

Standpoint

Multiple Targets, Mixing Strategies: Complicating Feminist Analysis of Contemporary South African Women's Movements

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In this brief commentary, I want to focus on the importance of identifying the key aspects of identity that motivate women to participate in activism for social change. In doing so, I build on the injunction, variously expressed by Basu (1995), Mohanty (1991) and Mouffe (1992), that women's identities are multiply informed by their racial, ethnic, socio-economic and geographic locations. Consequently, the issues that impel them into action for gender justice, as well as the alliances they choose, will necessarily be informed by these different aspects of their identities. However, the issues that they take up are not of their own choosing. These too are informed by the confluence of geopolitical relations in the historical moment. Multiple shifts have occurred in women's struggles in South Africa, and they have had to invent equally multiple and innovative strategies and spaces of engagement, as well as enter into new alliances with other gendered movements to effect gender justice.

Most of the issues I raise here form a dialogue with Shireen Hassim's article in this issue. Her analysis of the post-apartheid women's movement provides us with a helpful conceptual framework for thinking about the strategies and alliances that women's movements have used to maximise the gender gains and promises ushered in by the new political dispensation. As she suggests here, the historical changes in the post-apartheid landscape have meant that women's organisations need to redefine and renegotiate their relationship to the state, while remaining attuned to the issues that are central to their constituents. She rightly points out that women's access to the state has been facilitated by our links to erstwhile women's movement "comrades" who have now moved into the political arena.

The distinction Hassim makes between inclusionary and transformational feminist strategies is a helpful one; it alerts us to the dangers of relying upon the state as the primary site in which to effect meaningful gendered changes in the lives of ordinary women in South Africa. However, I argue that these dualistic analytical categories do not fully capture the range and complexity of women's activism in the current period. Hassim indicates that the distinction between these two strategies is more apparent than actual, and that the two types of strategies should not be seen as opposite poles, but as part of a continuum. Nevertheless, I argue that this conceptualisation still relies upon the assumption that women's or feminist activism can only be categorised in terms of a binary opposition: namely reformist (read inclusionary) feminist action or radical (read transformational) feminist action. I would further suggest that the distinction that Hassim makes between inclusionary and transformational feminist strategies fails to take fully into account the complex and multiple terrains of gendered struggles, as well as the diversity of gendered movements in present-day post-apartheid South Africa. This diversity, as well as the complex multiple levels at which these activists all operate, [1] necessitates both inclusionary and transformational strategies.

At the same time that the women's movement has diversified into various issue-based groupings, as Hassim has accurately described, other gendered movements, including gay and lesbian organisations and a critical men's movement, [2] have come to the fore, requiring that South African feminists negotiate our relationship to these interest groups. More importantly, the re-insertion of South Africa into the global arena has meant that women's organisations have had to take account of local, national and international power relations. In grappling with issues of donor funding or resisting the corrosive effects of economic globalisation, we have had to consider forging alliances with both local and international organisations. The organisational work required at multiple coalfaces, both at home and abroad, calls for inclusionary and transformational feminist strategies to be deployed both simultaneously and serially.

Perhaps we should consider alternatives to conceptualising feminist strategies for change. Following Faranak Miraftab's work, I argue for the occupation and use of what she calls "mutually constituted concepts of invited and invented spaces" of activism (2005: 3), in which feminist organisations can make use of both inclusionary as well as transformational strategies in their attempts to effect change at multiple levels of engagement.

Miraftab, writing about the anti-eviction campaign by the poor in Cape Town, argues that these concepts of "invited and invented spaces" allow one to "recognise the range of spaces within the (multiple) arenas where citizenship is practiced" (2005: 3). She describes invited spaces as those "occupied by those grassroots actions and their allied non-governmental organisations that are legitimised by donors and government interventions. Invented spaces are defined as occupied by those collective actions by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo" (2005: 3). These two concepts, she argues are mutually constituted, and not suggestive of a binary, oppositional relationship.

I refer to three women's movements – the Reproductive Rights Alliance, the New Women's Movement, and the rise of gender consciousness within the anti-eviction campaign – to illustrate how both inclusionary and transformative strategies can effect change. In this way, I will follow up on Hassim's valuable work, but perhaps take it further in probing the diverse nature of women's activism and organising in South Africa, as well as the different actions women launch on multiple local, national and international fronts.

The Reproductive Rights Alliance (RRA), which consists of a conglomeration of approximately 40 rural- and urban-based NGOs, was initially formed to lobby for policies that would recognise and protect women's reproductive rights. The advocacy and lobbying actions of the RRA resulted in the legislation that enshrined South African women's rights to safe, legal abortion for the first time in 1996. On the surface, the RRA's actions resemble inclusionary feminist strategies. However, the RRA's organic links with other organisations that draw upon the collective actions of members, such as the Treatment Action Campaign, [3] suggests a transformational strategy. Currently, the RRA is also in conversation with critical men's movements (such as the National Men's Forum) to advance their agenda for women's reproductive rights. [4] This is illustrative of feminist organisations' complex array of strategies for change.

Hassim has indicated that the political landscape in South Africa has indeed changed dramatically – our struggle for formal citizenship rights for all men and women has been won. However, the struggle for socio-economic rights still continues, in a new and often hostile global socio-economic order that has reconfigured the political and economic landscape in which women's movements operate, thereby necessitating that feminists take account of the multiple levels at which the struggle for women's substantive rights have to be waged. In this context, liberal national constitutions such as ours, in which women citizens' formal rights are enshrined, are juxtaposed alongside the failure of the nation-state to realise substantive socio-economic rights, often because the fate of their economies are decided elsewhere in the global marketplace.

South Africa has re-emerged from apartheid isolation into the global arena, and has promptly been re-inserted into a shifting configuration of economic power relations in which control over the flow of information and technology has become key. Moreover, the dictates of global institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have constrained the state's ability to deliver more substantive socio-economic rights to all its citizens, even as it granted them formal political rights. As these current global power relations impact the local context, the socio-economic divide between rich and poor has deepened, and is reflected in the fragmentary, diverse nature of

the South African women's movement today.

These differences have come into sharper focus as new organisations, such as the New Women's Movement and the anti-privatisation movement, have appeared in the post-apartheid scene, mobilising around particular aspects of South African women's identities, such as their class location. At the local level, the state's ability to realise citizens' economic rights is still being questioned, primarily because the new neoliberal economic framework has reconfigured citizens' socio-economic rights (to the provision of clean water, sanitation, health-care, free, universal education and safe, affordable housing) primarily as consumer services. To a large extent, these services are priced at levels dictated by the market, thereby barring millions of poor, primarily black citizens and their dependents from better living conditions. This economic exclusion has had especially corrosive effects on poor, urban and rural women. Organisations such as the New Women's Movement, which draws its support from poor, working-class black women in the Western Cape, has had to take cognisance of the local and global nature of their constituents' socio-economic struggles, and wage their battle at multiple levels accordingly. As Hassim points out, the New Women's Movement utilised an inclusionary feminist strategy by lobbying the minister of Welfare and Development to increase the child welfare grant. What she does not note is that this organisation is also linked to the international organisation, Jubilee South, a coalition of mass-based organisations and social movements across 40 countries, which share the common aim of eliminating global wealth inequality (<http://www.aidc.org>). [5] As a member of Jubilee South, the New Women's Movement also engages in transformational feminist strategy. Their members recently joined in mass protests against the UK-based Barclays Bank's buying of the South African bank, ABSA (already a conglomerate of four national banks). This action targeted and protested the global economic inequities that impact the everyday lives of poor women. It also aimed at bringing about long-term structural economic interventions in the local context, and as such, is transformational.

Feminists need to take note not only of the changing political landscape in which women's organisations are now operating, but also of the sharper socio-economic divides that have come to the fore within the black South African population. The new class divide presents formidable challenges to many middle-class feminists who wish to cross these emerging socio-economic boundaries. At present, we are witnessing impoverishment of vulnerable populations that cuts across geopolitical boundaries. Consequently, it seems that poor black South African women share common ground – their particular gendered experiences of socio-economic exclusion – with other poor women across national boundaries, rather than with their better-off middle-class urban-based sisters within national boundaries, be they black or white. Increasingly, these women's shared gendered experiences of socio-economic exclusion will impel them to engage in social movements that seek socio-economic justice, such as the anti-privatisation campaign.

Organisations such as the anti-eviction campaign, which draws upon poor, working-class black women as a mass base, tend to deal mainly with the socio-economic issues that impact so harshly on their constituents' lives. However, as Miraftab's analysis indicates, the organisation's gender hierarchy emulates that of the larger society. For example, women members draw upon the organisation's core principle of participatory democracy to push for a more representative gendered composition of its steering committee. Miraftab describes how organisational meetings become sites of contestation concerning the gendered nature of their leadership. She maps out how issues of gender justice are thrashed out in public forums, and sometimes satisfactorily addressed within the anti-eviction campaign, even as this organisation marshals its common skills and resources across gender barriers in its campaign for safe, affordable housing. In addition, the anti-eviction campaign, like the New Women's Movement, is also allied with global coalitions such as Jubilee South.

As other contributors to *Feminist Africa* have suggested, feminist conceptualisations and analysis of women's movements therefore need to extend beyond national boundaries, so that we are able to encompass the emerging social movements and organisations which use multiple strategies, and act in alliance with other multinational bodies. At the same time, the South African state cannot be conceptualised as monolithic. We are only a decade into our transition, and the bonds of friendship and allegiance forged in anti-apartheid women's movements still hold between some women activists and women parliamentarians. These links are able to mitigate the socio-economic divides to a degree. So while women's organisations may apparently be engaging in inclusionary rather than transformational feminist strategies, women's shared identities as erstwhile comrades, their consciousness of the transformations required to make radical changes in ordinary women's lives, as well as the geopolitical location of the South African state as part of the indebted group of nations, all mean that action that began as inclusionary feminist strategy may also come to contain elements of transformational strategy.

The South African transition to democracy is still in its infancy, and it is not surprising that many urban-based women's organisations are presently focused on apparently inclusionary strategies. The neoliberal direction of the state's policies are still being contested by civil society organisations and from within the broad tripartite African National Congress–South African Communist Party–Congress of South African Trade Unions alliance. It is therefore not unreasonable for women's organisations to rely upon their engagement with their erstwhile leaders who are now in the government, or to draw upon their recent subjective memories of struggling for political rights as they now press for socio-economic and gender rights. They are nevertheless contesting these state officials' framing of gender policies, and the state's weak responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the prevalence of gender-based violence. Alongside these battles, they are demanding that poor women's rights to better health-care and decent living conditions be honoured, as well as all women's control over their reproduction. Close scrutiny reveals that within the apparently limiting inclusionary feminist strategy as it is implemented in South Africa, lies a determination to press the state to provide concrete transformation and realise women's more substantive citizenship rights.

As class and urban-rural divides widen in post-apartheid South Africa, increasingly cutting across traditional categories of race, what rurally-based impoverished black women might identify as key issues for social transformation, may very well have more in common with concerns of indigenous Native-American women on a US reservation than those of their black, middle-class, urban-based South African sisters. Consequently, a broad united national women's movement that cuts across South African women's diverse identities would have to be worked for, rather than assumed – and the fragmented, diverse nature of women's movements, as well as the expanding nature of gender movements (to include gay, lesbian, bisexual, inter-sexed and transgendered groupings, as well as critical men's movements) need to be taken on board as central characteristics of the changing political landscape. Such an assumption means that gender activists would have to work at building organisational alliances around common concerns, while accepting that these alliances are short-lived and issue-driven. The changing nature of the South African women's movements, as well as the hybrid political strategies they utilise, at the multiple local, national and transnational levels of engagement must be taken into account in current feminist analyses. Furthermore, we need to refine and revise our conceptual toolkit in order to appreciate and accurately represent the complexity of these struggles for gender justice.

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Footnotes

[1] Such movements would include, amongst others, activists for gay, bisexual and lesbian rights, women's reproductive rights, poor women's socio-economic rights and men's groupings against gender-based violence.

[2] I define critical men's organisations as those willing to work towards the gender transformation of South African society. These organisations identify with various feminist agendas, and recognise the human rights of gays, lesbians and other sexual minorities.

[3] TAC is the NGO seeking transformation in the health services sector to ensure the reproductive and health rights of men and women living with HIV/AIDS.

[4] Interview with RRA co-ordinator, Judi Merckel, June 2005.

[5] Interview with Claire Mathonsi, New Women's Movement, June 2005.

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