

## Standpoint

### Is Sisterhood Possible? Racial (Dis)Harmony and Feminism in Higher Education

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*The depths of the feminist deployment of [black women] need to be thoroughly plumbed before the mainstream feminist movement can impact positively on race relations... (Arlie Loughnan)*

Does the South African feminist movement seek to impact on race relations in our new democracy? Should it? The race issue has confronted feminists internationally and over time. It surfaces at every conference, seminar or workshop that brings together feminist academics, researchers and practitioners from different racial groups, geographical locations and social classes. Some have referred to it as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of feminism, with the same characteristics and impact: passionate accusations by black women, who see themselves as victims of white women's racism and/or racial insensitivity. Invariably, at some time during a meeting, a black woman, or a woman from one of the "developing countries", bemoans the unfair, unearned and unshared privilege enjoyed by white women and women from the "developed world" at the expense of the former, and the hegemonic relationships between these in academic, research and practice situations. The lamentations may take the form of:

I do all the research, but she gets all the publications and the credit!

I was hired a year ago, but have never received any support or professional development to help me do my work better.

I feel completely isolated in meetings and social gatherings.

I get no support at all. All my assignments come back with comments like "On the right track", but when I ask when I can submit my thesis, she tells me it's not ready.

There is no equality among feminists themselves. White women see us as interesting subjects for their research, but not as equal partners working towards a common goal.

In response, such accusations are either met with a deafening silence, or occasionally, indignant denials and counter-accusations by the "accused". However, the most debilitating of these responses involve tearful pronouncements like, "You make me feel so guilty", a defensive stance that tends to silence the complainant and discourage further discussion and engagement with the issues being raised. The result is progressive erosion in mutual trust between black and white feminists, and between white feminist faculty and students, as well as targets of feminism and feminist interventions. Thus, while the dynamics of racial difference and gender are hardly new issues for academics and activists alike, there is yet to be an adequate and honest engagement with it by all in these groupings. Instead, black women either suffer in silence or have to find alternatives to fight their battles, real or perceived.

Arlie Loughnan (2002) recently asked regarding the unequal power relations between Australian Aborigines and feminists, "Is sisterhood powerful?" For South African feminists the question remains: "Is sisterhood possible?" Can our feminist agenda transcend the discomfort, resentment and silence that surround issues regarding power relations among feminists from different racial and social class contexts? Is the unity we need and seek to fight against unequal gender relations, our common enemy, possible, or even desirable, when racial inequality remains unchallenged and is allowed to fester? Isn't it time we had an

honest discussion among ourselves that will resolve this issue once and for all?

### **The Moral Imperative of Feminism**

Weiner (1994) identifies three main dimensions of feminism: politics, critique and praxis. These require gender researchers and activists to deal with personal, professional and political relationships and demands in all aspects of their work. Specifically, this involves, not only the understanding of gender inequality in society, but efforts to lobby for change and remove such inequalities as well. Implicit (and explicit) in such an agenda are the moral and political imperatives and the obstacles gender researchers and activists have to overcome if they are to be successful. For South African feminists, particularly because of our racial history, these moral imperatives should include the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including racism, to pave the way for a united fight against gender inequality and a just and equitable life for all.

This means that while we celebrate, and deservedly so, this inaugural issue of *Feminist Africa*, we should also regard it as an opportune forum to launch a decisive attack on racism, specifically on the silences around racial identity and unequal power relations among feminists of different racial backgrounds. This is particularly pertinent because in this issue, the editorial collective's choice of the theme "Intellectual Politics" is not insignificant. The theme implores us not only to look critically at the politics of "African knowledge production" in our academic institutions, but also to work towards eliminating the obstacles that stand in the way of a united and powerful feminist movement in academic institutions across the country and the continent.

But what exactly are these obstacles? In South Africa, and maybe elsewhere, the resistance to feminist work is not only patriarchal. It is also racial and class-based. As illustrated above, many black women are suspicious of a field which they perceive not only as unsupportive of their fight to end racial discrimination at all levels of society and academic endeavour, but also as one whose members may be active agents of their subordination. This renders current academic efforts and activism focusing on gender inequality ineffectual, a situation that can only be resolved through concerted efforts to develop and implement interventions that are informed by both anti-racist and feminist theories. For us, it is only when racism and racial inequality, real and imagined, are effectively tackled, that all feminists can honourably claim to be true "sisters" in the fight for social justice for all, particularly for women in our unequal and often brutal society.

Until we do this, mutual trust among feminists will continue to be eroded. Most importantly, until feminists from all racial groups are seen as behaving honourably and honestly towards one another and others, this mistrust will not only impact negatively on the "sisterhood", but will weaken our perceived moral competence and intentions to respond adequately to the needs of those we purport to serve: our students, our research subjects, and our development targets (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Again, the issue of racism and unequal power relations, and perceived tangential agendas between black and white feminists is not new on the feminism programme. However, that it continues to rear its ugly head whenever feminists meet to discuss pertinent issues means that it remains unanswered in the minds of those who feel "wronged". There can only be one resolution of the problem: an open and honest debate that seeks not only to define and analyse the issue, but also to identify practical and lasting solutions to the satisfaction of all parties. As I have argued, such debates and the resultant solutions should be informed by both anti-racist and feminist theories.

## References

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