

Review

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Women's Organisations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority by Shireen Hassim. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

Women's Organisations and Democracy in South Africa by Shireen Hassim is a lucid and sometimes fascinating account of the evolution and struggle of women's organisations in the context of South Africa's turbulent recent past. Hassim's study is part historiography, part political analysis, and clearly activist: it proposes policy and despairingly critiques the limited gains of gender equality movements in post-apartheid South Africa. Given that South Africa's democracy, now in its teens, is currently gripped by urgent debates around the palpable effects of the reform and redistributive policies of the ANC government, this book is timely. It gives us a broad view of the development of women's organisations in South Africa, which allows for greater understanding of the post-apartheid context, where the rhetoric and practice of revolutionary politics has had to filter into and be redefined by the hierarchies and processes of state bureaucracy and liberal democratic governance.

The book can be broadly divided into three sections. The first is the struggle against apartheid, the second is the politics of the period of transition to democracy and the third is an analysis and appraisal of the post-apartheid, ANC-led era. Hassim begins in the introduction and chapter one by outlining the conceptual apparatus utilised in her argument, including a literature review of the key feminist theoreticians that have influenced her arguments and methodology. Chapter one explores the structure of the organisations that constitute the focus of this study, and also and significantly the "world of discourse" in which these organisations operated. A sharp distinction emerges between the concerns of Western feminism (read: "academic/elitist" feminism) and the particularised challenges of the nationalist liberation struggle against apartheid, the urgency of which often overwhelmed a feminist agenda. Hassim expands upon the battle of ideologies in chapter one, where she discusses the often conflicting demands of feminism and nationalism in the struggle against apartheid.

In chapters two and three, Hassim considers the development of women's organisations during the apartheid era according to particular themes. Chapter two is a broad assessment of women's organisations as they battled out a position in the repressive conditions of 1980s South Africa, where, after a brief surge in successful feminist activism in the early 1980s, the internal UDF-led¹ liberation struggle took precedence at the expense of the autonomy of women's organisations such as the Natal Organisation of Women and United Women's Organisation in the Western Cape. Chapter three looks at the slowness of feminist activists in exile to win real support within the ANC, given the curtailment of their autonomy by the hierarchical structure of the organisation in exile. This chapter considers the incremental gains made by women fighting in Umkhoto we Sizwe for legitimization of feminist concerns and the struggles of younger women in the organisation (the "generation of '76") to gain autonomy within the ANC in addressing and expressing the concerns of women. Hassim also highlights the significance of international networking for sharpening awareness of the particular needs of women amongst activists, laying the groundwork for greater gender sensitivity in the ANC and creating awareness of the significance of women as a constituency.

Chapters four to eight look at the transition period and post-1994 democratic South Africa. Working through the complexity of politics within and between various women's organisations, and their relations to the power-brokers of the transition negotiations, Hassim considers the influence of the ANC Women's League, the influence of returning exiles, the struggle for women's groups to enshrine gender rights into the new constitution and the momentarily successful effort to create a multi-racial, multi-party women's organisation in the form of the Women's National Coalition. In the final two chapters, Hassim considers the realities of gender politics and policies in post-apartheid South Africa, assessing the successes and failures of gender activists as they repositioned themselves in government, the bureaucracy and powerful, internationally funded NGOs; as she critically assesses the limits and successes of the gender machinery instituted by government.

Throughout the book, Hassim's analysis is nuanced, charting the successes and failures of South African women's organisations through a rigorous exploration and critique of the exigencies of real politics beyond mere ideology. The struggle of marginal women, the double standards and rhetoric of politicians within and without the ANC, the debilitating effect of petty politicking within

women's organisations and the enduring battle of women activists to overcome deeply entrenched opposition to gender parity makes for challenging reading.

There are some minor quibbles. The book is overtly an "academic" text, one that a lay reader would struggle with due to the sophisticated utilisation of theory and the thesis-style of the writing. There is an intrinsic irony here: Hassim is consistently concerned with the tendency of feminist activism, especially when it is bound to the state, to stray from an engagement with marginal women, such as the rural poor. Yet the rich content of this book will undoubtedly be of use mainly within the academy, or by people trained in academic reading and writing. Perhaps this is a necessary evil given the care taken by Hassim to avoid "Manichean dualities" and to allow her subject matter to speak in all its complexity.

The book is also overwhelmingly a study of the women's organisations in relation to the ANC and its internal politics and external policies, which sometimes leaves the reader wondering about a title that implies a broader palette. Whilst not ignored, the book deals rather fleetingly with organisations attached to other political parties.

Overall this is a fine contribution to feminist scholarship in South Africa. Hassim's analysis reveals the degree to which women across the cultural and racial spectrum in South Africa continue to face deep seated prejudice as second class citizens. *Women's Organisations and Democracy in South Africa* is a complex and challenging study of the successes and failures of gender activism in the complicated context of a developing country, and is of great use for historians, sociologists, political scientists and gender and human rights activists.

Endnote

- 1 The United Democratic Front was the ANC-aligned, extraparliamentary political movement that led internal opposition to apartheid in the 1980s.

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