



GENDER ON THE AGENDA

PUTTING WOMEN ON THE AGENDA,
Edited by Susan Bazilli, Ravan Press,
Johannesburg, 1991 (R43.05, 290 pages)

NEGOTIATORS, TAKE NOTE: as you work yourselves out of deadlock and try to get back to the business of democracy-building, keep these quotes in mind: "The change required in South Africa cannot be brought about by atomised, isolated individuals... We can draw on the forms of organisation that the women's movement has developed which are democratic and non-elitist."

"It is no good saying we want this or that in a constitution if we elect an all-male constituent assembly or we have only a few women in positions of power."

"The struggle ... is not just for majority rule, a liberal democratic constitution and a justifiable bill of rights. It is a struggle for the liberation of women and men to restructure our society into a humanistic one."

"Unless women's rights are taken seriously during a society's transition, they will not miraculously appear afterwards."

These and several other on-the-mark quotes are scattered throughout *Putting Women on the Agenda*. The book's namesake was a conference held at Wits two years ago, and its 14 essays are derived from that event. Contributors, who include lawyers, academics and physicians, have tackled a wealth of topics of timely and critical importance to women: sexual harassment on the job; their inclusion in a future constitution; family and traditional African laws and customs; reproductive health; and stories of successful gender battles fought in other countries like Canada and Botswana.

What distinguishes this collection from other works of critical and scholarly prose is its activism. Going beyond an insular, self-absorbed intellectual posture about the gender inequalities women must battle, *Putting Women on the Agenda* attempts to do just that, "as the back cover says. When Desiree Hansson discusses, for instance, the appalling rape statistics (one woman every 2.7 minutes) and domestic abuse in this country, she provides concrete, hard-hitting recommendations to address the crisis.

Other strong papers include a look at the state of reproductive health, which provides some chilling statistics (300,000 illegal abortions annually; 80% of black women studied in Cape Town and Ciskei used as their method of contraception Depo Provera, the high-suspect injectable progestogen) and a feminist analysis of the ANC's May 1990 statement on the emancipation of women.

The range and scale of societal ills the new government will have to address seem insurmountable, but it has become clear that, in order for a true transition to a democratic, non-racial society to take place, the phrase "non-sexist" must be more fully incorporated into the speech and realities of a new South Africa.

This book deserves close attention as we proceed through the transition. ■

Opportune look at women's issues

AT the Lawyers for Human Rights "Putting the Women on the Agenda" conference, a live wire rural woman proposed in strident but broken English that half of every delegation taking part in the constitution-making process be comprised of women.

The idea caught on like wildfire — the delegates, academics, professionals, unionists and rural women nodded vigorously in agreement. The demand was taken to the African National Congress' first internal congress last year. It was tounded, but was the subject of hot debate at the congress.

But the demand was not all that came out of the conference. Susan Bazilli's book is a collection of the papers presented there. It comes at an opportune moment for the country. With the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa) deliberating transformation and the possibility of a new constitution by the end of the year, such a work

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provides a useful account of the debates and demands of women regarding their place in the constitution.

Bazilli has managed to commandeer contributions from the most influential politicians and academics: The ANC's heavyweight gender campaigners, Bridgitte Mabandla and Frene Ginwala, both present the organisation's views on gender. Ginwala's public acknowledgment of the ANC's failures in gender equality is a challenging account. Dorothy Driver too, takes the ANC to task with her incisive questioning of the organisations constitutional guidelines.

But the book's range does not stop at constitutional issues. It also takes account of other aspects of gender politics: perspectives on rape, sexual

harassment, the family and welfare are all presented in the thorough form characteristic of their specialist writers. Each article drips with statistics and chronological accounts of developments so useful to academics, policy makers and others for whom scrupulous research is so important. Each article includes detailed footnotes, again of help to researchers.

Bazilli has also included important ANC documents, like the constitutional guidelines and statements on gender issues. But perhaps she has forgotten that it is not only the ANC which will be drawing up a new constitution. It would have been useful to get policy statements from all the organisations on the political stage.

Unfortunately, because the contributors are drawn almost solely from the world of academe, the book's style is highly academic and accessible to only a small audience.

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Welcome departure in SA feminist politics

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By RHODA KADALIE

This is a much-needed departure from the usual race, class, gender analysis which has been seminal to South African feminist politics up to now.

The strength of the book is that it goes beyond presenting women as triply oppressed victims of apartheid. It tries to show how women construct themselves and are constructed through political discourse in certain contradictory ways, and how an understanding of this will assist us in making informed and appropriate legal and constitutional changes for women in South Africa.

The essays (ranging from political pamphlets to rigorous analyses) are by a wide array of authors — activists, politicians, lawyers, medics and academics whose contributions complement each other in a more holistic approach to the analysis of women and gender.

The essays can be placed into three categories: the first nine are mainly concerned with the nature of gender discrimination locally; its manifestation in the Constitutional Guidelines of the ANC; the kinds of changes which have been made to accommodate women; critiques of these changes; the kinds of changes which are needed; and predictions of their effect on women.

The next four essays deal with sexual politics: rape, sexual harassment and reproductive rights. The last four are concerned with constitutional changes and their effect on women in post-independent countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, and in one advanced industrialised country such as Canada.

We are already familiar with the kinds of political statements made by women such as Jacklyn Cock, Linda Zama, Brigette Mabandla and Frene Ginwala about the importance of taking gender issues seriously in the liberation movement. Ginwala, however, goes further with her up-to-date analysis

not yet ready to take up positions in the national executive of the ANC.

An important lesson learnt is that affirmative action needs to be taken more seriously by the ANC; a kind of action, she emphasises, that will ensure the entry of women into the political arena in the most effective ways, and not just a kind of tokenism for which the ANC is notorious.

The contributions of Dorothy Driver, Thandabantu Nhlalpo and Christina Murray and Catherine O'Regan, Sandra Burman, and Nululamo Gwagwa together, constitute an interesting theoretical package.

The Constitutional Guidelines of the ANC are scrutinised painstakingly by Driver to show that mere changes in terminology do not necessarily deal with the patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions underlying the Constitution. She presents us with a refreshing analysis of the family, marriage, women as a social category, and what constitutes women's voices, showing that unless we concomitantly tackle the ideology of patriarchy and heterosexuality women will never attain full citizenship rights. They will still be seen, despite the changes, as mere adjuncts to men, the family and the group.

Murray and O'Regan demonstrates how an uncritical application of the notion of equality can have negative effects on women, and that merely inserting a clause on equality may have contradictory effects in bringing about the changes that women are striving for in the home and in the workplace, the unions, educational institutions, and so on.

Driver argues that the "ideology of the family often masks the ideology of heterosexuality". It isn't just a matter of saying that "the family needs to be protected". The family changes all the time and has gone through significant changes from precolonial times to post-modern capitalist times. The notion of the family itself needs to be deconstructed before we can talk about "the protection of the family".

Nhlalpo and Gwagwa develop Driver's assertions about the family further. They

made sense in precolonial times are dysfunctional in today's formal society". Many of the customs pertaining to the family, which made sense in precolonial times, have become obsolete and inappropriate in today's social, political and economic context.

We need to take cognisance of the tension that exists between respect for certain African customs and traditions and those which are inimical to women's rights, says Nhlalpo, and warn that an "anachronistic adherence to so-called 'African ways' poses obvious problems for the cause of women's rights". Yet total abandonment of these values may pose an even greater threat to social cohesion by creating a cultural vacuum in circumstances where there are no ready substitutes.

Nhlalpo argues that the sudden elevator of customary practices when women demand their abolition is highly suspect, it says the least, and suggests a resolution to this problem by looking closely at how some of the positive aspects of customs pertaining to the elderly, children, women/wives, mothers that functioned in precolonial Africa can be retained, while we jettison those that are harmful to women.

An aspect taken for granted in South African feminism, the right of women to speak in their own voices, is not as self-evident as it seems. What does it mean, ask Driver, to speak in "their own voices"? How does one know when women are speaking in their "own" voices rather than speaking from assigned subject positions?

Driver provides examples of how many women in the resistance movement often articulated their oppression in terms demanded by the national agenda of the political organisations, which were often determined by the men, anyway. And when women became "too uppity" and feminist demands, they could be labelled a Western and feminist as an easy dismissal of the issues raised. Hence, many black women felt obliged to clarify their position as either black first and women second, so deny themselves the right to articulate the oppression as black women.

She further argues that one achieves voice "at the point where one recognises the way in which one has been subordinated by political system, and thus made to fit a political category at odds with one's own experiences and aspirations in the world". To assert that one is speaking as a black first and as a woman second, is to deny oneself one of the important voices and, through making that choice, one may even misrepresent oneself.