

Women and the elephant

The need to redress gender oppression

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When considering any aspect of our subject – putting women on the agenda – we have to begin with a clear and common understanding of how we perceive the relationship of women and society. It is therefore important to try and identify and define the problem with which we are trying to deal. What we are talking about is not discrimination against women. The phenomenon that we have to address in this country is gender oppression.

Discrimination is more a symptom than a cause. It is the product of the whole way in which society works. To attack it, then, we have not only to legislate and act against it itself but also to work for shifts in the deeper causes which underlie it. As the ANC national executive committee's statement on the emancipation of women says: 'To achieve genuine equality, our policies must be based on a real understanding of gender oppression and the way in which it manifests itself in our society.'

The word sex is a biological definition, while gender is a socially constructed understanding of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman, with defined characteristics which are encompassed in the notion of femininity and masculinity in our society. We derive these understandings from the way society is organised and from the way in which we experience it. We are all aware from our own experience that this social construction is loaded with psychological and physical traits which are artificial and attributed to all men and all women.

From this it follows that 'men's role' and 'women's role' in the family, the economy and society generally are not biologically determined (apart from pregnancy and childbirth), but are culturally allocated, and the relationship between the two is not one of equality but of oppression.

What we must address therefore are the power relations in society. Given that gender oppression is socially constructed, we must examine and aim to change the social relations which construct it. Our aim must be to reform gender relations so that they exist on a more equitable foundation and provide the basis for the full and free development of both men and women.

Let us consider for a moment, briefly, some of these characteristics that are attributed to women and how they affect us in our daily lives: Supposedly men are rational, and women are intuitive. Women are small and frail, men are tall and strong. In western societies, this has given rise to the notion that men are stronger and suited to physical and manual work, they are logical and hence better at science and able to understand machines, and because they are allegedly immune from emotional judgements and operate on pure reason they make good managers and executives. In contrast, women are weak, supposedly better at arts and with a particular talent for the 'caring professions' and social sciences; they are given to emotional outbursts and intuitive judgements and hence incapable of taking on any major responsibility in business and industry.

These notions of what are female and male characteristics are not only inaccurate but totally artificial - they are cultural constructs and vary between places and with time. For example, although today in South Africa women are considered most 'suitable' for domestic work, up to the beginning of the twentieth century in Natal and the Transvaal men, and not women, were the domestic workers, and still are in many parts of Asia. In times of war women replace men in most categories of civilian employment. They do heavy work on the land and in industry, drive and repair trucks and cranes, operate heavy machinery, etc. In South Africa, African women had traditionally been the cultivators of land. This did not fit in with the Victorian notions of the missionaries on the role of women in society, and hence when schools were established African women were trained to be the domestic workers and were excluded from the agricultural training that was provided for African men.

Divisions between jobs done by men and jobs done by women become self-perpetuating because in turn they shape the jobs and tools and the work environment. Decisions about the size and weight of loads, the force required to move levers, the design of tools, even the length of spade and pick handles were based upon assumptions about which sex is

doing the work. In office furniture, desks for managers are sized according to male physiques, secretarial ones for women's!

All of us are victims, and tend to accept social, political and economic relations based on artificial assumptions about men and women as real. As a result we are guilty of accepting the world and our society as given. It is there, and we have to fit women into it. We try and shape women, to accommodate a given society and its underlying assumptions, rather than challenging the assumptions and reshaping society. We all tend to do this.

GBS!

As academics, and as activists in the liberation movement, we have participated in numerous conferences and written papers around the themes of women and education, women and health, women and society, women and the law, women and the constitution and so on. The logic of this is almost to write a paper entitled 'women and the elephant', because the assumptions in this approach are that women are homogeneous and we are considering and relating women to something like the elephant, that is outside of women, and whose shape and character is unaffected by that something called women.

By following this approach women are identifying themselves as 'outsiders' seeking entry into a society that is normal and acceptable to women. When we deal with racism in our society we have come to reject such notions. For many years there was the perception that there existed a 'civilisation' to which blacks had not contributed, and blacks had to be raised to certain levels before they could qualify for the vote and otherwise participate fully in civilised society. These ideas have been rejected in most parts of the world, and even to an extent among the ruling circles in our country. Why then in gender relations do we now put up and acknowledge a standard which we women have to fit into?

One of the fundamental changes facing South Africa is the emergence of this country as a democratic country, as an African nation with an African culture on an African continent; not as a European nation with a European culture artificially located on the African continent. Similarly, we have to build our democracy as a gender-neutral society, one whose institutions, patterns of behaviour, values and norms are people-shaped rather than man-shaped. Both processes are part of the liberation struggle.

Further, if we continue to look at women as homogeneous we will not be able to assess and take into account questions of class and race in our society. It is the interface of race, class and gender which has shaped our society and is the fundamental issue that we have to confront. If we continue to see our problems as simply a matter of discrimination, then we will not be able to deal with the fundamental basis on which the status and condition of women in South Africa has been determined.

The focus of a great deal of research in this country has been on the oppression of black women. By ignoring the position of white women, the impression is created that black women are the only oppressed women in South Africa. The spotlight has also been on the liberation movement's policies and the failure of women activists to raise feminist issues. This research and criticism has very often come from white academics. While much of what has been said may have been factually correct, the context was wrong and the understanding of the liberation struggle faulty.

The failure to look at the position of white women in society was initially shared by the liberation movements. For example, those who framed the Woman's Charter of the 1950s referred to the absence of property rights for African women, but ignored the reality that white women had only limited property rights at that time, and for some purposes white women were also treated as minors.

The result of the critical spotlight being focused on black women by mainly white women had the effect of setting back the cause of feminism. It made black women and the liberation movement defensive, and allowed those who were anxious to maintain the status quo to exploit the situation. Hopefully, we have moved away from this, and can now look at gender issues as they affect all South Africans, and not exclusively in racial and ethnic terms.

We need also to address white women in our country and ask: what have you done with the relative power that you have had? Where are white women in the political, social and economic life of our country? Did comfort and privilege blind you to the national oppression around you and to your own subordinate status?

There is an additional aspect now being added to the situation of maids and madams in our society. There are growing numbers of black 'madams'; and what is more, both madam and maid are in the same ANC branches. This is a major challenge for the liberation movement, and will provide a demanding test for the principles and values we have advocated in struggle.

The ANC's understanding of gender oppression was set out in the NEC's statement of 2 May 1990: 'Gender oppression is everywhere rooted in a material base and is expressed in socio-cultural traditions and attitudes all of which are supported and perpetuated by an ideology which subordinates women. In South Africa, it is institutionalised in the laws as well as the customs and practices of all our people. Within our racially and ethnically divided society, all women have a lower status than men of the same group in both law and practice. And as with racism the disadvantages imposed on them range across the political, economic, social, domestic, cultural and civil spheres.'

Thus there is a material base with social, cultural and ideological underpinnings. These are all interdependent and each of them has to be addressed. Is it possible to address these equally, or must it be at the expense of one or another? More importantly, the interdependence emphasises that we cannot put gender into a box and say these are gender issues which we must look at in isolation from the general problems of society.

Those engaged in women's studies in particular must consider whether it is possible to have a viable gender policy. Are we in danger of putting women in a ghetto of our own making? Should we speak of women's rights or of gender relations?

Women must consider whether the way in which we formulate the issue harms us, and the danger of ghettoising women. Are the issues being discussed of concern only to women, or to all democrats? While we welcome the fact that Lawyers for Human Rights organised a conference around these matters and recognised the issues as ones of human rights, we must also take note of the fact that very few male lawyers participated in the conference. This reflects a failure on the part of both women and men, to recognise the nature of gender oppression, and their own responsibility to redress it.

The issue cannot be compartmentalised. Gender policy cannot be treated as something separate. The question of gender relations must permeate all policy. This means that we must begin to challenge the structures and institutions that we tend to accept as given. Such an approach leads to some surprising conclusions as we found when instead of looking at women from the perspective of economists, one looked at the economy from the perspective of women.¹

Generally, women disappear when economists look at economic issues. In South Africa's statistics, there is serious under-enumeration of Africans, and even more so of African women. But the real problem is universal, and economic policy and the whole terrain of economic debate tends to be deeply biased against women. We found that:

Economic concepts *exclude* women and the perspective of men is wrongly perceived as the universal objective perspective;
 the economic activities of women are systematically *devalued* and omitted in the economic statistics and argument;
 economic analysis largely *omits* the economic relation between the genders, for example, at work and within the household, hence:
 aspects of the operation of the economy are systematically *misunderstood*, hence:
 economic policy is based on some false premises and can systematically work to the further relative and absolute *detriment* of women.²

Clearly there is a need for a rethink of some of the basic categories of economic analysis and policy making; and a redefinition of many of the supposedly gender-blind concepts of economics. One example will suffice to illustrate: All women are familiar with the notion that domestic labour consists of 'chores' and is not 'work'. But why must we recognise such definitions as acceptable? Should the terms used by economists not be redefined so that 'labour' includes both paid and unpaid work, and 'work' and the 'working day' included unpaid work so recognising and valuing women's total working day.

In the light of the ANC policy on the emancipation of women, its economic policy has to begin to address such issues. Internationally also, there are UN resolutions which call for recognition of the unpaid work done by women as a contribution to creating wealth.

Women must begin to look at other areas of society in a similar way, challenging the fundamental definitions and institutions that are usually taken as given.

This must include both the laws and the legal system. There is a danger that our objectives will be limited by demanding simply that blacks and women should be put on the *existing* bench and the law should be made 'accessible'. Let us instead put the laws and the legal system under a microscope and examine the fundamentals as they should apply in a gender-neutral society.

Our experience of the law has not been that it is necessarily a liberating force, on the contrary laws are what oppressors have used to control people, and in particular to subordinate women. Let us then scrutinise legal systems, legal structures and institutions, legal ideas with women's eyes, and formulate what it is that we need. Simply having a woman judge will not solve our difficulties. Women must approach law as a system of regulating society in a creative way, starting from the pooling of our collective experiences.

However, this is not to suggest, that until this is done, women should not look at the laws within the existing legal system. In particular, women have to articulate their demands in relation to the constitution of a new South Africa. It is important, that even while we are challenging structures, institutions and systems, we make sure that what is being proposed does not work to as great a disadvantage to women as it might do without our intervention.

When women in the ANC looked at our proposed constitutional guidelines, a number of changes were proposed, which need to be included in the constitution of a democratic non-racial, non-sexist South Africa. We believe it is necessary to place an obligation on the state to end sexism, in a similar manner to the obligation to end racism. Otherwise, the equal rights accorded to women can be no more than rhetoric. We

cannot expect women with little education, and scant resources to find out that the constitution guarantees them certain rights, and then to set about the complicated legal procedures to claim those rights, especially as those rights might have to be asserted against male members of the family. Such types of constitutional rights are devoid of meaning.

Another recommendation made was that any law, custom or practice that discriminates against women should be held to be unconstitutional. Again, in the proposed guidelines there was the idea of democratising the traditional office of chiefs. However, the traditional powers of chiefs included judicial functions, and in most societies women were not even admitted to the courts. Hence it was argued that the democratising of traditional institutions must include the democratising of judicial and other powers. Similarly, proposals were made regarding the family: the need to recognise various types of family systems, and to remove the structural subordination of women in any new family law.

Now my final point is on the subject of this conference: 'putting women on the agenda'. Who should be doing this? Quite simply it has to be women. We will not do so by having a conference about it. It is going to have to be done by struggle. The one thing the ANC has learnt is that no one will give us our freedom, we have had to fight for it. Women are going to have to struggle for their emancipation. Despite the ANC's excellent policies, we do not have excellent practices. Gender relations are imbalanced and it is a power relationship. At the moment we have to talk about political power. Women have got to put themselves on the agenda. The only way we are going to ensure that the laws which we want in future are there, is if women are part of the law-making machinery. It is no good saying we want this or that in the constitution if we elect an all-male constituent assembly or we only have a few women.

So part of what we have to do is to talk about how we are going to organise, how we are going to make sure that we put women on the agenda, that we elect women into positions of power and then by that process of participation we will achieve the kind of gender-neutral society which I think we need to move towards.

Postscript

After the longest and most intense debate at the 48th ANC National Conference (July 1991), a proposal by the ANC Women's League that a 30 per cent quota for women should be instituted at all levels of the ANC including its national executive committee was not accepted.

This was not a surprising development and was a consequence of tactical errors by the Women's League and political failure by the ANC.

The debate revealed a lack of understanding of affirmative action policies and the mechanisms through which they can be implemented. The result highlighted the dilemma faced by a women's organisation located and operating within a national liberation movement.

The ANC in exile has adopted very progressive positions on the emancipation of women, positions that are far in advance of other national liberation movements, and of many western governments and political parties. However, the adoption of such policies owed more to the persuasive advocacy of some women members, than to the level of understanding of either the membership or the entire leadership. As a consequence, both in exile and in the reconstituted legal ANC in South Africa, little regard was paid in practice to the question of women's emancipation, and on a number of occasions the ANC leadership failed to act in conformity with its policy pronouncements. This was evident, when very few women were on the interim leadership structures appointed by the NEC to establish the ANC inside South Africa. Again despite the very strong political demand that there be the widest possible political participation in the constitution-making process, the ANC's own constitutional committee has consisted of 19 men and one woman.

The debate at conference revealed the failure of the organisation to take its own policy on gender issues seriously and to educate the membership on these policies. Women members, and the ANC Women's League also failed to engage the membership in debate prior to conference or to promote and project the policies they wanted conference to adopt. In the months following the decision of the Women's League Conference to put forward the quota, its own activities focused almost exclusively on campaigns around issues such as the release of political prisoners, and the violence that was unleashed against the people with the connivance of the police and security forces. In practice the League functioned simply as an arm of the ANC, mobilising women into the organisation and the current national struggles. There was little in its approach or activities that was specific to women.

Not only did the League fail to engage in educational programmes around emancipation and the quota, but by allowing the broader national issue to overwhelm it, the League lent substance to those critics who have long argued that a woman's organisation attached to the ANC would inevitably subordinate women's interests.

It is not too harsh to suggest that the League failed its first test, and its membership will have to engage in critical self examination as to its future role. However, it is not yet possible to give a definitive answer to the question, can the ANC Women's League prioritise women's issues.

Affirmative action

The proposal for a women's quota in the ANC's decision-making bodies is in conformity with the organisation's commitment to affirmative action policies in a democratic South Africa.

One needs to recognise that historic injustices create a legacy of disadvantage that will not be overcome automatically. Legislation that outlaws discrimination and provides for an extension of equal opportunities to all citizens, will do little to redress historic imbalances, if one operates on the assumption that those previously disadvantaged will already have the necessary skills, education, training and experience, and that all that is necessary is to introduce an element of 'free and fair' competition. In such circumstances there will be neither freedom, nor competition, and no fairness.

Further one cannot permit a situation where those who are already privileged should have the exclusive responsibility of determining how education, skills and training are to be provided, while the disadvantaged are required to wait patiently until their standards are 'raised'.

Affirmative action is a form of positive discrimination in favour of those previously disadvantaged, and can be used as a transitional and therefore temporary measure to redress the imbalance. Affirmative action policies have been used in a number of countries in relation to groups disadvantaged on grounds of race, gender, language, ethnicity, etc. Such policies have been most commonly applied in the fields of employment and the provision of educational facilities and skills training. In most cases this has involved the imposition of quotas in favour of those whom the policy is intended to benefit.

The ANC has committed itself to a policy of affirmative action for women in a post apartheid South Africa. In the sphere of employment this must go beyond simply giving preference to women among equally qualified candidates. To be really effective, affirmative action must extend to advancement and promotion and recruitment including an obligation to search for suitable women candidates. Many gifted and skilled women have been excluded through being 'rendered invisible' by existing hiring practices in all countries including South Africa. In addition there will need to be affirmative action in the provision of education, training and support, and the conscious elimination of stereotyping in the education and careers advisory systems.

Women are also rendered invisible when it comes to considering candidates to fill responsible jobs or positions in political organisations - whether this is done by appointment or through elections. The absence of women in such positions in every country in the world establishes beyond doubt that in democratic elections choices are not based solely

on merit: To argue that merit is the criterion being applied, would be to subscribe to the view that women are genetically inferior to men, as there are so few women who have 'merited' selection so far.

The application of affirmative action in this area is much more contentious, and there has been considerable discussion on the relative merits of special 'women's seats' women's representatives, and quotas as well as on the actual mechanisms of selection.

The absence of women at decision-making levels is detrimental to the organisation concerned – as the experiences of more than half the population are excluded and do not inform the decision-making process. This is particularly important in political parties and liberation movements where the mobilisation of the entire population is so important. Many political parties have set apart a number of seats in their decision-making bodies for women.³ The mechanisms used vary. In some cases a certain number of seats are designated as women's seats. In others, a proportion of the overall membership of a committee must be women. In the first case, usually but not always, those selected are intended to represent women's interests, and are chosen by women. In the second, various mechanisms are used for the selection, but both men and women are involved.

In this way, women are able to function in decision-making committees. There is an educative value in women being seen to be among those who make important decisions, and women's experiences and perspectives to some extent begin to inform those decisions. On the other hand, there are negative aspects. There is a danger that these seats form a ghetto, limiting women's participation rather than expanding it. Rarely, if ever, is the quota allotted to women proportionate to their numbers in the population or membership, and the agreed initial number becomes an upper limit. In addition, whatever the intention, women are often seen simply as women's 'representatives' rather than as members of the committee or executives who happen to be women. They are then excluded from mainstream issues. At the same time, any questions relating to matters chauvinistically perceived as women's issues, such as catering, health and welfare, children and family are automatically allocated to the women on the committee thus further entrenching divisions and keeping women isolated and the questions of emancipation outside of general concern and attention.

Last but not least, simple quotas often lead to resentment of capable women because some male or white feels he has been discriminated against and on the basis of 'pure merit' would have been appointed or elected. This resentment is often manifested in aggressive behaviour and hostility to women colleagues and confrontational response when affirmative action is being advocated.

Such attitudes are aggravated by particular mechanisms used as affirmative action, which pit individual men against women. The most commonly used system in elections is for there to be a common list of candidates, and regardless of the votes received a fixed percentage of women are deemed to have been elected. Unsuccessful males, thus experience 'discrimination' in a very visible and direct way: they will have received more votes than a successful women candidate, or will claim to have done so. Individual women are targeted and the system provokes male hostility, while on occasions women feel guilty for being responsible for the exclusion of a capable male. In addition, such a mechanism, does not overcome the ghettoising of women, and effectively operates in the same way as women's seats or women's representation does, with all the negative aspects already listed.

These considerations have exercised the minds of feminist activists and has deterred them from supporting quotas.

However, some of the negative factors are mitigated by applying affirmative action at the point of choosing rather than when votes are counted, that is by voters rather than electoral officers. Thus electors would be required to vote for a certain minimum percentage of women, and all valid ballot papers would have to reflect this. Those with the highest number of votes would be elected regardless of whether they were men or women.

Such a system, has a number of advantages. It serves to educate the voter by promoting consideration of women candidates and overcoming the usual 'invisibility' of women. Women elected in this way, are also more likely to be seen as having been elected on merit and as general or national leaders rather than as persons representing only women's interests. In addition, this mechanism can help to eliminate, or at least reduce, male hostility, as no woman would have been deemed elected if she has received fewer votes than an unsuccessful male.

In most countries where such mechanisms have been used, more women than the required minimum percentage on the ballot paper have been elected. However, such a result is not automatic. But the way is open for women to strategise, and by limiting the number of women candidates, to facilitate the election of larger numbers of women.

The Women's League Conference did not consider mechanisms when putting forward its proposals for a 30 per cent quota in all structures of the ANC. However, a number of those who promoted the adoption of the quota, had been persuaded by the knowledge of the advantages of this type of mechanism.

The main argument used against such a system has been that it limits the voters freedom of choice. This, however, applies to all forms of

affirmative action. Yet as women's experience has shown, without such policies hierarchical and power relations are self-perpetuating.

In a democratic South Africa, blacks and women will bring with them the cumulative burden of their historic disadvantages.

Whites and men have for centuries enjoyed privileged education, health employment and power, and as a result in many areas of human activity retain a virtual monopoly of experience.

The argument that the 'standards' of blacks have to be raised before the introduction of democracy is now recognised as merely an excuse for maintaining the status quo and retaining minority rule. Similarly, in relation to the economy and in society generally, such an approach is a way of maintaining white and male privileges. For how can blacks and women acquire the skills and the experience to break the monopoly of effective power without affirmative action?

The organisation of the ANC conference did not allow for in depth debate. The size of the commissions and the plenary sessions usually only permitted a single intervention of two or three minutes. There was therefore no opportunity to debate the case for or against affirmative action in general or in relation to women. However, the commitment to affirmative action remains, and will be put forward as part of the organisation's constitutional proposals.

No doubt in the negotiating process the issue will be contested in the name of democracy by white males desirous of maintaining their monopoly of power and privilege. Women will have to build alliances across racial and political barriers/lines, if they are to ensure that their interests are not lost in the process.

The ANC has to find means of translating its commitment to progressive policies into action, and of educating and enhancing the understanding of the membership to support such implementation.

When black men demand affirmative action for themselves, what arguments can be used to deny it to women? And if affirmative action is to form part of the ANC's proposals for the constitution of a democratic South Africa - can we fail to incorporate it into the constitution of the ANC?

Notes

1. Frene Ginwala, Maureen Mackintosh and Doreen Massey, *Gender and Economic Policy in a Democratic South Africa*. United Kingdom: Open University Development Policy and Practice Working Paper No 21, April 1991.

2. Ginwala, et al, *Gender and Economic Policy*.
3. Most but not all the political parties that have introduced a quota are members of the Socialist International. Among these, the Canadian New Democrats have a 50 per cent quota, the Norwegian Labour Party and the Danish and German SPD have 40 per cent and the British Labour Party 40 per cent by 1995. Following the introduction of a quota in Germany and Spain, the parties found that 80 per cent of new party members were women. In Norway and Denmark, the quota applies both ways – that is the rule says: 'In all elections and nominations, there must be at least 40 per cent of both sexes.' In South Africa, the Conservative Party has a 30 per cent quota for women.

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