

Genda A JOURNAL ABOUT WOMEN & GENDER



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Women and Gender
in
Southern
Africa
to 1945



FEMINIST CONFERENCING

Susan Bazilli

FEMINISM IMPLIES an analysis, a process, a practice, and a fundamental re-ordering of the way that we see the world and act both in and on it. That is what we want to do with our conferencing. And to do that, we need a different starting point as feminists.

I want to look at the question of how we can organise a feminist conference, taking into consideration all of our conflicting interests, diversities, and differences. What I am attempting to do here is to begin from the debates at the Durban conference, *"Women and Gender in Southern Africa"*, point out some of the problems and lessons, and suggest some ideas for discussion for the future. I will also refer at times to the Lawyers for Human Rights conference, *"Putting Women on the Agenda"* and the Cape Town conference, *"Gender Today and Tomorrow"*, organised by the ANC Constitutional Committee.

Nobody said it was going to be easy

At the outset, I want to say that I think that what happened in Durban was an essentially feminist political process. There came a highly creative point in the conference when we were called to 'own' the conference. It is at that reclaiming and transforming point where I begin.

Some of the problems that were pointed out on the first day in the 'activists forum', not necessarily in this order, were: there were not enough black women represented; the objectification of black women by white academics; the conference was not seen to be affirming of black women; there was an assumption - both explicit and implicit - of what academia is; the conflict between women was not recognised within the myth of sisterhood; how to transform the conference was not being debated; more space was needed for conflict in structuring the sessions.

I would say that as the discussion and debates became more polarised, I did not see the 'split' in the conference as necessarily being between the categories of 'academics' and 'activists' or between 'black' and 'white' but rather of a self-defined group of women who felt uncomfortable and/or angry with what the conference process symbolised and they\we wanted to actively participate in making the conference process to be one of political engagement. That is precisely why, I think, that the choice was left to those who were raising these concerns to decide if they felt that they would define themselves as 'activists'. There was no 'means' (or 'meaning') test. Since there were many 'academics' in the 'activist'

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meeting, the line was not so much crossed as integrated.

The anger that was raised by the black women at the conference about the omission of black women (and black academics) from the conference was not considered to be a malevolent action, but rather an omission. But it was a serious omission that was indicative of something processual that goes far beyond the specifics of this or any other conference. That is something we need to seriously look at. 'Omission' can be equated with 'invisibility' of black women in the research by white women; or rather, by 'academics'. The anger expressed by various women - black women, activist women, and so on - was not only necessary and productive, but essential. If we cannot begin to acknowledge the depth of that anger and account for and with it, we will go nowhere. Together.

I do think that the process of engaging in such debates was extremely important and very useful for the future. These splits/debates are not new. But the way of dealing with them was new. We must make sure that creative methods are found, so that we don't lose the beginning of a vision of a new way of organising.

It takes a while to cut through some of the rhetoric. It is a very difficult thing to be honest. Especially when anger, defences, emotions, are strong. But that is what made the process so useful. If the black women or the activist women or the lesbian women or any other self-defined 'category' had arrived at the conference with a position statement to be presented, or had boycotted the conference altogether, we would not have engaged each other in working through those issues. Together. And part of the need to be honest is the need to accept responsibility where it lies.

To do that, we have to accept some of the real constraints that befuddle the process of 'conferencing'.¹

Finally, it was pointed out several times that the conference organisers in Durban were not to blame. There is no blame - there is just history. And we all learned from all the mistakes - on all sides, I think. There was risk taken and courage exhibited and we are all much richer for the experience. Far richer and much further ahead than if we had gone to a conference and listened to papers and made a few comments and gone home. Now, we won't go home again, we will only go forward. *"Feminism is about empowerment, which is about process. Women must be able to participate; we need to acknowledge our differences and move forward; and we need to have the courage to address the issues of race, class and gender"*.²

As Shula Marks said in the closing session: *"Birth is a bloody and painful process, but there is no point in blaming the midwives for the fault of heredity"*.

Priorities

We are going to have to decide what our priorities are for conferences, given the constraints of resources and time. But I would suggest that our main priority focusses on ways that conferences can further the development of the women's movement and assist in the development of women wherever we are located. And that implies that our conferences have to be focussed.

I would argue that consultation is a fundamental necessity in organising a conference that purports to be feminist. But consultation is a two-way process. It means that we have to consolidate our networks for consultation to reach as wide a cross-section as we can. It means that we

have to work at finding new ways of seeing through the invisibility. It means being aware of what we mean by using the word 'community'.³ It means that those who are consulted with must also respond. It is not useful to criticise organisers of a conference if the critics have not responded to phone calls or faxes or made any effort to engage in the process, except as criticism. We do not have a history of being honest with what goes on behind the scenes: it usually ends up as after-conference gossip that can be very destructive. Lets get it out into the open. We have too long a history of being critical, now is the time for constructive criticism and debate. We need to forge a South African method of the Chinese '*speaking bitterness*'.

Part of the problem is that we have to redefine our notion of what 'academia' is. This is part of what I have referred to as the resource problem. There are many many women who have many interesting, worthwhile, thought provoking experiences to share with us. But we cannot expect people to always have to 'write papers' to be presented. Experiences can be shared without papers. I would like to go to a conference where no one has a paper in front of them. If we make the writing of papers a pre-requisite for speaking, we are going to continually exclude many women who are too busy to write papers, who do not have the skills or self-confidence to write papers, who have other priorities, and so on.

We also must be clear about our objectives. There is absolutely no reason why people cannot organise an 'academic' conference, or an 'activists' conference, or a conference on elephants, or anything else. But we mustn't try to be all things to all people. Which is a very fine line. We don't

have many opportunities, we have so much to learn, there is such a wide range of experience to be tapped. But if an academic conference is the choice, and 'activists' therefore do not participate in organising, to invite them at the last minute is at the least, patronising. If an 'activists' conference is organised and academics are brought in at the last minute to present something, likewise. And if a conference on the Constitution and a Bill of Rights is organised to allow women to participate in making their opinions known, they must be given the space and not marginalised into their 'own' workshop, as I know was the feeling of some women at the LHR conference. No more 'own affairs'.

Finally, I think that one of the things that we have to overcome, which is universally true for academia the world over, and all too prevalent amongst activists as well, is the 'propriety' of 'the struggle' and our resources. We don't have anything to gain by being competitive or privatising our work, this isn't a competition. Contributions must be acknowledged and encouraged, of course. But to play with the simplistic phrase of 'triple oppression', we are in danger of creating a triplication of resources. We don't need to reinvent the wheel, we need to give it momentum.

Resources and Suggestions

What follows I think is true for *both* academics and activists. I think that it is of paramount importance that we learn to share what resources we have before we can make our priorities work for us.

We must learn to use the resources that we have available to our advantage. We have far more resources available than any other country in the whole of Africa.

By resources I mean physical things like telephones, fax machines, postal systems, computers, photocopiers, libraries, resource centres; and I mean human resources like people, literacy skills, organisations, structures, universities, and political analysis.

Let's use the resources that we have. First and foremost, I mean, the issue mentioned in Durban of outreach: to share the research and information we have and make them accessible. All of the participants at all these conferences have access to some skill or constituency that can be accessed. Popular education techniques, oral tradition communication, professional associations, literacy groups, social workers, health workers, cultural workers, civic associations... women are members of almost everything. Points were raised about the fact that 70% of South African women belong to a church or a religious group; that there are existing structures such as SAYCO, unions, civics, where women want to be more involved but lack the skills or confidence.

There are several practical problems that we should incorporate into our future plans. In using the limited resources that we have, let's incorporate them creatively into existing structures. We always complain about the hierarchical and intimidating problems of holding conferences in university lecture halls. But unfortunately we do not have the money to hold conferences in hotels or conference centres the way that The Men do. The reality is that university facilities tend to be the cheapest places to use. So if we have to continue to do that, let's find ways of reclaiming and transforming those physical spaces. Or make new ones that remove us from the main cities but that have the facilities available.

Money is the critical factor. Conferences, especially national ones, are expensive. We are going to face a crisis in funding. We need to use what little piece of the pie we can get to the best advantage.

Let's build into our conferences an actual on-going evaluation process. While I believe that it actually may be more important to acknowledge the problems as they arise, we need to structure that time into the conference so that the ongoing process can be monitored and recognised.

We must ensure that we take full advantage of the opportunities that we have created. Let's not ever go to another women's/feminist/gender conference where we have to rely on informal contacts or small workshops at the very end of the conference to find out where we are. This is an unwieldy request - but I find it extremely frustrating to sit for days in a room full of women from all over the region and to know that somewhere there are women who I may really want to talk to about specific issues but I don't know who they are. I know that in a hall of 200 or 400 people, it is not practical to go around the room and have everyone introduce themselves. But there is a way to do it. Either to have a list of all participants with their names and areas of interest circulated on the morning of the first day of the conference - which involves a great deal of administrative work, and could only be overcome with financial resources; or at least to have such introductions take place in each smaller session/workshop each time. There will be different people in each session so by the end of the conference we will know who at least half or two thirds of the people are.

Finally, there is the question of time. There is never enough time at conferences for discussion: that was clearly evident by

all three women's conferences that I have referred to. By reclaiming the process in Durban, and limiting each presentation to five minutes, we were able to redress that problem to some extent. It is a difficult decision to make. On the one hand, there is no one idea that should be so complex that it cannot be summarised in everyday language in five minutes; especially if the papers are on hand to be distributed. On the other hand, some concepts and issues can take a long time to be explained, especially if it is done in everyday language.

We have to make crucial choices between competing interests. Time is a resource in other ways that we must be attendant to; not just the time at the conference or the time for discussion. We don't have much time to consolidate our demands for the future, as women. We always try to do too much with the limited time that we have because it is so costly and difficult to bring women together from around the country. And there is the actual physical problem of time for most women: one of the criticisms that I received about the LHR conference was that it was too short and should have been at least a day longer. I knew that when I was organising it: but I also knew that for us in Johannesburg that would not have been such a problem. But we have to take into account the fact that for women to travel by car or kombi from various regions can add another two days onto their time away, and it is not just the time spent that is a problem. There are issues of the work that piles up in their absence, the cost of travelling, the loss of income, and the toll that their absence may take with disgruntled families and so on. These are other factors of 'time' that we have to consider.

Affirmative Action

As feminists, living and working in South Africa, we have an acute responsibility to practice affirmative action. And we have to broaden our definition of affirmative action to take resources and priorities into consideration. In terms of conferencing, that means that we can no longer rely on our own location in specific communities to develop our own list of contacts. We always go through established networks and contacts, especially in a community that traditionally has been very small - here for example I refer to feminist academics or people doing work on gender issues. By its very nature, then, this process of contacting people will lead to exclusion and will limit the access that we have to other women, and that they may have networks to find other people - to reach into other communities. There are many skilled and competent women out there, we just have to make sure that we use creative channels to reach them, to provide an atmosphere of encouragement and acceptance to them - *and* to redefine our priorities.

There were many ideas of training and sharing that came up in Durban. The twinning idea of matching, for example, organisations and activists with academics in the planning of conferences. Or the mentor programme that was mentioned in the Women's Studies workshop - where academics doing work in such courses are sent into the field to work with specific organisations in the community to share their expertise and find out what the needs of grassroots women really are; before they are told what they are.

Finally, practicing affirmative action means that we have to build into our practice, not just our research, the fact that

while all women are oppressed, we are not all equally oppressed. That does not mean that white women academics should stop doing research 'on' black women; but it does mean that training, sharing of skills and resources, consultation, workshopping, brainstorming, twinning, should be an integral component of the work practice itself. Consultation with, and accountability to, the 'community' that the work is meant to benefit does not mean having to get permission to do it: it means acknowledging that we can do it because of our privilege and what we do with that knowledge.

Access

I guess that most of what I have been discussing up to now is really the question of access. But there are a few separate points to make here.

We need to find new ways of presenting information. Maybe instead of having the author of the paper present it - because it is very tempting to go on and on about something that you have invested so much of yourself in and are excited about - maybe we should have a group of other people to read and summarise the work. And if they can't do it because they can't make sense of it, then the work needs to be reworked to be more accessible. There aren't that many concepts in the world that can't be explained in everyday language. It's just a good thing that we don't have to do feminist analyses on nuclear physics - just the outcome!

There were various comments made about sending the Malibongwe papers to each of the universities and that much of the recent work done by the ANC on women had not been circulated inside the country. And we never see the material that gets presented at other overseas or

'out of South Africa' conferences. WE need to consolidate this resource in some form of accessible clearing house. We need to popularise it to make it really accessible. SPEAK, Learn and Teach, pamphlets, organisational publications, literacy training, union workshops - all these are forums that already exist for doing this kind of work. We have to combine our resources from all sectors.

Another aspect of access brings us back to time and money. A lot of women can't afford the conference fees or travel costs; if we want to organise conferences and we want as many women to attend as possible, we have to redefine our priorities. It may be more important to bring women to the venue than to photocopy papers; this is just an example of hard choices we are going to have to look at making.

In the final analysis, it is all about access: to the process, to the venue, to the material, to the language.

Language

Much debate arose at the Cape Town and Durban conferences on language and inclusion versus 'exclusion' of women at such meetings. We cannot speak for, or on behalf of, 'women'. But neither can we be all things to all people. I think that is where part of our problem lies. We fear criticism and political sanctioning, so we organise conferences and then try to include everyone. Which on one level is a good thing; but looking at it deeper, it does a disservice to us all if we can't find a way of recognising our commonalities *and* differences. Language is the key. By that I mean all aspects of language: the actual language spoken; the language of exclusion\inclusion; the language of differences\similarities; the language of experience.

At the Cape Town conference, we discussed the issue of having the conference in English. But despite some of the suggestions for recourse, we do not have the resources of the United Nations and cannot have simultaneous translation in multiple languages. So what is the way to deal with that? I think that it is a very *serious problem, but how do we address it?* Mass literacy campaigns to assist people in English literacy will not happen in time. Do we advise people that such and such a conference will be held predominantly in English but that translators will be on hand to assist any women who wants to speak in her mother tongue? I think that should at least be the bottom line: if we can do it for French we should be able to do it for Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Afrikaans, etc.

But that assumes that she can follow the discussion in English, and therefore restricts the access. Do we send out the message to all organisations, to discuss the problems in their communities and elicit their suggestions - that they decide to send women who can speak and understand English who then take the conference information back to their communities. To really find out 'what women want' - once one defines which women where - it has to be done by women in those communities, in the language of those women. For instance, the TRAC women who work in the rural areas and speak to women in their own language and then translate for US what women say is the 'correct' sequence, not for us to take our translations to *them*.⁵ And it must be a two-way process. WE may not always be right, but neither might *they*.

And part of the problem of language and access has to do with the discipline. To use the example of the LHR conference, lawyers speak a language unto themselves.

But they do that on purpose, so that they can keep the power for themselves. Knowledge is about language and knowledge is about power. If we are going to explain constitutions and Bills of Rights and changing laws, we are going to have to, as Gcina Mhlope said, "*decode the language*". It is a responsibility that we have to accept.

Networking

I was amazed at the depth and breadth of the feminist work that is being done around the country, that I found at all three conferences. We do have some wonderful human (women) resources. Hopefully now, after these forums, we will begin to consolidate our networks. As was pointed out at the evaluation session, there is a real poverty of networks in Southern Africa when compared to Britain and North America.⁵ We know too what the antecedents of that fact are. But now we have made a beginning.

We need to be networking around, for, of and with women - activists, academics, researchers, organisations, politicians, structures, resources - locally, nationally, internationally.

Locally and nationally, we need to develop structures for networking in all areas. We know that 'out there' are a myriad of organisations that have women in them in all areas: whether they be churches, unions, universities, women's organisations, political organisations, burial societies, civics etc. And then there is the challenge of mobilising more women to join organisations: but that is a separate paper (or book) on its own.

Personally, I cannot stress enough how crucial I see regional networking. At the Durban conference, and at the LHR conference, we learned a great deal from

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together in sharing resources wherever we are able. And where our privilege and class serves to invalidate, oppress, or render invisible other women, we should be accountable for our actions.

Second, especially given the resources problem, we should concentrate our energies in our regions. We need to work and workshop and organise and mobilise in our regional areas and structures, before we come together again in a national conference. This is not to suggest that we confine ourselves to regional issues, but to strengthen our strategies at all levels; local, regional and national. So that the next time we meet at a national forum, we have built up our organisations in each region, and given praxis - the infusion of theory with practice - to empowering women. I think too that we should take seriously the warning that we are in danger of creating a new elite - an elite of 'conference goers' - which could have the effect of removing participation and access from some of the very women we want to represent at such gatherings.¹³

We need to be vigilant to ensure that we share our resources, practice affirmative action, define our objectives and priorities, encourage and empower women: so that ALL women will have a chance to be part of the transformation process. Our transformation process! ■

Susan Bazilli was the organiser of the Lawyers for Human Rights Conference.

Footnotes:

1. The fact that women felt it necessary to meet in separate groups to discuss the issues IS important. That is what 'consciousness raising' was all about in the early days of the western 'women's movement'. That is why women feel the need to organise women's organisations. That is why black students organised black student societies, thereby enriching NUSAS politics today. That is what 'consciousness raising' and empowering is all about - be it feminist consciousness or black consciousness.
2. Pregs Govender, speaking at the Durban conference.
3. Francie Lund made this very important point at the Durban conference and in her paper.
4. It seems that we cannot get away from the constraints of language when it comes to characterising such categories of 'women,' 'us,' and 'them.' But we cannot stop trying, or redefining.
5. Cherryl Walker made this point in the evaluation session.
6. Made by Helen Rees.
7. Such as the concern presented by Linzi Manicom.
8. As suggested by Pregs Govender.
9. As pointed out by Tammy Shefer and Pauline Stanford.
10. As Mary Simon's dream for the future.
11. Comments and papers by Ginny Volbrecht and Francie Lund, to name a few.
12. Frene Ginwala made this point at all three conferences
13. Both of these points were made by Beatie Hofmeyer in the 'activists' forum' at the Durban conference. I would also point out the example made by the Western Cape region's paper presented at the Malibongwe conference, that was workshopped in the region by representatives from 400 organisations.

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