rather potent evidence that the problem still exists at record levels, these alliances are sorely tested. In many ways this exchange encapsulates the relationship between progressive civil society organisations and the post-apartheid democratic government, and this is also symptomatic of a much more entrenched tension within the anti-apartheid movement in terms of dealing with ‘women’s issues’ as part of the struggle for liberation.13 While these organisations are often rhetorically and theoretically aligned with the new government, they also find themselves needing to criticise and monitor their old allies. This critique is often read as disloyalty and can have dramatic implications for their survival and funding.

Yet the government and civil society depend on each other – and are increasingly intermeshed through outreach and service delivery, especially in terms of gender violence. The movement to end gender violence in South Africa seeks to provide services including empowerment programmes, face-to-face and group counselling, shelter and intervention services and legal assistance. Although they have become the primary contract agents for the government, many women’s groups remain thwarted by the complexities of their new bureaucratic relationship with the same government institutions they used to oppose during apartheid.

Based on interviews and participant-observations during five research trips to South Africa from 1990 to 2003, this article examines how women’s organisations in the sector against gender violence are redefining their mission, securing effective leadership and utilising new methods of activism. Over the course of the five research periods, I interviewed 60 women members of parliament and conducted an additional 140 interviews with women in civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), government departments, the Commission for Gender Equality and the Office on the Status of Women. This article focuses primarily on the interviews with members of women’s groups fighting gender violence, although the additional interviews provide the background information for the discussions of the coalition strategies.14 In particular, I evaluate the work of four organisations in the Cape Town area and four organisations in the Pretoria/Johannesburg area that are working to end violence against women, domestic violence, or gender violence. The goal is to understand the role of organisations working with, and sometimes against, the democratic government to shift both the statutory and cultural environment. While much democratisation research examines the transformation experienced either by national parliaments or by civil society organisations, substantive work exploring the association between these groups is severely limited. In addressing these questions, this article extends the literature on democratisation and intends to fill the now recognised gap in this field.15

Colonialism, Apartheid and Gender Violence

While it is outside the scope of this article to delineate the causes of the gendered violence that has become rampant in South Africa, it is important, first, to frame the context within which

14 In accordance with the regulations of the Institutional Review Boards of Syracuse University and Mississippi State University, all interviews were conducted in English and all participants and organisations are given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Given that most NGOs and CBOs are deeply dependent upon the government for funding, it was essential that the names of the organisations remain protected. I wish to thank IDASA in South Africa for hosting this research, Mississippi State University for funding the 2003 research, Robert Miles of Mississippi State University for assistance in the background research on violence against women, and the comments of the two anonymous reviewers and the three editors from JSAS.
violence became normalised during colonialism and apartheid and, second, to explore the nature of gender violence that exists today. Although there is no single cause or explanation for these patterns of gender-based violence, there are several theories about contributory factors.16

Gender-based violence is often linked to patterns of patriarchy and systems of oppression that are in accord with those found during the colonial period in South Africa.17 The patterns of exploitation did not end with colonialism but were extended within the apartheid system of white-minority rule. Afrikaner masculinist identity was protected by apartheid, and ‘[f]or decades, being a white male meant being kept from poverty, with jobs in the traditional Afrikaner preserves like the mines, railways, the police and the civil service being handed down’ through the generations.18 While masculinities varied during this period, Swart argues that Afrikaner masculinity ‘assumed a hegemonic form’ over other forms of masculinity and the gender system as a whole.19

The vision of the racial superiority of the colonial settlers and later apartheid-era rulers went hand-in-hand with their gender ideologies and hierarchies. Although women in pre-colonial southern Africa had only limited official political power, they did have notable status ascribed to them because of their productive and reproductive roles in society.20 With colonisation, and later apartheid, those women of European descent were privileged politically, socially and economically as were the gender hierarchies that entrenched male power (most specifically white male power) and further disempowered women (especially black women) of what power they had culturally or otherwise.21 Colonial rule and apartheid ideologies privileged specific types of femininity that were typically domestically focused, and certain women were often celebrated for their roles as mothers of ‘the nation’. Some femininities were championed, such as the idealised visions of womanhood found within the Afrikaner voortrekker community, and others were debased and disregarded, such as the roles and identities of African women who were forced into subservient roles cleaning and caring for the white society.22 Yet, throughout much of the period, all women regardless of race were publicly silenced and were obstructed from participation in formal political life. Many black women and some white women supported the gender system while resisting the policies of racial segregation and ethnic hierarchies. In this way, some women could adopt a conservative militancy that used traditional gender roles to challenge apartheid through radical mass action.23


17 For a discussion of these patterns in the colonial period, see, for example, P. Scully, Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853 (Cape Town, David Philip, 1997).


19 Ibid.


Although not at the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement, which was almost exclusively a male domain, women were leaders and participants in major opposition groups, such as the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the United Democratic Front (UDF). Women’s active roles in the anti-apartheid struggle placed them in danger of imprisonment, exile, torture and harassment. Goldblatt and Meintjes discuss the gender-based violence women experienced, including rape and gang rape, forced abortions or sterilisation and electric shock. South African Defence Forces regularly raped black women, regardless of whether they were civilian women or part of the guerrilla forces. Women were at risk not only from the opposing forces, but often were also subjected to rape or harassment by their own comrades, even in the ANC camps. This abuse often went unreported out of loyalty to the overall fight against apartheid.

But gender-based violence during the conflict was not exclusive to women detainees or combatants. Men also were subjected to gender violence. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings reveal how men regularly underwent sexual violation as well as electric shocks to genitals as a means of torture and a method of coercion. Thus, the continuum of gender-based violence is complex, in that men were also the primary perpetrators of violence, and the TRC was aware that the final reports did not fully analyse the connections between masculinities and violence within the conflict.

Gender-based violence as a means of torture was also psychological. Women and men were often subjected to threats of abuse or harm of family members, especially children, if they did not comply with government demands or coerced confessions. Police often humiliated and harassed women during menstruation, and security forces often denied women access to sanitary protection to violate women’s privacy and to ridicule them psychologically.

Although state violence such as that employed by the police and security forces during the apartheid era has ended, gender-based violence has numerous manifestations today. Rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, ‘corrective rape’ against gays and lesbians, virginity testing and sexual assaults form the contemporary continuum of gender violence. Rape and violence within the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is also rampant. There are regular accounts of HIV/AIDS-infected men, who rape young women, misguided in the belief that they may ‘cure’ themselves of the disease by ‘passing it on’ to uninfected individuals. Stoning, murder, physical burns, harassment, job discrimination and other forms of physical violence against infected men and women are also prevalent. This type of violence further points to the gap between legislation and reality, given the constitutional and legislative prohibitions against discrimination of people based on their HIV status.

The contemporary period also brings with it new ideologies that frame gender identities, and it is clear that new masculinities are being shaped in the post-apartheid era. Morrell identifies one of the most notable features of South Africa since the end of apartheid as the ‘volatility of gender change’ and the diversity of masculinities so that ‘[n]o one masculinity

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29 TRC, Final Report.
or group alone is likely to be the carrier of new values’. Violence and masculinity have become further entangled with the availability of small arms since the end of the Cold War, and this linkage between violence and masculinity serves to produce an ideology of militarism. Cock finds that ‘guns are a key feature of hegemonic masculinity’ within the South African context and serve to equate masculinity with power. Guns become ‘part of the dominant masculine code in diverse cultural groupings’, and when guns are combined with a culture of violence and a legacy of patriarchy, gender-based violence is often the result. With the proliferation of light weaponry, gender-based violence may be further entrenched because the consequences of resisting it become even more deadly.

Morrell shows that the high levels of rape in contemporary South Africa are linked to ‘reactive or defensive responses’ to shifting gender roles, feminist and gender organising re-ordering civil society, and the legislative and electoral advancement of women. Rape is used to keep women in line and perpetuates a status quo that privileges a particular form of white, middle-class, homophobic masculinity. While rape is just one form of gender-based violence, it is clear that in contemporary South Africa the changing gender ideologies necessitate new resistance strategies. Given the transition to democracy in South Africa, civic groups and gender activists are trying to walk the delicate line of working with, within and against the state to create change.

Organisations in Transition

During the transition to democracy, women’s organisations faced a triple crisis of leadership, methods and funding. First, the success of women in national political office had an unanticipated disadvantage for women’s organisations in civil society. The top-tier of their leadership structure was elected into national or provincial office, leaving the women’s groups struggling to find new leaders. Additionally, women’s groups were no longer working as anti-apartheid resistance organisations. They often found themselves working in collaboration with, rather than in opposition to, the government. While they had undauntedly confronted the former apartheid regime, contemporary women’s groups had to strike a delicate balance between working with the new democratic government while simultaneously monitoring its progress. Finally, each organisation has to secure funding without losing its organisational autonomy, learn to collaborate with the new government without being co-opted by it, and balance advocacy work with the consultancies they do for the government.


32 Ibid., p. 47.


34 Morrell, pp. 26–9.

35 In 2005, the total percentage of women in South Africa’s parliament consists of 32.8% women in the National Assembly, the lower house, and 33.3% women in the National Council of Provinces, the upper house. For a full discussion of women in office in South Africa, see H. Britton, Women in the South African Parliament: From Resistance to Governance (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2005).
While women in government and in non-governmental organisations are revamping their missions, life for the majority of South African women continues to be marked by socio-economic hardships, patriarchal domination and frequent gender violence. As a result, grassroots organisations, coalitions and government–civil society initiatives have joined in the campaign to end violence against women. These groups are working to provide a long list of services including training sessions, empowerment programmes, face-to-face and group counselling, shelter and intervention services, legal assistance and one-stop rape crisis centres. They have become the primary contract agents for new government, and they are implementing a growing number of social services.

Despite this interdependence, groups remain thwarted by the complexities and requirements of their new bureaucratic relationship with women in government. As Grace in Cape Town indicated, ‘The first stage of legislation is happening, and it had to happen. But now women need to move beyond legislative change to implementation challenges and all of that.’ These groups are working to maintain their solidarity, advance the cause of women and lessen the destabilising effects of gender-based violence.

During my interviews, members of the movement to end violence against women indicated that they required new skills to build a more collaborative relationship with government. This is an important finding because it mirrors a shift within the South African women’s movement as a whole. While the focus of the women’s movement from 1994 to 1999 was on getting women into office and writing progressive legislation, since 1999 the agenda has shifted to policy implementation. Strengthening the linkages between women’s groups and government departments is critical to secure funding, ensure trust and facilitate collaboration.

Organisations and Ideologies

The eight organisations in this study include several that address gender-based violence. There were three organisations working specifically to combat physical gender-based violence directed against women. Of these three organisations, two had always or had recently involved men in some limited form as staff members or counsellors, while one remained a women-only facility. There were two NGOs that were working for human rights and gender rights broadly defined that had a unit or branch dealing specifically with violence against women. One involved men; the other did not. There was one working to address family violence that included a particular focus on domestic violence and marital rape. This organisation actively involved men in all aspects of training, counselling and advocacy. Finally, there were two organisations that focused on ending gender-based violence that worked with survivors and perpetrators. Both involved men in a limited capacity as staff counsellors, primarily for perpetrators of violence.

Almost all the organisations had white, coloured, or Indian women as their chief executive officer or programme directors, although almost all also had a very diverse group of staff members from all racial backgrounds. The class divisions could easily be mapped on to

36 Interview conducted by the author, Cape Town, 12 June 2003.
37 The article deals primarily with four organisations in Cape Town and four in the Pretoria/Johannesburg area. Given the continued sensitivity of the mission and political positioning of these organisations, the real names of the groups and the names of the individuals interviewed must remain confidential, pursuant to the Human Subjects Agreements each of the participants signed before participating in this study. Seven of the eight groups regularly seek government funding or contracts, and all eight are in competition for private sources of funding. There are thus tangible political, financial and material implications for their organisational survival, that precludes my revealing which organisations participated in this study. Confidentiality is essential given the importance of ensuring the public trust within this population, maintaining the ethics of the broader research community and fostering the ability of future researchers to work with these groups.
the existing racial and class hierarchies within South Africa, although it was clear that these organisations did not provide employees with extensive financial rewards or compensation. The women and men who worked in these organisations did so because of a deep commitment to eradicate gender-based violence and not to secure financial gain. Counsellors, advocates and legal aid assistants were typically available to provide services in English, Afrikaans and the languages of the region, especially Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho.

While each of the organisations has been focused on ending gender-based violence, they have adopted very different ways of accomplishing that goal. There are some important generalisations that can be made about the types of groups within this sector. Their ability to work with the new government, or interest in doing so, seems to have been related more to the level of institutionalisation of the organisations rather than their racial composition or ideology. First, organisations that were in existence since before the transition to majority rule were often the most likely to receive government funding, to be headed by white or coloured women, and to be engaged in service delivery for the government. Some of them, typically those headed by white South Africans, had been engaged in service delivery with the apartheid government and thus had the advantage of understanding government bureaucracy. This underscores the idea that both gender discrimination and gender-based violence predate the ending of apartheid, and ironically those groups that are most recognised or supported financially also predate the demise of apartheid. Those that had been ideologically opposed to apartheid and had not received government funding before 1994 still seemed to have an advantage over newer organisations because they were more institutionalised. They already had offices and staff, so they had greater institutional capacity when entering into competition for government support.

Second, organisations formed after the 1994 transition to apartheid seem to have followed two different paths in terms of their relationship with the new government. One was to pursue government support and funding; the other was to oppose government support on ideological grounds and instead pursue private or international funding. The organisation that criticised government and women in parliament most vigorously was led by a white South African, I call ‘Karin’. Karin was totally opposed to working with the government and opposed all forms of government funding – since that would mean a lack of control of her organisation and a shift in direction. Most of the organisation’s support came from international funders, under the assumption that the group would have more control if the funding agencies were not part of the government. Other organisations formed after the transition were seeking both government and non-governmental sources of funding, and these were most often led by black or coloured women. These groups were actively trying to secure, with very uneven success, government and private sources of funding.

Overall, I found that there were four main areas of tension within civil society organisations fighting to end gender-based violence: collaboration with the state, issues of securing funding, debates about working with men and approaches to fighting gender violence.

Collaboration: ‘What kind of tap dance do we have to do?’

One of the central questions is whether or not the government and community organisations can work together towards one goal. Although the current South African government is dominated by former comrades, allies and activists from the liberation struggle, members of civil society organisations still question the potential for true collaboration. This tension is even more poignant in the South African case because there was a concerted effort in the early 1990s to pursue state feminism. Yet, as this research indicates, there were suspicions regarding government officials and their priorities from early in the new dispensation, long before their impact would have been felt.
In interviews conducted in 1996–97, evidence of a fissure between civil society and government was beginning to be seen. Kate, an anti-rape activist working in the Western Cape, drew attention to the political imperatives within government that could limit or even change the identity, purpose and ideologies of women who, until joining parliament, were not in any substantive way dissimilar to herself:

That whole struggle of being in partnership with government and yet at the same time monitoring it is an extremely difficult one. That is the struggle for NGOs, and it is at the same time about our relationship with the women in parliament. Absolutely like having connections with [certain] ones from the past, being in organisations with those people . . . . One automatically within government is limited with your priorities, your resources, your time. There are so many things that whether or not one has relationships with people, [they also have] party alliances and provincial responsibilities and national responsibilities. In a province like this, whom do you target? It is difficult in terms of who you form alliances with. I remain cynical. I will continue to be suspicious. Can government, any government, really share the same priorities as community organisations?

Listening to Kate, we can hear her suspicion that those within government were co-opted by different priorities and allegiances, merely by stepping across the threshold into formal state institutions. While understanding the new responsibilities of MPs, her words suggest that old allies who become members of the government will inherently have different priorities. This is a tension found in many post-transition contexts, but it was interesting that such a gap was already evident by 1996. As Kate stated, the question of trust was central to their relationship with women officeholders:

Previously, one knew very clearly where the lines were, where the boundaries were, and who the enemy was and wasn’t. Now I think it has been really difficult over the last few years. The opening of everyone trying to co-operate, trying to work together, trying to include everyone – and really how much that is – it is so difficult. The new wave in the Western Cape, the Alliance Against Violence, all new structures – there are discussions of whether people should be a part of those structures or not. And there is this pressure, ‘Well, they should be, and why aren’t you? This is the NEW government, so you should be a part [of it].’ For me, even if you take away the NGOs, I don’t think everyone has the same agenda. I think that for me, it is going to be difficult to know if you work in small groups to hold on to your principles or whether you don’t. Before we had a clear split, and now it is sticky.

But this division between enemy and ally is too simplistic. Many activists recognise that many of the women in parliament continued to be allies in spirit if not in action. Kate represents those activists who felt women MPs’ lack of action was neither a result of maliciousness nor a form of gate keeping. Instead, Kate and others believed that the MPs and government officials were mired in a complex bureaucracy that limited their efficacy. Lisa, an anti-rape activist from the same organisation, could clearly articulate the limitations that many of the women in parliament faced:

I mean the election promises were so absurd . . . people moved into a town area to cast their votes and said there would be houses and would be this and would be that – things that were impossible to deliver on. I think that is going to be a real challenge for the national network. They need to connect the empowerment and violence against women and show the relationship between those two, why you can’t separate them out from each other . . . The Department of Welfare as well. It really gives you a new insight into how you can have some of this commitment at the national level and that supportive Director is really high up. But, the massiveness of the bureaucracy – they have and they can be incredibly eager and so motivated, but how that will translate on the ground through the social work is another matter . . . [there is] not a smooth movement of ideas within a department.

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In interviews conducted in 2003, I again found that anti-rape activists reached similar conclusions. Many were excited about the return to being critics of government, because they saw this as a healthy relationship. Mary in Cape Town found that it was important, if delicate, to be a critical collaborator with the government:

The thing is, before [1994] we were watchdogs. We were anti-government. Then the shift came, and now we have our government. And we aren’t watchdogs any longer. And now we are re-negotiating the goal; we are working together to rebuild the society. But there still needs to be a watchdog function. And our government, they are not always going to do what we think is right in terms of civil society. And that is also where the struggle comes in. And you see it a lot in NGOs that are partially funded by government. How do you now renegotiate your role? . . . What kind of tap dance do we have to do to ensure that? But I think that is what is exciting, that we can move back to that role. We have to learn that with criticism we grow. It doesn’t mean that we are not on the same side.39

At least for Mary, being critical of government can actually help improve government. The problem, of course, comes about when members of the government interpret such criticism as disloyalty. Or, even worse, as in President Mbeki’s accusations against Charlene Smith, such criticism may be labelled as psychosis or latent racism. So this tension runs in both directions. Rather than understanding the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity, one identity is used to trump or de-legitimise another. There were an equal number of gender activists in these organisations who were suspicious that MPs and leaders had ‘sold out’ their political ideals for personal political and financial gain as political leaders; similarly, MPs and leaders were suspicious that their critics were anti-government because of their race, even though most organisations were composed of ethnically diverse members.

For example, many participants in these eight organisations spoke forcefully against the new government. The distrust of the government had expanded from a fissure to a canyon. During our interview, Karin indicated she received and ‘expect(ed) nothing from the “fat cats” in parliament’. Another anti-rape activist, Thandiwe, indicated to me in an interview that she felt civil society was responsible for positive social changes, not the women in parliament:

There are so many of them in parliament, but really I don’t see the changes. The changes I am seeing, we are still fighting for the changes. We are still on the ground organising and lobbying and trying to change the legislation and influence policy. So for me, what I have seen is that the powerful women we have put in parliament are not really connected in gender issues in parliament. Although they are willing and open, and we know that we can target them from the ground, but they are not involved in gender issues or in gender portfolios.

Despite this distrust and division, seven of the eight organisations in this study pursued some form of government funding, and each of those was in competition for providing services that the government was essentially contracting out. The section that follows will outline the tensions between autonomy and co-optation that are found within the issue of funding.

Funding: Maintaining Autonomy or Becoming ‘Technocratic Handmaidens’?

Money is a complicated issue for NGOs and CBOs. These organisations are dependent on funding for their survival, yet at the same time they are wary of the limitations and expectations that sponsors place on their activities. This tension was heightened in post-apartheid South Africa, especially in terms of groups’ relationships with government. Their historical experience of apartheid meant many NGOs feared the promise of cooperation from the government and the possibility of co-optation by the government.

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39 Interview conducted by the author, Cape Town, June 2003.
The possibility exists that NGOs, CBOs and civil society groups are going somewhat unconsciously to become mere servants to the new government, because their ideologies are rhetorically aligned. In fact, this was the purpose of voting the ANC into office and the women’s movement pursuing state feminism. The ultimate goal was to have government working in tandem with civil society to solve problems. Old barriers and obstacles were to be dismantled. Both the government and women’s groups were opposed to gender-based violence. The South African government has control over most of the funding available to fight gender-based violence, admittedly a small amount, and organisations need funds to execute their programmes. Government departments and ministries did not have the capacity to implement the legislation from parliament. They needed organisations that were already involved in communities, with programmes and staffs for counselling, training and advocacy. But now the groups in civil society are raising questions about their own autonomy. As Kate said in her interview, the funding from the government is particularly problematic: ‘one needs to be very careful about how independent they [NGOs and CBOs] will be when they get that kind of funding’. Once a group becomes a contract agency for the government, it loses the ability to engage as a strong critic of the government and to pursue more radical and less institutionalised forms of social change. The strength and vibrancy of these groups are that they are more than simply bureaucratic servants, or ‘technocratic handmaidens’ of the government.

Funding became increasingly complex during the consolidation to democracy. During the apartheid era, many international NGOs sent money to the anti-apartheid movement and organisations with few expectations or strings attached. Now, securing funding involves a complicated process that threatens to pit women’s organisations against each other, undermining the chances for a broad women’s movement and jeopardising the networking potential of many fledging groups. As Grace – an advocate in a well-funded anti-violence group in Pretoria – indicated, this competition is hurting her organisation and overall service delivery: ‘There [are] a lot of CBOs that are just springing up from nowhere. They apply for funding and the next thing the government does, because they are so desperate for services, they say “Wow this person can give us a service”, and they cut in on your things or they buy for another organisation that might not be there tomorrow because the service is cheaper.’

Tensions along racial lines are also evident. As one activist, Thandi, in an anti-violence group stated, ‘There are splits even among NGOs, for resources and because of race.’ Groups that work in coalition with one another are often in competition with each other for funding, and old ideologies and racial distrust re-emerge. This is not a new or a fleeting problem. Organisations experienced racial tensions not only during apartheid but also throughout the 1990s.

Despite the potential for co-optation, activists in seven of the eight organisations clearly expressed the need to have stronger linkages with government to secure funding, ensure trust and facilitate collaboration. The government contracts or provides funds for legal counselling, medical services, group therapy, community and school programmes, shelter and rehabilitation services, economic empowerment programmes and one-stop crisis centres. Almost all the organisations in this project felt that the level of government funding was inadequate for the types of services that they were expected to provide, including public education and awareness.

What is interesting is that only one organisation was adamantly opposed to seeking government funding, specifically because, as Karin indicated, it would lead to a loss of autonomy, control and agenda. Government agencies may contract out their services, but they

40 I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for this phrase.
41 Interview conducted by the author, Pretoria, July 2003.
still demand accountability and control over outcomes and methods. She felt that it was important to be able to provide the counselling, advocacy, economic training and empowerment programmes they deemed necessary – regardless of government demands and policies. In direct contrast, there was another organisation (also run by a white South African I shall call Grace) which had existed prior to 1994 that indicated a higher degree of satisfaction with government funding than the other organisations. Given its history of working with the government, it had both the experience and the capacity to deal with bureaucratic red tape. Ironically, in this case an organisation benefited from its dealings with the apartheid government.

There are two important paradoxes at work here. First, one of the organisations most able to secure government funding and financial backing was the same organisation that was, to some degree, complicit with the apartheid state. Second, given the racial politics still evident in the NGO sector, it is important to note these two organisations were both led by white South Africans, and they could not have been more different in their mission and attitudes towards the government. The organisation least satisfied/most opposed to working with government and the organisation most satisfied/most willing to work with government are both led by white South Africans. While this certainly does not mean that race is no longer an issue in this sector, it does indicate that one cannot make assumptions about race, identity politics and anti-establishment politics. Yet, race could be a factor in tensions among groups in this sector. Since both organisations were successful in securing funding – one internationally and one from the government – this might have been a factor in the way in which other groups recognised a racial hierarchy in terms of funding.

There is another level of complexity in the search for government funding, and that is the capacity of government to administer funds. Two organisations were told by the government that the problem was actually not the lack of funds but rather inadequate distribution mechanisms so that, for example, two government departments had never fully spent the funds they had allocated to HIV/AIDS. Yet these funds could have been used to counter gender-based violence if there had been a mechanism to transfer the resources. This would have been especially helpful in view of the now well-documented link between gender-based violence and the risk of HIV infection.42 Another anti-violence gender worker, Lea, indicated that her organisation had tried to overcome competition among agencies for funding and, instead, work in concert to secure money, but even these efforts were thwarted by government red-tape:

So although there is that competition, there is no two ways about it, we do work with other organisations on our campaigns and try to bring them on board because the more organisations [there are, the more likely you are to] get more funding. It also prevents duplication of services at the end of the day … And although violence against women will always be an area you need to focus on, [the priority is shifting to the] AIDS pandemic. What people do not [realise] is that domestic violence and violence against women [are] interlinked with that.

It is very difficult to get that [government] funding. At one conference, a representative from government said ‘there is money, we just don’t know how to distribute it’. It is very hard for us as an NGO to get access. We did apply to the lottery for example for funding. Last year, we applied. This year, they phoned us to tell us we filled in the wrong forms. And we had been phoning and phoning the lottery. Another woman in that workshop told us that she was phoning and phoning the lottery so often they sent her an email saying ‘please do not harass our staff any more’. She had to stop phoning. So it is very difficult.43

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43 Interview conducted by the author, Johannesburg, July 2003.
Here is a poignant example of the clash between potential service providers and government capacity. Members of the government confessed that they did not know how to distribute the money, and CBOs were accused of harassment when they tried to actively pursue the funds. However, it is possible to argue that some of these claims are excuses. While capacity certainly is an issue, there are also strong feelings within civil society organisations that ANC party leaders are using ‘red-tape’ for political reasons. Funding may be used as a way to support less radical, more conciliatory organisations, and claims of bureaucratic red-tape can be used as an excuse to block funding to groups that are more autonomous or critical. While there was no evidence to that effect in this research, it is important to note that certain members of civil society considered this a possibility.

Beyond the competition to work with government agencies, there was also fierce competition among organisations to secure international or private funding. Again, this is a trend in the post-apartheid era because now international funding is primarily directed towards government. Since 1994, international funding sources have chosen, for the most part, to place money in the hands of government, who then allocates the funds. Thus, for the first time, the competition among NGOs and CBOs to attract international funding is much more like that in other developing nations. Groups now face problems such as a reduced number of funding sources. They are also working against the short attention span of funding agencies that like to fund new and exciting projects rather than ongoing programmes. But international funding also comes with its own demands, and CBOs and NGOs often criticised the extent of control and power international funding agencies could exert over programmes and projects. As Lea remarks, organisations constantly have to re-invent themselves in order to attract the attention of international donors:

International funding is drying up very quickly, because their focus is changing … most international funders only fund for one year… they don’t realise that without the core services, how is your organisation going to run. They are only interested in sexy projects, like the date rape one is sexy, but not [in] a shelter [for battered women]. Without the core services, without the finances, we can’t keep the sexy projects going.

Even though this organisation is located in former Indian and black townships, and is providing extensive services to survivors of violence (including women, men and children), they are forced to develop new projects at the expense of successful existing projects. The short-sightedness of funding agencies can undermine the implementation of successful long-term strategies for changing communities, family systems and structures of oppression as this obviously takes more than a year.

The funding debate encapsulates the central tensions among the groups working to end gender-based violence. Competition for scarce public, private and international funding creates fissures among groups that otherwise work in concert on programmes and projects. The decision to accept or refuse government funding continues to be problematic for most organisations, as they must negotiate their new identities as monitors and collaborators with the new government, and must resist becoming merely technocratic handmaidens or bureaucratic appendages of the state. Finally, organisations have to compromise long-term programmatic needs in order to create new, eye-catching, pilot programmes to attract international funding agencies. In this way, groups are forced to engage in a form of commercialisation of their mission and agenda, therein commodifying programmes to end gender-based violence in order to remain attractive, interesting, if not titillating, to an international audience.
Engaging Masculinities within ‘Feminist’ Organisations

Another debate emerging in civil society groups working to end gender-based violence is centred on whether or not to work with men, as staff members and also as clients. There are several political implications as a consequence of this decision. A number of participants in this study indicated that government is prioritising organisations that work with both victims and perpetrators, both men and women. The organisation that was most successful in getting government funds worked regularly with both men and women in the context of family violence. Mary, a gender activist in a competing NGO, believed that this emphasis on men’s roles in violence against women was important, but often necessitated a different approach:

There is this whole move now around men’s involvement in women’s issues. There is a big thing. And you see it a lot in the women’s movement, in the violence against women’s sector: to address the imbalance of power means that you have to address the attitudes of men as well. And so there seems to be a lot of leaning towards working with men. So there are these organisations that have come up to work with men. There are different kinds of organisations. Some have started to say they are working with men to address violence against women. And they are actually working with men to improve their self-esteem, not addressing violence against women. I don’t mind the esteem building stuff, but I don’t want it under the banner of violence against women, because that is not what they are doing.

Mary presents an important critique of what is becoming a growing norm among gender violence organisations. While victims of gender violence are not exclusively women, the vast majority are women, and the resources to cope with this escalating problem are scarce. However, the pressure to find the root causes of violence against women often leads to an examination of the psyche of the male perpetrator. The problem, as Mary astutely points out, is that this may dilute the organisational capacity of groups that focus primarily on empowering women and assisting women to leave violent and patriarchal situations. Similarly, there is the related issue that the problem with gender-based violence comes primarily from men, and there are real financial and organisational needs that should be addressed without undermining the funding of women’s groups.

Although her organisation works with men, Lea echoes Mary’s assertion because she feels that working with male perpetrators would compromise the self-defined mission of her organisation: ‘No, we are not working with perpetrators … we talk to boys and show them what the consequences are for being perpetrators and why they should not become them … we don’t work with them [perpetrators] directly because our focus is strictly feminist.’ To work with perpetrators would be to surrender and undermine the feminist philosophy as defined by her CBO. This trend to work with male victims or male perpetrators, while an important effort, serves to re-inscribe a focus on men (and increasingly often male perpetrators) and moves resources and energy away from the majority of survivors of violence, who are mainly women. There is also a growing concern that male allegations that they are victims of partner abuse are not all legitimate. Faith, a leader in a Cape Town organisation working to assist victims of domestic violence, indicates that she has found that many men who seek assistance are not sincere or legitimate victims:

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45 This organisation is the one mentioned earlier led by Grace.
46 Interview conducted by the author, Cape Town, June 2003.
\textit{HB}: Do you work with or see many domestic violence victims who are male?

\textit{Faith}: I am very sceptical about that. We do help a lot of males in court, but I think that a lot of males are coming to apply for protection orders in response to their spouses or partners coming or whoever. So far, the stats indicate that a high percentage of males are abused by males – sons or brothers or fathers or uncles. The partner ones [meaning men seeking protection orders from their female partners] I am very suspicious of. The forms I am going through now, most of the males that say they are abused by their partners – the kinds of abuse they record are verbal and psychological. So, it is a woman who is furious at a man for abusing her, and then he goes back and says she is abusing him, trying to get back at her.

While Faith’s organisation works with men in their counselling services, it is clear there is suspicion that some perpetrators are beginning to use the laws to protect themselves. This, again, calls into question the appropriateness of purely legislative responses to gender-based violence, when the law can serve to protect those it means to punish.

Whether to include men as either staff or clients is constantly discussed within South African organisations working to end gender-based violence. For some, the issue is both ideological and pragmatic. Cock calls for new gender identities to challenge militarism and masculinity, but she argues this cannot be achieved through equal-rights feminism, radical feminism, or women ‘acting alone’, but only by incorporating men as ‘pro-feminists acting collectively with women in a transformative feminism which . . . challenges the relation of gender identities to violence and power’.47 Many interview participants would certainly agree that the burden of eradicating gender-based violence ought not fall primarily to the victims and that the responsibility of altering the gender ideologies ought not fall mainly on those subordinated by it. However, there are also concerns that redirecting resources and attention away from those most affected, the survivors of violence, can also be a form of re-victimisation. While there is no consensus in the international literature about which approach is most effective, there certainly is a trend by international funding agencies to support male-based programmes worldwide.

\textbf{Expanding the Framework: A Systems-Approach to Gender-Based Violence}

Given the longitudinal nature of this study, from 1990 to 2003, it is possible to delineate the transformation in the construction of the issue of gender-based violence over time. During interviews in 1996–97, organisations fighting gender-based violence were focused exclusively on the issue of violence. These organisations were successful then because their single-issue focus allowed them to survive the unstable transition period. This was a pattern I observed across South Africa. In contrast to the early 1990s, when national coalitions were viable and effective, by the late 1990s the women’s movement had moved instead towards issue-based or issue-focused groups. Highly successful organisation centred on women and health, violence against women and so on.

One criticism that is often levelled against issue-based organisations is that they do not directly counter the hierarchies of oppression, such as those embodied in the multitude of patriarchies found in South Africa. Broad-based women’s groups or ascriptive organisations focused more on cultural transformation and the long-term advancement of women. Issue-based groups may lack the force of a national women’s movement, and they may instead jump from issue to issue, crisis to crisis. Issue-based groups are not inherently concerned with structural change.

By 2003, the landscape of how women’s organisations defined themselves had begun to shift. Organisations stopped approaching the issues of rape or domestic violence in isolation.

Instead, activists and advocates clearly linked gender-based violence to issues of housing, land rights, HIV/AIDS, health, economic self-sufficiency, education and poverty. One counsellor, Nomzi, in an anti-violence organisation in the Western Cape situated the new framework thus:

There was a case of a young girl from the Eastern Cape who had been raped and nearly killed and her throat cut. She was brought here from the Transkei, and her friends had been killed. And, you begin to hear that in this case . . . a lot of other issues [were] involved, like unemployment and poverty . . . and housing . . . we need to network to be sure that even in the rural areas there are places that women can go, because at the end of the day, the homes of some of these women are in the Eastern Cape and in the rural areas.

The organisations fighting gender violence had to address a new set of challenges. Rape, murder, graphic violence are all inextricably linked to poverty, property rights, education and jobs.

When interviewing Nobanzi in Cape Town, I asked her about this difference between issue-based groups and organising ‘women as women’, and how the politics of race entered this sector of the movement:

We should be organising on issues rather than on identities. So I think it is eventually . . . where we need to go. But I can also see how race can . . . block the violence against women’s sector – the violence against women’s sector is still for me very much a white western women’s identified sector. The approaches that we use, the strategies that we implement, are largely based on western feminism – to a huge degree. So we are moving forward, but I would question that whole notion of moving forward. We may have the legislation yes, but we also have the statistics to say ‘[we have] so many rapes’. So it is more complex. But I do think we need to move to the space where the issue defines the need for a movement, rather than identity, rather than ‘being a woman’ or ‘being black’. It is violence that is the problem, and it is poverty that is the problem.48

Nobanzi’s answer is an example of how every organisation in 2003 was talking about eradicating gender-based violence. Violence against women had to be talked about in terms of poverty, race and power. The landscape had also shifted dramatically in relation to the impact of HIV/AIDS, as one counsellor, Mafuane, relates:

We are finding that women can’t leave relationships. They stay with partners who are HIV-positive and they get infected. And we are seeing more and more the link between HIV/AIDS and violence. We are seeing women unable to negotiate condom use and yet we use the ABC approach to prevention and it doesn’t work. We are saying that one in four women are abused by their intimate partner. The majority of women in this country actually don’t have the ability to negotiate condom use. And a lot of what we are hearing is women saying, ‘When we ask our partners to use condoms, they accuse us of having affairs and the violence spreads. It is actually just better to say nothing because we don’t know what is going to happen’, that sort of thing.49

Another CBO focusing on violence against women had expanded their entire mission from merely giving legal advice to survivors, to working instead to build HIV/AIDS awareness, teaching gardening skills, assisting in self-sufficiency programmes and promoting health education.50 This followed from the general understanding that it is almost impossible to leave a violent situation unless you can feed yourself. Mandisa, the leader of this group indicated that, ‘it is the changes in the community that are changing us – not us changing our mission. We are responding to the changes. We are seeing more people presenting with HIV/AIDS, and so we have expanded our counselling and support services.’ In fact, to address the contemporary spectrum of gender-based violence, groups now had to include
the psychological and financial implications of HIV/AIDS status. According to Mthuthuzeli, a gender rights advocate, her organisation was seeing more and more women who are being abused because of their HIV/AIDS status: ‘A lot of women, when they disclose their HIV status to their families, they become destitute. They don’t have anywhere to go, and families don’t want them.’

Financial self-sufficiency is one factor that may assist women in leaving abusive situations. As Sarah, a member of group working to end family violence in Pretoria remarked, ‘So the problem that we sit with in the project is that you sit with a woman that doesn’t want to leave the relationship because they are financially dependent or want the money and then they are being abused within that relationship … The focus in the programme is moving quite a lot into women’s empowerment groups.’ So, no longer are groups merely working on violence; organisations focus on social empowerment, economic opportunity and skills education as means to end gender violence. Thandiwe, a representative of another NGO located in a black township, expressed the same sentiment: ‘I mean there are issues of poverty, issues of HIV, so we need really to focus on that and develop that and so at the end of the day people can say, “Wow, I can build this house and at the same time I am aware of who I am as a woman and I can take care of myself.”’ Organisations are engaged in recycling projects, small-scale economic enterprises, crafts and income-generating projects, farming and gardening initiatives, empowerment training, soup kitchens, feeding schemes, home-improvement techniques, HIV/AIDS awareness and education – all in order to help end violence against women.

There is a paradox in this new direction. First, there is no question that the expansion into economic subsistence issues has increased the effectiveness of groups in addressing gender-based violence in a holistic fashion. This has been highly successful in helping women achieve self-sufficiency, economic power, and personal empowerment. These are qualities that indisputably can assist women who need to leave abusive situations. Paradoxically, this has also meant that NGOs, CBOs, and groups have yet again to refashion their mission and methods. The already resource-thin groups have to find the time, capacity, and techniques to teach these skills. Despite this greater dispersal of purpose, this new direction has led to greater success and promises to continue.

Finally, site-visits conducted in 2003 also revealed that women’s organisations, NGOs and CBOs were moving their offices away from former white-only areas into black, Indian and coloured townships. This finding is very significant in the context of contemporary South Africa. Townships used to be no-go areas, and often even progressive organisations expected clients and members to travel to white areas to receive services or participate in activities. This shift in location reflects a shift in ideology on the part of many organisations against violence against women. Service delivery has to happen where people live and where they can easily and inexpensively access the resources. Perhaps this is the biggest single indication that organisations have started to embody in practice what has been in place in theory. Location matters, especially in terms of the eradication of gender-based violence.

Conclusions: the Potential of an NGO-isation of the Women’s Movement

Given the success of the women’s movement before and during the transition to democracy, it is notable that since 1994 women’s groups continue to be the central agents in the struggle for women’s rights and security. However, unlike previous organisations, women’s groups

51 Interview conducted by the author, Pretoria, July 2003.
52 Interview conducted by the author, Cape Town, June 2003.
in post-apartheid South Africa face a myriad of new problems and challenges that not only threaten their effectiveness and survival but also their relationships with the their old allies, the women in parliament.

Women’s organisations have maintained their central goal of advancing the cause of women. However, they have been faced with new challenges over the past decade. First, many women hoped and even assumed that after the democratic elections of 1994, the possibilities for interaction between government and civil society would be endless. Since most of the new women MPs had been their allies during the struggle, the new era would see, at the very least, increased communication between government and women’s groups and, at best, increased service delivery and government assistance. However, almost as quickly as women gained office, questions about their commitment and their capability were raised. I spoke with leaders of many different types of women’s organisation, within the violence against women sector, the women and health sector, and numerous NGOs for civic action. The leaders of these groups immediately voiced concerns about the loyalty of MPs to women’s issues, the government’s ability to work with any NGO, and the limitations of bureaucracy. While it is not unusual for a level of distrust and tension to exist between NGOs and government, it was surprising how many groups voiced these concerns.

Second, there are significant time pressures facing women in women’s organisations. Certainly, NGOs always face time constraints, as daily they encounter the life-and-death realities of their clients. However, South African women’s groups are faced with the additional burden of the transition to democracy. The excitement and promise of the new post-apartheid era still pervades South Africa. Society’s expectations of women’s groups were only heightened with the end of apartheid, as these groups could, for the first time, operate openly and safely – no longer fighting against government forces but instead collaborating with government officials. The possibilities seemed extensive and immediate. Similarly, faced with the enormous demands of their own constituents, government officials began treating the women’s groups as non-governmental locations of service delivery. This only increased their workloads, tension and anxiety.

Third, the issue of funding is perhaps the most difficult challenge facing women’s organisations internationally. Women’s groups are chronically under-funded and constantly have to try to secure enough money to survive, to support themselves and to allow for proper service delivery. While women’s groups always have problems finding funding, there seems to have been a greater tension around this issue in the ‘new’ South Africa. Any acceptance of government assistance before 1994 was not only suspicious but was tantamount to collaboration with and endorsement of the apartheid system. This was a difficult legacy to overcome. Even though the government was now seen as a potential ally rather than a certain enemy, members of organisations fighting violence against women continued to worry that funds from government sources would lead to a co-optation of their mission, their independence and their autonomy. Additionally, while the numbers of NGOs and women’s groups were increasing, funding from international sources was decreasing. During the apartheid era, international organisations poured money into any viable organisation in civil society that challenged the government. Now that the transition was complete, the funding agencies demanded a new level of accountability as well as clear demonstrations of organisations’ success and achievements. These new constraints pitted women’s groups against one another in ways that revealed hitherto silenced race, class and ideological divisions.

One final lesson to be learned from this study is the growing institutionalisation of the women’s movement in South Africa, and in many respects the increasing NGO-isation of that movement. Since South African women leaders chose to focus on state feminism during the transition, it is not surprising that the women’s movement on the ground has also experienced
a trend toward NGO-isation. Part of this trend is indicative of the change in South African society as a whole. While civic action was suppressed during apartheid, participation in civil society organisations has finally been allowed to flourish. This has led to the proliferation of NGOs. NGOs can bring a sense of legitimacy to the activities of movements, and they are more attractive to funders because they have the staff and mechanisms to receive and utilise grants. However, NGOs also run the risk of losing the radical edge of their agendas and of sacrificing the possibility of strong and even militant resistance. The trend within the sector concerned with gender-based violence has thus been toward NGO-isation, with both its costs and benefits. There are now extensive partnerships between government and the NGOs in this sector as the NGOs have become the main service providers for government departments of counselling, violence prevention programmes, empowerment projects, self-sufficiency training, awareness education and one-stop crisis clinics. This has strengthened the distribution of government resources to people when and where they need it the most, while at the same time it has tempered the ability of NGOs to pursue more radical agendas.

Women’s groups internationally in a post-liberation period have to walk a thin line between being collaborators with and critics of government, with caution. Likewise, women in civil society in South Africa have to pursue any post-liberation critique and hesitancy with great caution. They do not want to risk alienation or disenfranchisement from their main source of funding and support as they seek to address the growing menace of violence against women.

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