

# Review: Calling for feminist solidarity, vigilance and accountability in the fight against gender inequality in contemporary South Africa

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Ruiters, G. (ed.) 2008. *Gender Activism: Perspectives on the South African Transition, Institutional Culture and Everyday Life*. Grahamstown: Rhodes University Institute of Social and Economic Research.

The fact that South Africa boasts one of the most progressive constitutions in the world and that the post-Apartheid policy environment is geared towards enabling a socio-political environment that is governed by principles of equality and social justice for all, has almost become a cliché. Yet, the country is also notoriously known as the crime capital of the world, particularly as one of the most unequal (in terms of race, class and gender) and the most violent for women and girls. Many scholars and activists have concluded that the situation has reached crisis and epidemic proportions and in response, have written and lobbied government and other concerned agencies, groups and individuals to develop and implement ameliorative interventions. However, the crisis shows very little or no sign of abating. Why?

The essays in the edited volume reviewed here: *Gender Activism: Perspectives on the South African transition, institutional culture and everyday life* not only identify the reasons for this crisis, but also develop ideas for ameliorative interventions informed by gender activism. The essays seem to suggest that this contemporary crisis (or crises) that South Africa is grappling with requires a total revolution if it is to be adequately addressed. The book, divided into four parts, is a collection of papers from proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Rosa Luxemburg seminar held at Rhodes University in 2008. The seminar brought together academics and activists to “share and compare local and international experiences of various sites of women’s oppression...” (p.2).

The first part of the book locates the feminist (and Marxist) debates on South African women's struggles in a global context. Depressingly, the contributors seem to conclude that when it comes to women's oppression, the struggles have remained the same over time and geographical space, suggesting that decades of gender and feminist activism have not succeeded in addressing them. The highlight of this section seems to be the underlying question: what can women in South Africa (and elsewhere) learn from exploring the contributions of historical feminist champions such as Rosa Luxemburg (the seminar being named in her honour and memory)?

The second part of the book contains contributions that explore women's rights in post-Apartheid South Africa, highlighting the mismatch between the policy framework and the realities of women brutalised by, among others, gender inequality, gender-based and sexual violence, HIV and AIDS, and poverty. On one hand, the essays in the volume acknowledge some of the major strides that women in South Africa and elsewhere have made, particularly in the public sphere (for example, through significant increases in representation in elected political office). On the other, they unanimously lament the continuing struggles women confront in the social and private sphere (in the family), where they continue to be violated through sexual violence, sexual harassment and marginalisation. As such, they are not able to access and benefit from the rights they are guaranteed in the country's constitution. In particular, the essays identify several battles feminists still have to fight, some old, and others new. To illustrate this point, firstly, contributors such as de Nobrega (pp. 72-97) refer to the democratisation of the public sphere, while the private sphere (family in particular) remains neglected, particularly in terms of gender equality. This, they argue, results from programming such as gender mainstreaming and affirmative action, which is often interpreted as simply requiring an increase in the number of women (in parliament, in employment) without significantly changing the institutional cultures within which they have to work or the power relations between men and women within these, as well as within communities and families.

Secondly, the book highlights the continuing policing of women's bodies within communities and families using culture and religion (and therefore, morality), and the resultant gender-based violence against women (and gay and lesbian groups). For example, evidence from media and research reports suggests that culture and tradition inform the ways in which an unprecedented number of individuals and groups construct and perform their identities. As

Magwaza (2006: 2) warns, culture is often “superimposed on many aspects of society, particularly those that deal with [girls’ and] women’s rights [and sexuality]”. It is through such notions of culture and religion that society (men and boys, and women) are able to excuse, justify and condone the violation of women in families and communities.

The third part of the book focuses on women in the workplace and bemoans the precarious working conditions which they face (e.g. in farms, as sex workers, domestic workers, in education, health and even public office). In particular, this section highlights the intersectionality of race, class and gender and points to the ways in which these interact to impact negatively on the lives of women in the workplace as well as of those kept outside by gender inequality and its associated gender-based violence.

The fourth section of the book explores the representation of women and girls in the media. The essays in this area identify the constructions of gender in the public sphere (e.g. women and men and girls and boys in the media), especially the constructions of women and girls as lacking agency and in need of guidance (including punishment) from men and boys, and of boys and men as capable and naturally able to provide it.

The strength of the book lies mainly in the diversity and depth (of intellectual activism) among the various local and international essay contributors informed by feminist and Marxist theories and drawing on empirical, policy and personal/individual evidence to celebrate the strides made in women’s struggles and to highlight the many miles we still have to travel to reach true gender equality. These include, among others, local and international feminists such as Jacklyn Cock, Desiree Lewis, Wendy Isaack, Nomafrench Mboho, Elaine Salo, Jeanne Prinsloo and Sara Rein. It is heartening to see a collection of essays that respond to the criticism of academia and academic institutions as ivory towers oblivious to the needs of ordinary people (women) and often paralysed by inaction when it comes to addressing such needs (Moletsane and Lesko, 2004). In fact, this book is testimony to the power of academics and activists coming together to exchange ideas and ideals about developing interventions aimed at addressing the continuing struggles women and girls face in our society. From asking us to reflect on the contributions of feminist champions from bygone eras, to imploring us to join in feminist solidarity (for example, Desiree Lewis) and to speak in one radical voice so as to transform “private patriarchies” (de Nobrega, citing Gouws, 2005), the essays motivate feminists and others concerned with gender equality to stand

up and act on behalf of women and girls. However, the contributors also warn that such activism cannot be informed by business as usual and instead, requires feminist vigilance to challenge the insidious nature of what Nadia Sanger refers to as 'heteropatriarchy'. Such vigilance includes holding the state accountable for poor service delivery that impacts negatively on families and communities, particularly on women, and for its failure to implement policies meant to ensure the human rights of women in society, including the right to safety, the right to health, and the right to equality. It involves holding each other (as feminist scholars and activists) accountable to the women and girls we speak and act on behalf of and together with, so that we can speak in solidarity with the radical voice the contributors in this collection are calling for. The fruits of such solidarity, vigilance and accountability will only be seen when our voices are no longer conspicuously muted when one of us is raped and violated and the perpetrator is never punished; when we hold to account those of us who burn underwear and shout violent and sexist slogans in protest against one of the few women who are brave enough to take their cases in front of a judge.

## References

- Magwaza, T. 2006. "Editorial", *Agenda* 68: 2-6.
- Moletsane, R., and Lesko, N. 2004. "Overcoming Paralysis: AIDS Education-and-Activism", *Agenda* 60: 69-80.