South Africa, African feminism and the challenges of solidarity

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For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (Audre Lorde, 1984: 112).

Universal sisterhood?

Feminist calls in the name of universal sisterhood have been legitimately discredited. Black, third-world and other socially subordinate radical women have insisted that "women" form a very heterogeneous group. They have also insisted that formerly influential notions of sisterhood take for granted the centrality and leadership of privileged women in the west. Since the 1990s suspicions about universal sisterhood have been fuelled by post-structuralist thinking about multiple identities, agencies and struggles. Much of the intellectual work on gender is extremely reluctant to universalize, homogenize and totalize (also see Cock in this volume).

Yet the challenge of collective political opposition to patriarchal injustices – given the recent resurgence of global patriarchal oppression – has become increasingly urgent. There has been terrifying evidence of the upsurge of patriarchal authority in contexts such as the United States and Canada, where women's hard-won battles for rights are

increasingly being threatened by the rising tide of militarism. And the assault on women's rights has been compellingly prepared in the name of the security of the nation, or of Western democracy.

Undoubtedly, then, there is a need for global conversations about solidarity and feminist politics even as we continue to challenge Western-centric monoliths and totalizing discourses. Having said this, however, I want to present a case for African feminist solidarity in the face of distinctive gender dynamics on this continent. I want especially to highlight South Africa's status within Africa, to challenge ways in which perceptions of this country's exceptionalism have inhibited African feminist solidarities for South Africans, and to raise the importance of building these solidarities. This is important in view of the way that South Africa continues to be seen as exceptional even by the left. There is a very strange belief that our singular history of struggle means that we will never experience quite the same fate that, for example, Zimbabweans face. I argue that we have much to learn from the knowledge and struggles of feminists elsewhere on the continent.

Throughout much of Africa, the post-colonial state has been a site of aggressive primitive accumulation, a situation resulting from the absence of a viable bourgeoisie and centuries of African economic underdevelopment. While conventional wisdom identifies the violence, repression and ruthlessness of much African politics as a residue of archaic "tradition", the most basic materialist analysis reveals that the feudalistic politics, rapacious plundering of national resources, and fierce patron-client politics within African states has economic determinants.

The connections between economic and political struggles, leadership styles and authoritarianism are for me well captured

in Manuel Castells' definition of patriarchalism, the "founding structure of all contemporary societies ... characterized by the institutionally enforced authority of males over females and their children in the family unit ... a structure which permeates the entire organization of society, from production and consumption to politics, law, and culture ... where interpersonal relations and thus personality are marked by domination and violence ..." (1997: 193). Castells' definition here is suggestive in linking feudalistic economic and political struggles to the most basic of social structures: organization based on fear, violence, bonds of loyalty and obedience orchestrated through the rule of symbolic fathers.

In what follows, I reflect on challenges facing South Africa through collaborative work – whether in the form of intellectual activism, lobbying or feminist action – with other African countries.

The African state, women and gender

In South Africa during the 1980s, a robust struggle for gender equality seemed to augur well for a resilient and autonomous women's movement in the post-apartheid period. Working women, students and activists played dynamic roles in anti-apartheid politics. From the early 1990s, the ground had been laid for systematically confronting gender injustices. And with the formation of the Women's National Coalition, women were poised to ensure gender equality in the constitutional dispensation being negotiated by different parties and organizations at the time.

The taking up of gender into the nation-building agenda, or what Shireen Hassim has identified as the "gender pact" (2003) saw gender concerns being institutionalized in the construction of democracy. After 1994 the establishment of national machinery for women meant that the state came to be viewed as the site through which equality for women would be created. Equally important to the gender pact was

the growing number of women involved in politics at the national, provincial and local government levels.

Both national machinery and the increase in women's political participation have been seen as central routes for gender transformation throughout Africa. Yet national machinery has offered extremely slippery terrain for progressive change in Africa. The numerical increase in women's political participation has also had dubious effects.

An astute explanation of this is Sylvia Tamale's study of Ugandan politics (1999). Tamale shows that it is necessary to adopt a Foucauldian analysis of the gendered and class character of post-colonial state institutions and politics. This allows us to understand how deeply institutional cultures shape individual women's involvement in formal politics and the conservative scripting of apparently transformative gender initiatives. When leadership and institutional cultures come to reflect the state's role as an instrument for elite consolidation, women's potential as transformative agents is severely compromised. Many women position themselves conservatively in response to the state's post-colonial function. Moreover, mechanisms set up to promote gender-sensitive, democratic and bottom-up governance will increasingly be overwhelmed by a dominant state culture of competition and elite consolidation.

Pregs Govender, former chairperson of the South African parliament's joint monitoring committee on the quality of life and status of women grimly attests to this in her recent autobiography (2007). She shows how both women politicians and gender machinery operate within the context of politics that is fiercely authoritarian, cut-throat, top-down and patriarchal. In this context, many women choose to become defenders and proponents of the status quo to protect their class interests and political power.

The impact of the African state's aggressive culture was anticipated in Amina Mama's discussion of femocracy in Nigeria under military rule (1999). To as great a degree as men, women within the state bureaucracy acted in accordance with class logic. They became ruthless defenders of the status quo and clearly operated in ways that protected their power and authority. Femocrats therefore endorsed patriarchal styles and norms in order to pursue dominant class and political interests for self-survival. It seems important to stress this imperative to make sense of the ferociousness with which many of Africa's women politicians – and South Africa's leaders have demonstrated this well in recent years – have sanctioned and bolstered the patriarchal functioning of the state.

The resulting conservativism is compounded by the depoliticizing of discourses around gender, where gender machinery and discourses amount simply to a technocratic process for redress and equality. Charmaine Pereira, a Nigerian feminist, describes this as "the determination of the agenda by the relevant state agency, as opposed to engagement of state institutions by civil society organizations".

State control over gender has also involved the right-wing transformation of formerly robust women's movements. The demobilizing of women's movements in relation to African states has been well illustrated throughout Africa. Dodzi Tsikata demonstrates this situation in Ghana (1997: 393), and there has been stark evidence of how the Kenyan African National Union steadily increased its grip on women's organizations to reconstitute a national women's organization as a party wing that was eventually declared the sole representative of Kenyan women (2000: 9-10).

The Zimbabwean feminist, Rudo Gaidzanwa anticipated this process in her comparative consideration of the official women's movements in Zimbabwe and South Africa (1992). Writing at a time when many South Africans were highly optimistic about the autonomy of the women's movement, Gaidzanwa demonstrated that the Women's Wing of Zanu PF was playing a role that the ANC Women's League was poised to play in post-apartheid South Africa. As both women and men come to perceive the state as a pivotal source of accumulation, and to realign themselves in relation to power, government and the ruling party, the pursuit of people-centred and women-centred concerns becomes more and more hazardous. Recently we have seen testimony of this in the way that the ANC Women's League supported Jacob Zuma.

This clearly reveals what Terri Barnes describes as the "supine support of women for masculinist hegemonic domination" (2007). But it also reveals the logic of class action and consolidation, the way that social actors strategically position themselves in patron-client networks that the post-colonial state generates. The co-opting or repositioning of women's movements, as well as the conservativism of femocrats and gender mainstreaming are crucially connected to the growth of the post-colonial state as a site of primitive accumulation. This function makes it increasingly authoritarian and hostile to democratic participation. It also makes leadership fiercely aggressive, and leads both women and men leaders and politicians to create allegiances that signal their compliance, and that therefore guarantee their security.

The legacy of primitive accumulation within African state apparatuses is well illustrated in contexts such as Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe, where threatened elites have fiercely battled to maintain control over the state apparatus and their only source of power. Echoes of such battles have become increasingly evident in South Africa. Ranging from Jackie

Selebi's and Jacob Zuma's abuse of public office to the disciplinary action taken against the former deputy-minister of health, political leadership vividly reflects feudalistic battles for economic and political power, autocratic forms of leadership and entitlement, and that basic social structure that Castells describes.

This poses huge challenges for feminism and for progressive women in governance. In a recent issue of the feminist journal *Agenda*, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge (2007) reflects on these challenges by distinguishing between women's leadership and feminist leadership. Feminist leadership would mean deliberative and servant leadership, democratic leadership that involves people in true dialogue. Feminist leadership would therefore mean a radical challenge to the state as a site of authoritarian control and elite consolidation. She therefore indicates that for women to make a true difference as political leaders they would need to take a stand against class and power injustices at the same time that they confront the patriarchy of the state.

Alai Tripp develops Routledge's theme in relation to Uganda. Focusing on the concept of "societal autonomy" (2005), her research on gender politics shows how the Ugandan women's movement was able to sustain vigorous gender struggles by maintaining its independence from the state. This autonomy becomes important when we consider that not only the state and national machinery, but also many NGOs have become very tainted by state control in many African countries. Tripp shows that by regulating NGOs, certain African governments redirected funding aimed at progressive and state-independent gender initiatives to the governments' agendas for development and policy-making.

South African NGOs might not be as closely controlled by the state, but they are constrained by narrow developmental

agendas – established by donors in consultation with governments. This situation makes it important to assess to what extent NGOs have the potential to play a significant role in driving or even supporting autonomous women's movements. Currently, the precarious existence of many NGOs addressing gender justice in South Africa seems to result not simply from diminishing donor funding. It is also symptomatic of their ambiguous agendas and politics. This is a consequence of their efforts to fit into both government's and donor countries' foreign policy prescriptions for efficiency (masquerading as "good governance").

Women, gender and citizenship: controlling women's bodies

The fierce authoritarianism of governance and politics in much of Africa is mirrored within the nation state, where women have often taken up or been coerced to play roles as patriarchy's spokespersons, custodians or aides. This is reflected in violent attacks on women's bodily security. In fact, in much of Africa, colonial definitions of women's urban presence as illegitimate continue in the post-colonial period. Describing public perceptions of women's informal trading in Ghana, Tsikata notes the dominance of perceptions of "market women in urban areas as an undifferentiated mass of ... corrupt elements who bear responsibility for Ghana's economic problems" (1997: 399).

Similar observations can be made about women traders in Nigeria: the military government of the 1980s blamed women traders for economic crises, with the state's modernizing and disciplining missions instituting a formidable array of mechanisms against working women in cities. In Zimbabwe, immediately after independence, the government instituted policies of urban population control targeting women in ruthless round-ups (1987: 39-44). Throughout Africa, then,

the demonizing and scapegoating of women's urban presence and mobility affects their battles for the most basic of human rights.

There are strong echoes of this in South Africa. We daily witness evidence of South African women's extreme vulnerability in the public sphere. And the sporadic attacks on women for, for example, wearing trousers in rural KwaZulu-Natal, testifies to a deep misogyny and perception of women as undisciplined intruders in the public domain. In February of this year, a 25-year-old woman wearing a miniskirt at a Johannesburg taxi rank was subjected to brutal abuse. Taxi drivers sexually molested her, poured alcohol over her head and called her names to teach her a lesson for her immodest dress. The spectacle here is reminiscent of the ritualized disciplining (orchestrated mainly by women) of the accuser in the Zuma rape trial in 2006. Zuma supporters wearing "100% Zulu Boy" t-shirts, publicly burned photographs bearing her name, to the cries of "Burn the bitch!"

Such outbreaks of misogyny are linked to the regulatory ethos of masculinist post-colonial nation-building. Women's independence, whether in the form of their sexual autonomy or their economic independence , is ruthlessly disciplined. And their subversive independence is construed as disloyalty, disobedience, a betrayal of what is "proper" in a woman and, therefore of the nation. The codes of punishment they are subjected to are the codes associated with the patriarchal heterosexist family: wayward women are humiliated, punished and divested of a sense of belonging within communities. For many young women, such messages are overwhelming, and the risk of forsaking societal "approval" has led to, for example, growing compliance with the practice of virginity testing, an especially direct form of policing women's bodies and sexuality.

Women's compliance with the status quo requires our urgent attention as feminists or gender activists. It is evidence of how perniciously patriarchal ideology takes hold. It also speaks to the urgency of our need to build supportive feminist cultures and movements. In an environment where many women face few choices around identification and belonging beyond injunctions to be a respected woman citizen, they will zealously demonstrate prescribed gendered behaviour. And this is especially pronounced when these identities assume special valency in the defence of "culture", "tradition", or "the nation".

Dealing with Uganda, Jessica Ogden describes women's self-regulation of their social and sexual behaviour in the face of tremendous material and ideological pressure. Focusing on the widely defended notion of the "Proper woman" (*omukyala omutufu*) she shows that "as participants in post-colonial Kampala, women actively generate the means and meanings by which they can obtain respect and respectability, and be identified as Proper Women" (1996: 165).

In South Africa, both the regulation of women and their self-regulation have grown in relation to the Moral Regeneration Movement (see de Nobrega in this volume). Among other things, this movement has domesticated the US state-driven ABC campaign of HIV prevention, which prescribes explicitly heteronormative and stereotypical messages about gender roles, family values and traditional hierarchies within sexual relationships. Through the Moral Regeneration Movement, various political and religious organizations and public figures have advocated clampdowns on women's sexual and reproductive rights and bodily integrity, and formulated very repressive sex talk in the post-apartheid public domain. In articulating – within the public sphere – appropriate codes of social, gendered and sexual behaviour for South Africans, the Movement is playing a pivotal part in crafting conservative,

traditionalist-inspired discourses on the meanings and experience of citizenship in South Africa.

It should be stressed that anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles laid the foundation for many heterosexist and pro-natalist images of women. Rooted in conservative discourses of "culture" , the view that women's legitimate duties are to bolster their families, communities and nations has been pervasive and compelling during both the nationalist and nation-building periods. Tsikata's Ghanaian examples of opposition to some of the progressive gender legislation fought for by the women's movement are revealing here. She shows that legislation aimed at promoting equal work opportunities for women was solidly contested by MPs. They claimed that women, rather than competing for employment opportunities with men, had primary responsibilities to their families; it was argued that the government's new legislation threatened to promote delinquency and emotional stress for children.

Debates around legislation in South Africa may not appear to have resulted in such a blatant backlash. But it is revealing that processes ranging from the Moral Regeneration Movement to the conservativism of legislation on women's bodily rights indicate how organizations and leaders have popularized repressive ideas about women's bodies and roles. In fact, it is remarkable how out of sync the protracted process around sexual offence legislation in South Africa has been – in comparison with the rapid pace of legislative reform in other "safer" spheres. Equally noteworthy is the fact that evolving versions of the Sexual Offences bill were very different from the South African Law Commission's draft, which was based on extensive consultation with civil society and women's movements. The absence of the state's political will to change legislation around the nexus of the private and the public speaks volumes about the official reluctance,

testifying to hegemonic "national" sentiment, to disrupt ingrained power relations surrounding women's bodies.

The slow pace of enacting new sexual offences legislation in South Africa resonates with the open resistance to laws for protecting women's sexual rights elsewhere on the continent. There has been direct opposition to legislation like the Domestic Violence Bill and the Sexual Offences Bill in Kenya and similar legislation in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Tanzania, countries that have insistently laid claim to the rhetoric of "gender-mainstreaming" and "gender equality" over the past two decades. Despite the rhetoric, all these countries maintained colonial and misogynistic legislation for several decades after independence, and only occasionally conceded amendments to gender-exclusionary legislation.

Building solidarity

Threats to women's bodily security within the African nation-state, raise the imperative of dynamic, popular and radical ways of building women's movements and rekindling feminist consciousness. This would mean creating solidarity on the basis of crafted politics, rather than any assumption of sisterhood on the basis of shared experiences of oppression. When taking a stand against injustice is construed – often by both women and by men, and even by some who have been charged with promoting gender equity – as disobedience, disloyalty or irresponsible disruptiveness, resistance is possible only when those who resist can rely on solidarity with others. And solidarity, unlike sisterhood, can't be assumed; it comes through struggle.

What has been extremely encouraging in present-day South Africa are individual agencies – the unexpected, unpredictable resistances of individual persons or small groups.

I want to deal with two of these in South Africa. One example is provided by the rebellion of the accuser, often known as Khwezi, in the Zuma rape trial. Khwezi's determination to speak out, at a point when she was trapped in networks of loyalty and dependence – the patriarchalist complex that the post-colonial state engenders – was an act of extraordinary courage. Her fortitude became a mobilizing force for many women, and galvanized the protests of, for example, the One-in-Nine campaign and POWA.

Equally significant was the mobilization of radical South African women through the production of alternative knowledge and information – especially through the media, in public talks and via the internet. Feminists such as Pumla Gqola and Pregs Govender wrote against dominant messages which perpetuated stereotypes about the accuser and indulged predatory male sexuality as pardonable weakness. Here it is worth noting how the website, Behind the Mask, published an interview with the accuser which totally overturns the figure of a victimized, voiceless and faceless Khwezi, and airs her very incisive condemnation of the state, the ANC, heterosexist patriarchy and violence against women.

This subversive knowledge production is reflected elsewhere in Africa. For example, the Ugandan feminist, Sylvia Tamale, compromised her professorship at the University of Makere to disseminate ideas in newspapers and the radio regarding rights for gays and lesbians in 2002. Generally, the production and dissemination of alternative knowledge –through the media and the internet – can be a crucial resource in building new African feminist solidarities.

I sometimes feel that the problem of the digital divide has been too strongly stressed in thinking about possibilities for African feminist e-activism. Recent advocacy work on the continent reveals that patriarchal media institutions and

messages are being effectively interrogated and contested. The Know-How conference, held in Kampala in 2002, demonstrated African women's empowerment in male-dominated spaces of mass communications. This is crucial at a stage when entrenched gender biases in newspapers, magazines, radio, television and websites pervade public and private life and profoundly shape men's and women's sense of their legitimate gendered places in the world.

Another example of the potential for autonomy in women's activism was the way women protested against the brutal assault of the young woman at a Johannesburg taxi rank. Hundreds of women wearing miniskirts, led by a prominent radio personality, marched to the taxi rank to express their solidarity with the survivor, and to exultantly celebrate their right to independence.

Patricia McFadden highlights the value of this kind of celebratory resistance:

> A fundamental premise of patriarchal power and impunity is the denial and suppression of women's naming and controlling their bodies and desire ... The redemption of the pathologized female body is seen to come through males of various statuses: fathers ... priests ... brothers ... husbands ... and strangers, who wreak misogynistic vengeance upon them (2003).

She goes on to write: "Becoming a feminist has always been about the joy of being free" (2003).

For me the women protesters at the Johannesburg taxi rank illustrate the joy that McFadden highlights here, and the spontaneity that Sandra Rein (in this volume) alludes to. It is a form of resistance that organically erupts, but that is in fact sharply theorized, acutely incisive and highly perceptive about how patriarchy works, what it means and how women can

claim freedom in the face of it. It is also the joy and spontaneity that is so vital to the building of defiant and supportive cultures that can enable oppositional and empowering ways of being citizens for so many women.

I want to end by suggesting that many intellectual activists dealing with gender in Africa have, to date, not fully used strategies and forms of activism that speak to the breadth of what it means for women to be free. For example, there has been a squeamishness about using the resources of popular culture and the mass media, very often allowing conservatives to play a leading role in using, for example, radio, television, posters, leaflets, billboards and other similar platforms. There has also been far too much of an emphasis on the discourses and strategies directed by the state and by international donors. Lastly, not much attention has been paid to forms of intellectual activism that fully engage the imagination of many women, or that lead to the sort of spontaneous and joyous rebellions illustrated by recently protesting women in Johannesburg. Building solidarity, rather than simply assuming that sisterhood will just surface, requires us to engage much more adventurously with forms, styles and sites of resistance.

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