

01

**Feminist &  
Women's  
Movement  
Building in  
Southern Africa**

Shamillah Wilson

**OP**  **NDEBATE**





## CONTENTS

**02 - 05**

Introduction

**06 - 14**

Movement building models  
and frameworks

**15 - 22**

Current trends and reflections on  
women's organising and  
movement building

**23 - 29**

Movement building anchors  
and moments

**30 - 31**

Some concluding reflections

**32**

Endnotes

OSISA

Open Society Initiative  
for Southern Africa

*women continue  
to be impacted in ways  
that persistently  
compromise their  
dignity and  
human rights.*

# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

The world as we see it today is characterised and defined by power – expressed in political, social and economic terms and manifested in phenomena such as the erosion of democratic spaces, global economic crises and inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, age, sexual orientation and so on. In particular, women continue to be impacted in ways that persistently compromise their dignity and human rights. While there is almost universal recognition of women's rights, for most women their rights only exist on paper. Statistically, women still make up nearly two-thirds of the world's illiterate people, comprise two-thirds of the world's poor (living on US\$1 a day or less), perform two-thirds of the world's work and produce 50 percent of the food, while earning only 10 percent of the income and owning just 1 percent of the property<sup>1</sup>. In addition, violence against women is a worldwide phenomenon of immense proportions. The United Nations Development Fund for Women reports that 'for women aged 15 to 44 years, violence is a major cause of death and disability'.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as global economies continue to shift and reconfigure themselves, the rise of various religious and cultural fundamentalisms are posing an additional threat to women's rights in many places.



## women's progressive gains are under threat in southern Africa.

**W**ITHIN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT, the status of women is impacted by increasing poverty, failed states, corrupt leaders, ethnic conflict and natural disasters among other things. In addition, women in sub-Saharan Africa account for half of all people living with HIV worldwide and almost 60 percent of HIV infections in the region.<sup>3</sup> In southern Africa, the context is framed by a diverse set of political systems, struggling economies and a decline in the agricultural sector due to inadequate agricultural policies, over-taxation of crops, inadequate spending on market infrastructure for small-holder producers, and insufficient investment in research on local foods. Within this context, culture, religion, class, education and location (urban versus rural) inform women's economic and social options, opportunities and limitations. In fact, millions of women continue to live in conditions of acute poverty, struggling to cope with the impact of HIV and AIDS and other epidemics and trying to make ends meet when they are unemployed or earning a pittance in the informal sector. Too many are still without houses, water, electricity and affordable health care. This economic deprivation can be attributed to macro-economic policies, such as the structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s and the existing neoliberal framework, which continues to erode the capacities of women to live in dignity. In addition, the link between persistent violence against women and girls and HIV in the context of deep poverty continues to be a huge

challenge. The push and pull between religion and culture also present significant problems, particularly where fundamentalist forces (for example evangelical churches) have cemented the vulnerability of women by increasing patriarchal control over women's bodies, security, social welfare and migration.<sup>4</sup>

However, women have not been passive within these ever-changing social and political contexts. Globally, women have been campaigning for women's rights and social justice for decades, and have joined or formed movements as a vehicle for achieving their goals. In Africa, the women's movement has, through popular mobilisation and protest, been able to secure significant gains for women such as key legal instruments, women's political participation etc. While independence and democracy in most southern African contexts impacted on the vibrancy of women's movements, women managed to organise themselves so that they were still able to mobilise in varying degrees around advocating for women-friendly policies, addressing violence against women, and mounting campaigns around basic needs, the repression of women's democratic expression and other forms of sexism and inequality.

While women everywhere are now resisting and organising for change at every level, patriarchy is still alive and well and our freedom (or liberation) has proven to be illusory. More frighteningly, it

is now evident that women's progressive gains are under threat in southern Africa due to high levels of misogyny, which have the potential to unravel the political, legal and policy gains that women have secured, including significant representation in parliament. In the diverse political cultures within the region, where intolerance, authoritarianism and sexism continue to thrive, women have striven to transform the situation by participating in the political sphere (through membership or participation in leadership structures). Yet there is a need to assess alternative ways for women to engage with power in all its social, economic and political permutations in order to ensure accountability in leadership, better exercise of power and more progressive crafting of policies. At this critical time, women's organising also faces serious challenges if it is to help transform women's lived experience of power relations.

It is within this context that the following reflections on feminist movement building from the global level to the regional level are made. This paper identifies some of the dominant trends that currently characterise women's organising and analyses key anchors and movement-building moments. These are then used as the basis to extract some insights for southern African and followed by a set of recommendations that could be used as a basis to catalyse movement building in the region.

The paper does not make a distinction between feminist movements and women's movements as these tend to be closely related. Gaidzanwa (2006) makes clear the distinctions between a women's movement and a feminist movement. She defines a women's movement as "a social movement constituting women who collectively decide to further interests specific to women, using perspectives that draw from and highlight their lived experiences."<sup>5</sup> As such, women's movements tend to have a "reformist agenda: focused on women's equal rights with men, and social and political rights on par with men."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Gaidzanwa defines a feminist movements as "often a smaller section within broader women's movements, which tend to have a transformative agenda: going beyond opposition to patriarchy, to critiquing the architecture of oppression and the political struggle necessary to transform rather than reform the structural inequalities at national, regional and international levels."<sup>7</sup> In this paper, the analysis draws on both feminist and women's movements as the models, frameworks, challenges and experiences they have used are often closely intertwined. In fact, in most discourses, these terms are used interchangeably, with women's movements often equated to feminist movements or referred to broadly as women's liberation movements in other contexts.

## 2.

## Movement building models and frameworks

**B**EFORE EXPLORING THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN CONTEXT and its movements, it is useful to consider existing movement-building models in practice. For this purpose, I would like to borrow the definition by Batliwala<sup>8</sup> that “a movement is a set of organised constituents pursuing a common political agenda through collective action.” With this in mind, movement building would thus involve processes that build the collective power of an organised constituency of excluded, marginalised, oppressed or invisible people around a change agenda that enables them to access rights and resources, challenge dominant ideologies and transform social power relations.

In reality, it is difficult in many cases to pinpoint exactly where the women’s movement is in any particular country. By adopting a definition of a movement that emphasizes a common political agenda, continuity, unity and coordination, we could in fact end up dismissing the intense activities of women’s group meetings and seminars and even individuals agitating for rights in the courts, media and on the streets. The example of the Iranian Women’s Movement is a case in point. The movement itself does not fit

into a centralised and coordinated movement with clear leaders but has in fact taken the form of diverse organisations with demands shared across class, ethnicity and generation and even across ideological and secular/religious boundaries. Priorities are based on tangible issues affecting the daily lives of women and while their resistance is often individualistic and uncoordinated, they do they follow some visible patterns – not wearing their veil properly, fighting for a divorce or custody of their children, setting themselves up as electoral candidates, studying hard to surpass male students and go to university, staying in their jobs despite harsh treatment in their work place and fighting to get into the football stadium.<sup>9</sup>

As noted earlier, women (in both urban and rural settings) have long been engaged in a range of activities and processes aimed at improving the status of women, including individual efforts, self-help groups, occupational associations, non-governmental organisations, business enterprises and social welfare activities, among others. Some of these include associational life that provide solidarity networks for women, such as women’s religious groups, savings clubs and burial societies<sup>10</sup>. While some of these initiatives have opted to establish formal organisations (NGOs), others have chosen to remain informally constituted networks or collectives. Some of the NGOs within the region that we all know about include Sister Namibia, Women and Law in Southern Africa (Zimbabwe), Women for Change (Zambia) and Masimanyane Women’s Support Centre (South Africa). Women’s networks and collectives include networks of women living with HIV and AIDS, women’s farming collectives and economic empowerment collectives.

The organisation and formalisation of different initiatives of women working together have often depended on the context and shifts in opportunities as well as the growth of initiatives to enable them to function more effectively and fulfil the needs of those who had constituted it. In addition,

the fact that various efforts may co-exist in a single context yet can often function in ways that seem uncoordinated and fragmented with individual women or women’s groups developing specific structures and agendas in response to local situations has, in certain contexts, created a perception that the women’s movement either does not exist or is insignificant. Furthermore, while some of these initiatives may organise around women’s prescribed roles, others may directly challenge power and seek to transform gendered and social power relations.

Yet, as a starting point, it is important to acknowledge that the diversity that characterizes women’s organising and activism does not in any way detract from its strength, but is a means to stimulate movement-building and growth.

For purposes of this paper and in exploring movement-building models and frameworks, the author has chosen a few global and regional movements from the multitude of possible examples to illustrate how women have been organising and mobilising to achieve their goal of transforming power relations. Below four key models or frameworks for building movements will be shared. The first one focuses on movements that give voice and visibility to women’s perspectives around key issues, including peace and democracy. The second one is women’s political participation and legal reform, where women have directed much of their efforts towards ensuring that they increase the number of women within elected institutions and/or change laws that discriminate against women or promote violence. The third one is around increasing the voice and organizing power of key marginalised communities such as Dalit women, indigenous women and women living with HIV. The models shared below are merely used as a means to reflect on the conditions and organising strategies of women in a range of different contexts – without necessarily looking at some of the deeper structural challenges that are usually part and parcel of any movement-building process.

## 1. Voice and visibility to transform power relations

One of the key issues impacting on women's rights is the fact that most institutions claiming to hold the interests of all citizens at heart are dominated by men and operate on patriarchal principles. As a result, many decisions impacting on the lives of communities are often taken without the participation (or consultation) of women and therefore without an understanding of how these decisions will impact on the lives of women.

While the spaces are often viewed as an even playing field where logic and factual information are the basis for decision-making, in reality the process protects the interests of certain groups of people through biased laws and policies or closed, corrupt or unrepresentative decision-making structures that do not adequately involve the voices or interests of the people they intend to serve.<sup>11</sup>



Movement-building strategies to target these issues often try to change the 'who, how, and what' of policy-making – the decision-makers, the transparency and inclusiveness of the process, and the policies – so that decision-making is more democratic and accountable and so that people's needs and rights are addressed. As a movement-building approach, it is based on the presence of preconditions for mobilisation, resulting in women's abilities to form collective identities and articulate their interests, which are shaped by local, political and historically contingent processes. While it is one thing to argue that certain movements emerge due to the presence of specific constellations of factors, sometimes called 'political opportunity structures', it is also true that women's movements are invariably shaped by political processes and contexts, which can result in particular forms of mobilisation.<sup>12</sup>

An example of this type of movement is Codepink<sup>13</sup>, which emerged in 2002 out of the desperate desire of a group of American women to stop the Bush administration from invading Iraq. Symbolically, the name Codepink plays on the colour-coded homeland security alerts that signal terrorist threats and are based on the need to instil fear to justify violence – a conscious strategy to

reclaim power. What is significant about Codepink is that women commonly used a set of direct action tactics such as street theatre and media to give visibility to their political cause. One example was the use of 'the pink slip', when members gained access to political events and then disrobed to reveal pink slips on which anti-war messages were printed. The use of pink slips and women's bodies were a way to focus political attention on the impact of the war on women not only in the United States but also where the war was being waged. The strategy of making women visible through standing on street corners and holding vigils outside the White House confronts power in ways that is absolutely necessary as a feminist strategy, especially as it confronts gender definitions that affirm militarist ideologies.<sup>14</sup> While Codepink had its 'Codepink Central' headquarters, it also boasted over 200 local community groups that acted autonomously. The common thread linking them together was a feeling of solidarity, guidelines for organising, and overarching national campaigns and initiatives.

The Women's Transformation Watch (WTW): Women Crossing the Line (Observatorio de Transgresion Feminista) is another example of an innovative regional political strategy, which was established at a gathering of diverse Central American and Mexican women leaders and feminist activists convened by Just Associates (JASS) in Panama in August 2006. What is significant about its strategy of movement building is that it was responding to the fragmentation and lack of dialogue among women and among movements by creating spaces to deepen thinking, action and advocacy that would build the collective power of women – despite their differences – to respond effectively to pivotal political moments, opportunities and crises in the region.

Another defining feature of the way this movement organises itself is that it is not a formal organisation, but is coordinated by a growing number of diverse organisations and activists as well as being supported by a movement building

organisation (JASS) while still retaining its autonomy.<sup>15</sup> This strategy involves mobilising the physical and virtual solidarity of women from near and far, and using radio and other communications strategies to spotlight and support women most affected by injustices – in contexts ranging from widespread violence and repression to difficult elections. The Watch is a deliberate and complementary alternative to networking around policy agendas, which can be less responsive to changing contexts and disconnected from the concrete aspirations of the majority of women in the region. A team of allies prepares an electronic bulletin, La Petatera, to document events through the lens of feminist analysis, drawing insights about how these moments enable diverse women to seek common cause across boundaries of class, ethnicity, sexuality, age and location in a way that builds the collective power to make a difference from the ground up. Thus fast-paced political actions can be shared more broadly to expand and deepen learning about effective political strategies for women's rights. As an extension of this strategy, WTW has also developed Feminist Leadership schools to build on the existing strategy and to ensure that there are formal ways of passing on the lessons from this organising strategy.

Finally, the example of the Liberian women's Peace Network is another illustration of how women have managed to organise around key concerns. The country's political agenda was constructed around the need for peace so that communities can thrive again. The movement was protesting about the fact that those involved in the negotiations were representing their own interests and was intended to make them realise that they were accountable to the movement. The movement-building organisation, which was created by the movement to support its work and be its institutional base, was the 'Peace Outreach Project' (POP). Despite theological differences, women from all religions were able to come together on the basis that the war was affecting everyone in the community. What is also significant about this example is that at the outset, all the groups

*One example was the use of 'the pink slip', when members gained access to political events and then disrobed to reveal pink slips on which anti-war messages were printed.*

involved in the process were asked to identify their leaders, thus ensuring that the movement was not led by a group of middle class women but had a leadership that was recognised by all communities. At the start, the movement was also funded through membership fees and the sale of paraphernalia. The strategies employed by this movement involved extensive use of the media with an unemployed journalist brought on board to record everything the movement did and send it on to different media houses. Another key element was the ongoing intra-group dialogue and debate to ensure that the agenda was clear. Finally, the element of healing was also integrated into the work of the movement to ensure that processes that affirm the self-esteem of women were an important part of moving forward<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. Movement building around political participation and legal reform

Despite the fact that women make up more than 50 percent of the world's population, women are only represented in 16 percent of parliaments around the world<sup>17</sup> – due to legal and institutional barriers, discriminatory attitudes influenced by local cultures, religions and social norms, and child and family-care responsibilities among other issues. But without equal access to decision-making bodies, women's voices will remain absent and will not be taken into account. While the strategy of getting women into decision-making positions has often been subverted due to co-optation of women by political party systems and by the lack of any guarantee that women will legislate with the political consciousness of power, getting feminists into those positions remains a critical strategy.

Increasing fundamentalism and the resulting repression of women along with the adoption of conservative women agendas requires the feminist movement to carefully strategise and ensure that the gains made so far are not

eroded. In addition, the continued existence of laws that discriminate against women is another reason why movement building targeted at law reform is such an important part of the feminist agenda. Fortunately for women, international conventions such as the Beijing Platform of Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the African Protocol on the Rights of Women and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Protocol provide a strong foundation on which to build organising campaigns that can bring issues of gender inequality, women's political participation and empowerment to the forefront. In fact, it has been proven that women in political decision-making positions such as governments and legislative bodies contribute to the redefining of political priorities, place new items on the political agenda that reflect and address women's gender-specific concerns, values and experiences, and provide new perspectives on mainstream political issues. As noted by the Sudan Muslim Women's Coalition, gender quotas facilitate women's participation in politics and so ensure that they are able to intervene against corruption and also give their inputs into peace building efforts in post-conflict states<sup>18</sup>.

Three African examples of movement building in relation to women's political participation stand out. The first is the Namibian 50/50 Campaign for Women's Political Empowerment led by Sister Namibia on behalf of the Namibian Women's Manifesto Network in the build up to the 1999 National Assembly elections. The inclusion of respect for the rights of lesbians in the Manifesto resulted in the withdrawal of the ruling party SWAPO from the coalition. Even so, and despite persisting homophobic attacks, lesbian rights were not only mainstreamed into the 50/50 campaign, but also gained the support of many ruling party members at local, regional and national levels. Although the entry point for ensuring women's sexual rights are protected was through women's political participation, this

particular initiative is a good example of how – within a repressive environment – a coalition of groups can focus attention on the importance of protecting this human right. The campaign ran for six years, from one national election to the next, and was successful in maintaining support from both NGO partners and women in communities across the country to keep the reference to lesbian rights in the revised Namibian Women's Manifesto of 2004.<sup>19</sup>

The example of Sudan is also worth reflecting on. The Sudan's women's movement was founded through the Women's Association (or League) in 1947. The objective was to mobilise educated women, to advocate for women's education, and to provide women's health classes. By the mid-1950s, women's groups were gaining membership as more women became involved in the anti-colonial, nationalist movements. The introduction of Sharia or Islamic Law in the 1970s limited women's access to financial resources and their ability to own property as well as imposing other restrictions, such as state-enforced public morality that has reduced women's mobility and their participation in the public sphere. In Sudan, gender segregation is implemented in all public spaces. For example, on public buses, women must stand separately in the back. Women started organising on the basis that if gender inequalities remain codified in laws like the 1991 penal code, it is doubtful that quotas will make substantial differences in decreasing gender inequalities.

Even though women were not allowed to work or convene in certain spaces, they organised creatively – meeting in smaller groups, working with young women and building the capacity of women in their villages. For example, women would never meet at the offices of the movement-building organisation as this was under surveillance and would instead change the venue to a different person's house each day in order to mobilise. In this way, they were able to mobilise up to 2000 women to go to the constitutional

court for a direct action campaign. On July 7th 2008, Sudan's legislature passed a law to reserve 25 percent of seats for women.<sup>20</sup> While there are still key issues around women's integration into political party system, the possibility of getting a minimum number of women candidates into the political system is one step in the right direction. However, the women's movement has identified that there is still considerable work to be done with women, men and civil society broadly to ensure that it has a positive effect in transforming power.

The lessons learnt from Sudan have already been integrated into a strategy adopted by Abantu for Development, a Ghanaian-based organisation that acted as the central organisation within the broader women's movement for the development and launch of a Women's Manifesto in 2004. The manifesto emerged at a time when there was a growing awareness among women activists that there was a need to continuously engage with the state in order to broaden the space for women's organisations to flourish, as well as to ensure that the state took women's issues seriously.

The transition to party politics had not been smooth and women had already been organising, demonstrating and protesting to raise awareness of the problems faced by women, which influenced the new government's sensitivity to women's issues. Having made the decision to pursue the Manifesto, the women's movement clearly articulated that the Manifesto was a political action to develop a common platform to struggle for gender justice and push for a feminist agenda. The idea was introduced to the broad spectrum of women's organisations and other civil society organisations – NGOs, CBOs, policy makers and individual activists – in Ghana, including at the grassroots level and also to local policymakers. This was an important starting point to mobilise ideas and contributions. Other strategies included engaging policy-makers and political parties as well as developing a close relationship with the media. Structurally, a

Steering Committee was elected and involved in putting all the concerns and issues together into a draft having engaged with different people at different moments. At the launch in Accra, over 1000 women and men were present, from all 110 districts of the country at the time (now there are 130).<sup>21</sup>

Since the document represented the views and concerns of all these different groups, they all felt that this was something they owned. For the movement, a key lesson was the possibility of working together with women from across the spectrum of realities on critical issues that affect them all, and the realisation that with effective mobilisation, success is possible. This also laid the groundwork for the subsequent work driven by Abantu on increasing women's political participation. The organisation found that working to increase women's participation at national level did not yield great results and instead decided to focus on increasing participation of women in local government as it offers more opportunities for women to participate and also maintain their households. In addition, there are more seats available for women (230 seats nationally versus 5000 locally). Overall, since Abantu began its work in 2002, the women participation in politics has increased from 3 percent to 11 percent.<sup>22</sup>

The Women's Manifesto process brought together all the women from the district assemblies and gave them the opportunity to strategise and identify a national advocacy platform. The result is not only that Abantu has ensured that women get into local government, but also that it has linked the women together once they are in the institutions based on the realisation that they share the same challenges and concerns. Abantu has also served the role of a movement building organisation by ensuring that during the build up to elections, women's consciousness is raised and their capacity to stand for office is enhanced – and that those women who are successful are supported, while those candidates who were unsuccessful are

helped to prepare for the next elections. Finally, along with convening, mobilising, consciousness-raising and capacity building, a newsletter was also issued to share information more widely.

While exploring the option of political representation, many women's movements, especially in post-colonial settings, have grappled with the dilemma of how to engage with the state. Many governments are fearful of the challenges posed by women's organising and have set up state-funded machineries (women's ministries and focal points) in a bid to reduce potential challenges. Women's movements were an integral part of setting up some of the gender machineries, but it is clear that a lot of work still needs to be done to directly hold states accountable while at the same time ensuring some autonomy of political organising. Indeed, over the last 15 years or so, there has been increasing acknowledgement by women's movements of the need to work selectively with the state while maintaining their own autonomy.

### 3. Movement building to give voice and visibility to particular agendas

While most feminist movements would argue that they are organised with a critical awareness of issues of diversity and inclusivity, the importance of autonomous spaces where particular groups of women can organise around a particular identity is essential for ensuring their leadership and participation within the broader women's movement. These formations have been critical for creating space to articulate the needs and interests of women in specific communities in a way that focuses on the layers of discrimination they face and on the oppression and exploitation that accompanies such discrimination. As a consequence of action-oriented interactions, many of the parent movements that they emerge from now pay greater attention to the participation of women in their programmes, and to the heightening of gender-awareness within their organisations. However, within the feminist movement, considerable work still needs to be done to ensure that the agendas of these communities of women do not remain on the periphery of the broader feminist agenda.

Particular similarities exist between the Indigenous Women's Movement in Latin America and the Dalit Women's Movement in India. In terms of the Indigenous Women's Movement, its political agenda is premised on the need for self-determination and cultural diversity politics. During the last

*the movement of Indigenous Women emerged out of the struggles ... around the impact of **increasing poverty, modernisation of traditional economies and exploitation ...***



two decades, indigenous peoples' political mobilisation has gained important ground against Latin American national governments, forcing them to negotiate on matters of self-determination and cultural diversity politics. The movement of indigenous women emerged out of the struggles of indigenous people around the impact of increasing poverty, modernisation of traditional economies and exploitation of indigenous people's natural resources and territories. Within the movements focused on the rights of indigenous people, concerns emerged about issues of gender equality as well as traditional practices that harm women's dignity, access to health and education. While women have been central in the organising structures of indigenous peoples' movements, they also starting mobilising among themselves to make their voices heard in shaping their lives. Despite criticism that indigenous women's claims of internal discrimination would fracture the unity of the indigenous people's movement and disrupt indigenous culture, women continued to raise their voices about their rights to gender equality. In particular, women started profiling the specific internal and external barriers that indigenous women face as well as defining a political position that enriches the indigenous people's movement and therefore claiming their rightful place and space as activists within the broader movement. As a result Indigenous Women's Movements have focused on building an enabling environment for new women leaders, building capacity and creating safe spaces for women's organising. Similarly, Dalit movements emerged in response to stigma and discrimination towards the untouchable caste.<sup>23</sup> The need for a separate women's movement emerged as a result of the recognition that the issues raised by Dalit women – such as violence against women and the need for an enabling environment for women's participation in local politics – were not being addressed. The movement was set up to do this by promoting the leadership of local women.<sup>24</sup>

In the southern African context, the emergence of networks and coalitions of women living with

HIV and AIDS was also in response to the fact that the broader HIV movement had not been able to respond to the specific issues of women living with HIV. In Malawi, for example, the Coalition of Women Living with HIV and AIDS (COWLHA) has been growing in strength and now has a membership of over 40,000 across the country. In Zambia, while groups such as Society for Women and AIDS in Africa Zambia (SWAAZ) attempted to mobilise and organise HIV positive women, their response focused on addressing single issues like income generation and awareness raising. The need for a more political approach resulted in the establishment of the Coalition of Zambia Positive Women (COZWHA).<sup>25</sup> What most of these networks have in common is that they fill an important gap. But while they have a huge membership base, they often lack strategic capacity and sufficient resources.

One of the initiatives that has worked in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe has been the JASS Southern Africa Movement Building initiative, which was launched in 2007 to strengthen the voice and organising power of women living with HIV and AIDS. The overall aim is to strengthen activist leadership, expand grassroots organising, forge new alliances and make women leaders more visible. This initiative uses strategies like political consciousness raising, capacity building, and communications to achieve its goals. Since this is a fairly new initiative, its real impact will need to be evaluated in the coming years.

# 3.

## Current trends and reflections on women's organising and movement building

**C**ONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S AND FEMINIST MOVEMENTS have have been through a variety of social transformations over recent decades – sometimes in response to changes in context and specific historical moments, sometimes due to evolution in feminist thinking and a new understanding of how to make systemic transformation happen. Women's organising in the early part of the century was mostly focused at the national or regional level, and then gathered force and momentum to become a global phenomenon.<sup>26</sup> While each geographical region may have used different approaches and analyses to transform relations of power, their efforts have nevertheless raised the profile of issues affecting women. Evolving beyond the 'personal is political', feminist organisations have taken up highly complex struggles that have resulted in some of the most significant societal changes over recent centuries.<sup>27</sup>

Even though the political and historical contexts differ from region to region, feminist organising shares a lot of commonalities. For example, in Latin America, Asia and Africa, many feminists were part of national liberation struggles, often occupying diverse roles, including participating in armed struggles. In southern Africa in particular, we have had historical periods when women's organising was restricted to male-dominated women's leagues. Post-colonialism saw women struggling in both the public/state arena as well as privately in the battle for equality and justice. Through

their involvement and engagement in liberation struggles, more often than not fighting multiple expressions of exclusion, southern African women laid down the foundations of what has become the most critical site of struggle for them vis-à-vis the state and institutionalised cultural forms of patriarchy.

In constructing the women's movement as an autonomous space, women have had to contend with continuous attempts by the state to appropriate this political vehicle. Along with this, the dwindling vibrancy of women's movements both nationally and regionally within the SADC region over the past decade can be attributed to a range of factors, including a diminishing resource base, limited capacity, and inability to effectively mobilise and organise around new challenges such as HIV and AIDS, among other issues.

At this critical time, women's organising seems to be characterised by some of the following challenges:

#### (i) NGO-isation of women's movements

On the African continent, women's organising has been shaped and impacted on by a phenomenon dubbed the 'NGO-isation' of movements. This refers to NGOs defining the agenda and driving women's rights activism, but often this is influenced by the NGOs' own interests and the interests of those who fund them. While NGO-isation has affected organising for women's rights globally, in Africa it has resulted in a marked decline in the strength and visibility of African women's rights organisations at regional and global levels, as well as instances of co-option – all of which hampers responses to the increasing challenges faced by women at all levels of society.

While on the one hand NGO-isation has resulted in prioritising the building of institutions and a focus on establishing organisational structures and processes, on the other hand it has resulted in



*NGO-isation has also resulted in a situation where many organisations and organisational leadership are less connected and accountable to constituencies of women and instead pay more allegiance to their donors and their boards.*

individualising responses to social justice, which in many cases has fostered competition as opposed to complementarity and collaboration. This has often weakened movement-building capacity and focus because of the emphasis on searching for resources as well as the need to meet stringent legal and regulatory requirements as well as donor requirements.<sup>28</sup> NGO-isation has also resulted in a situation where many organisations and organisational leadership are less connected and accountable to constituencies of women and instead pay more allegiance to their donors and their boards. NGOs clearly have a role to play in advocating for rights, providing services and proposing policies, but if we are to achieve sustainable social justice, then different forms of organising (and organisations) are needed – including some that have a more locally grounded vision and boast a more sustainable power base for social transformation.

The institutionalisation of feminist movements has also signalled an era when feminist advocacy and agendas have been distorted and co-opted into tools and formulas, which have been divested of their original politics and transformative agenda. These include gender mainstreaming, women-focused micro-finance projects and quotas for women in politics.<sup>29</sup> It is probably one of the key reasons why reclaiming the politics of feminist organising and movement building is such an important step since it indicates a reconnection with the roots of feminist ideology and agenda-building that is imperative at this particular juncture.

Bringing this issue into the discourse on movement building is a means of highlighting that NGOs exist not in and of themselves, but that they are also accountable to the constituencies of women they claim to be representing. It is a means to reassert the need for strategic thinking, strategising and action that seems to have all but disappeared in an era when each group is struggling separately for survival. This is one key means of addressing the current fragmentation of movements.

#### (ii) Sectoral approaches to women's organising

Feminists across the globe have been able to tackle the complexity and breadth of issues that contribute to women's subordination and oppression. In reality, though, this specialisation and diversification has in many cases fragmented and splintered movements.<sup>30</sup> Sectoral or issue-based approaches – such as women organising on economic rights or women's reproductive rights or women living with HIV or violence against women etc. – have often lacked focus and in many cases have fallen short of addressing the structural underpinnings responsible for women's subordination. Very often, in this approach, groups choose to focus on capacity development, policy and advocacy related strategies and would not make the connection to the root causes – thereby addressing the symptoms rather than the real issues that sustain the second-class status of women.

In addition, the interaction between groups working on similar issues leaves a lot to be desired<sup>31</sup> and does not enable consolidation to strengthen activism or to support sustained engagement for transformation. The lack of deep collaborative work is a missed opportunity since most groups are not able to do everything that is needed to ultimately shift power relations. Working together strategically would result in much greater impact.

On another level, there is also evidence<sup>32</sup> that most groups working on particular issues that respond to systemic inequalities within society are mostly working at the local level with little or no connection to broader efforts at the national level, let alone at regional or global levels. While the emphasis on local is absolutely critical, this insular form of organising further disconnects the different efforts from one another, decreasing opportunities for collaboration and an accurate assessment of impact and strategy.

As a result, sectoral organising has resulted in the erratic and often scattered engagement of feminist voices in the public domain on political developments nationally and regionally. Collaboration and collective organising among groups focusing on similar issues is one area that must be improved on. It is also important to acknowledge that issue-based organising (each group has its own agenda, goals and strategies) presents challenges in creating an overarching and shared political agenda to which different groups can subscribe – preventing groups from speaking on even some issues with a unified voice. This fragmentation, without some mechanism for cohesion, also enables outside forces to 'divide and rule' more easily.

### (iii) To work with men or not to work with men

In southern Africa, many organisations that were set up by the women's movement in response to particular issues have ended up being led by men.<sup>33</sup> While there is now wider acknowledgement that men can ascribe to feminist ideology and that this commitment can translate into them joining the effort for social justice, gender equality and the many battles against sexism, it is also true that the majority of people who enjoy access to power, resources and privileges are men.<sup>34</sup> The debate is not about excluding men from the struggle, but acknowledging that the success of efforts to dismantle patriarchy is more likely if those most affected by it are able to lead the struggle – namely, women at all levels of society. Women's movements have to continue to be safe spaces where women can come together to prioritise their issues and strategise.

However, the emergence of more organisations focusing on involving men to achieve gender equality is a positive move as it means that men are taking responsibility for creating spaces where men are able to reflect and strategise on their engagement without putting pressure on women's movements to give them this space.

The challenge is that in many cases women's movements and groups working with men have not been able to come together to figure out strategic ways to collaborate to strengthen efforts and impact. Thus, a dialogue is necessary that moves beyond the focus on 'inclusion' of men in women's movements (as that is not the real issue) to how to engage in a space where women's voices remain at the forefront, and ensure that promoting the agenda for shifting power relations involves more than just rhetoric and a technocratic approach.

### (iv) HIV and women's organising

With HIV and AIDS being a key issue impacting on the lives of women in sub-Saharan Africa, one would certainly expect that this would be a key area within the feminist political agenda. In fact, globally as well as regionally, while there is the rhetoric to address the gendered nature of this global pandemic, it has not necessarily resulted in responses that take into account human rights and challenging power relations. The reality that dominant approaches to HIV and AIDS (such as ABC) both undermine women's rights as well as ignore women's rights as a pre-requisite for stopping the spread of the disease. The feminist movement has for the last two decades been criticised for engaging on issues affecting women living with HIV un-strategically, erratically and in ways that do not integrate the critical issues into a political agenda. These issues include linking women's basic needs, power, sexual politics and social transformation. When feminist movements have engaged, they often excluded women who have been living with and organising on the issues already<sup>35</sup>. In terms of women living with and organising around HIV and AIDS, many of them started organising because of necessity, mostly to address the basic needs of women. However, these women have also participated in other HIV movements and because of their lack of connection to feminist movements have had to deal with the sexual and power politics on their

own. The reality of the continued lack of capacity among groups of women working on and living with HIV to lead, strategise and give voice to their issues means that their issues continue to be on the margins.

### (v) Persistent violence against women and women's movements

Feminist agendas and activism are under constant threat in a global context of rising economic, religious, ethnic and other forms of fundamentalism.<sup>36</sup> This reality is expressed through the multiple forms of violence that impact women's lives – from attacks on the bodies of women in all societies to attacks on women activists to attacks on feminist agendas and gains. At the heart of this violence is the fact that key institutions and ideas supporting patriarchy continue to thrive and take on new configurations, including the sexism that conditions people from birth to accept women's subordination; the hetero-sexism that stigmatises lesbianism and makes lesbian women targets for boiling hatred; the traditional family with its designated gender roles that condemn sexual freedom for women; and, the masculinity that legitimates violent behaviour in men. In reality, both women's and feminist agendas have failed to effectively address this violence because they have not targeted its root cause – patriarchy. In cases where women have challenged patriarchy directly, activists have faced mounting threats as they raise their voices against corruption, totalitarianism and injustice. Women all over the African continent are being maimed, killed, arrested and disappeared as part of this struggle. Political parties and agents enact their agendas across the bodies of women through sexualised and politicised violence against women when the state or those in power need to assert their control. Even so, despite the increased risk of violence, many campaigns for lesbian rights, HIV and AIDS treatment, abortion by choice, sexual freedom, equality

in the household, struggles for democracy and for women's rights do not prioritise developing collective responses to the increased risk of patriarchal violence faced by their members and supporters. In addition, the attacks on feminist agendas in all regions have visibly impacted on policies, laws and social norms – threatening campaigns around fair inheritance, equal pay, labour protection, reproductive and sexual rights among others as well as the capacity to increase public awareness of gendered violence and discrimination. Here, the fundamentalist project has been to discredit feminists as man-haters, baby-killers, family-breakers and sexual deviants. In most cases, feminists and women's groups have been ill equipped to face these serious, complex and multiple challenges. This has led to wholesale retreat or piecemeal responses, or a kind of underground activism that has further weakened and fragmented our movements<sup>37</sup>.

### (vi) How does change happen?

Feminist movements have over the last few decades shifted in their understanding of how to effect social transformation. The theory of change has moved from getting more women represented in politics and political structures to the notion that the transformation of both the position and condition of women at the societal or macro level can be lastingly achieved only through political change (enabling policies, legislation, enforcement and protection of rights).<sup>38</sup> While there have been many lessons learned about our assumptions of how change happens, there are clear indications that none of theories are necessarily wrong. However, they do not account for how power transforms and reconfigures and its resulting impact on feminist movements. One of the key issues that we have to contend with is that, as a result of the magnitude of issues that keep growing, feminist movements have not been able to be more strategic or to create enough time for reflection that results in different actions.

Another issue that keeps on rearing its head is the lack of connection to different constituencies of women.

The re-introduction of movement building as a frame for achieving social justice in recent years has been a strategic move to re-politicise efforts for social transformation and to link these efforts to grassroots organising. The emphasis on the political is particularly relevant because ultimately social justice is only possible if we unravel the privileges and manifestations of patriarchy.<sup>39</sup> Feminist movement building – as it was originally conceived – involves mobilising and organising constituencies of women, building a clear political agenda (or change agenda), and preparing the constituencies to choose their targets, strategies and actions

to bring about the change sought.<sup>40</sup> Reclaiming movement building in relation to work around social justice is a move to reinvigorate feminist movements, expand their links with constituencies of women (at all levels of society) and ultimately develop a comprehensive roadmap to address existing and emerging challenges confronting women. Another argument for movement building is that in addition to ensuring that the constituencies most affected by issues are at the forefront of struggles, it also challenges and pushes women's groups to use approaches that build on each other over an extended period of time as opposed to the erratic, ad-hoc activities that seem to have resulted from NGO-isation. It reintroduces and reaffirms the politics of organising and change promoted by feminist ideology.

#### **(vii) Money, money, money – donor agendas and women's movements**

While many feminists have been – and still are – theorising about the impact of the global economic crisis on women's rights, the impact on women's organising is another concern. On the one hand, research done by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in 2006 and 2007<sup>41</sup> shows that there has been increasing pressure on groups to conform to donor agendas, which in many cases has meant a dilution of their political agendas. On the other hand, the reality

*there has been increasing pressure on groups to conform to donor agendas, which in many cases has meant a dilution of their political agendas.*



is that there is a flow of major donor resources away from movement-building approaches towards projects and interventions that supposedly show more 'visible' and 'measurable' returns – outcomes based organising.<sup>42</sup> Also, movement-building approaches require longer-term investment and involve smaller groups that are not yet institutionalised making the case for financial support.

#### **(viii) Wellbeing and sustainability**

The highly polarised political contexts have contributed to the extreme fragmentation among women's groups and to the co-option of the women's rights agendas. While this has impacted on the strategic capacities of the movement, it has also impacted on its energies. Not to mention how extreme political violence and the trauma it produces have undermined women's engagement on so many levels.

In fact, while it is possible to conceive of movements creating time and space to confront violence and injustices faced by women, the notion that women activists should expend energy, create spaces and develop strategies to take care of themselves and to strengthen their morale is still something quite foreign. Indeed, the belief that using resources (time, energy and space) to get to know oneself better, to optimise one's strengths, to reflect and to care for oneself is not justified is a form of violence that women activists enact on themselves. As a result we have movements whose key activist leaders (from local to national to global) are exhausted and suffering from burnout. This is a huge threat to the project to end patriarchy. Thus, there is a need to step out of the NGO 'business as usual' framework of engagement to create safe, informal spaces for healing and renewal as well as for retooling and rebuilding. It is important that the feminist movement recognises the importance of ensuring that the march forward is constantly replenished

with renewed energies, bodies and spirits. It is an essential ingredient in successful activist leadership and movement building.

#### **(ix) Involvement of young women**

While there are different initiatives at different levels that attempt to engage young women, bring them into the fold of activism and organise them within a feminist ideological frame, the reality is that they still leave a lot to be desired. In many cases, these efforts do not form part of a coherent strategy to strengthen movements in the various countries and may take a backseat to other urgent issues.

Since before the Beijing Conference in 1995, young women's involvement has been a key issue that feminist movements across globe have had to consider. Over the last 15 years though, they have moved from trying to involve young women merely because of their youth, to engaging them because they have something unique to offer in terms of their analysis and strategies. Importantly, there are also many more young women who come to activism through universities and educational institutions, which is a very different entry point from previous generations. Within southern Africa, the impact of violence and HIV on young women makes them an important constituency to consider in terms of expanding movements and energising them. That being said, the level of engagement of young women in movements says a lot about the movements longevity, reach, health and sustainability.<sup>43</sup>

During consultations with a wide range of women's organisations in Zambia in 2009, the fact that more young women need to be brought into the movement was mentioned over and over again. Yet, organisations such as Young Women in Action, which was set up by a group of young women, lack the support and mentorship of more

experienced organisations in the movement. In Zambia, several organisations have also run leadership programmes for young women, but these are all ad-hoc projects, which are not integrated with broader efforts to strengthen the women's movement.

The reality that many organisations are working sectorally and that there is no broader strategy to strengthen women's movements is not unique to Zambia. During earlier discussions in Malawi in 2008<sup>44</sup> with networks of women living with HIV, the fact that more young women are affected and infected with HIV was mooted as a key motivation to strengthen young women's feminist leadership and activism. But while the desire is there, the capacity and resources to follow through on it do not exist. In addition, the lack of good models of how to support, mentor and strengthen young women's activism and organisations is also part of the reason why there has not been any tangible changes.

In the meantime, young feminists have attempted to organise themselves, sometimes successfully but very often on the margins of broader movements. These include groups such as Young Women in Action, YOWLI (Zimbabwe), and the Young Women's Leadership Institute in Kenya. While these groups have struggled and continue to struggle to advance the agenda for young women, they do provide examples to learn from.

The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) has been working on developing young women leaders since 2008 as part of a strategy to strengthen women's movements in the region. The initiative is multi-pronged, including structured training as well as the provision of spaces and platforms for young women to network and learn from each other. These and other efforts by like-minded organisations have started to build a much-needed critical mass of young women, who can add their powerful voices and energies to women's movements in the region. to women's movements in the region.

## 4.

### Movement building anchors and moments

**T**HE MOVEMENT BUILDING MODELS SHARED ABOVE, if broken down, all contain elements of a broader framework for movement building, which is defined by a series of strategies and actions at different moments that include:

- (i) political consciousness-raising and empowerment;
- (ii) supporting constituency building for mobilisation and organisation for transformation;
- (iii) convening spaces (nationally and regionally) for reflections on theories of change, developing common political agendas and action strategies, and re-grouping;
- (iv) developing critical alliances and partnerships; and
- (v) ensuring support and solidarity around collective strategies for change.

Any movement may employ any configuration of these strategies to achieve its particular goals

**(i) Political consciousness-raising and empowerment**

Political consciousness-raising and empowerment is a critical first step in addressing the inequalities of women's participation at all levels and entrenched social injustices. This is an important means of supporting and strengthening movements for change as it increases the opportunities for women already engaged in leadership and activism to do the political analysis themselves, to contribute and shape political agendas and ultimately to lead initiatives that could shift power relations. The step involving political consciousness-raising encompasses a frame that allows people to move from a naive awareness of issues that affect them to a critical awareness of the issues when they find themselves asking why, what and how. This particular strategy also recognises the need to expand the ranks of feminist movements, not just by incorporating more young women, but also more women from poor and marginalised groups. According to Antrobus (2004), consciousness-raising involves experiential learning through reflection on personal experience when women can gain a deeper understanding of the experience of other forms of oppression based on class, race, ability, religion, age etc and use the exclusion of others as a basis for collective action.<sup>45</sup> Regionally and globally, numerous groups are engaged in political consciousness-raising, but mostly this happens at the local and national levels – usually in the form of training institutes or leadership camps or other awareness-raising initiatives, which are organised by groups such as the Association for Women's Rights and Development, DAWN Training Institutes, Akina Mama wa Afrika (Uganda) and Women's Trust (Zimbabwe) etc.

There is a need to invest more in feminist political education as a means to strengthen the leadership, organisation and strategies that will ensure that the voices of African women, particularly those living on the margins, influence policymaking at

all levels. This is an important strategy to build the constituency of feminist movements and to make sure that there is wider ownership of the feminist agenda. Not only would the focus be on developing the feminist political consciousness, but also on sharing experiences and allowing women to start articulating their own issues and agenda. Furthermore, by doing it in a manner that is aimed at longer-term, sustainable change, it will also facilitate strategic connections between grassroots women leaders and organisations and women's rights NGOs, which would help to build and draw upon the power of women's numbers to make a difference.

This particular area and opportunity is based on the need for movements to do more feminist organising and mobilising. It indicates that women's movements have to step out of their comfort zones of NGOs and institutionalised spaces of organising to mobilise women where they live, as it is only the participation of strong, organised women that will change the patriarchal power structures.

**(ii) Supporting constituency building for mobilisation and organisation for transformation**

Whereas political consciousness-raising and empowerment is the first step to movement building, the second step starts building a constituency and mobilising it for action around a particular issue. For example, in the case the Women's Manifesto in Ghana, constituency building involved convening groups, sharing with them the rationale for the Manifesto and securing their support for specific activities related to the process. The constituency building process is a well-recognised movement building moment as it allows groups to consult and see whether they can garner widespread support for their issue or cause.

**(iii) Convening spaces (nationally and regionally) for alliance building, reflection and dialogue**

This strategy is used to create spaces to build a common understanding across a range of constituencies and actors of a particular issue or agenda. In the context of movement building, it will not necessarily be restricted to those who are most intimately affected and involved by the

*conscious strategy that recognises the diversity of women's **activism, resistance and acts of rebellion** against patriarchy.*

issue but could also include decision-makers, other movements, and the broader feminist movement. In terms of convening spaces with other movements, an excellent example was the Feminist Dialogues at the World Social Forum. Creating spaces to share examples of organising actions is also a conscious strategy that recognises the diversity of women's activism, resistance and acts of rebellion against patriarchy, especially when those women would not necessarily identify what they are doing as feminist. Spaces where these women could meet provide an opportunity for feminists to show that their agenda is broader than violence against women and reproductive rights, as well as illustrating a willingness to honestly reflect on inclusivity.

Another example of convening spaces is the Association for Women's Rights in Development's (AWID) International Forum, which is the largest gathering of women outside of United Nations conferences. The AWID Forum is attended by up to 2000 women's rights activists, practitioners, scholars, policy-makers and donors from across the globe. What makes this space unique is that it is open for women to come together to reflect on theories of change, develop common political agendas and action strategies, re-group and engage in critical analysis. Given the scale of the AWID Forum, it is difficult to clearly assess its overall impact. However, many feminist activists have indicated that it is an unique opportunity to network beyond their own borders, to listen to

a range of other actors and to deepen their own understanding of how change happens.

At the African level, the African Feminist Forum (AFF) is another space that has been gaining momentum over the last four years. Around 120 feminist activists attended the first AFF in 2006, while 150 took part in the second in 2008. The purpose of the AFF is to build solidarity among African feminists, to enhance and deepen the analysis of issues that are faced by African women and to reflect on movement building strategies and actions. The AFF has been criticised for elitism because attendance is by invitation only, but the strategy to expand the AFF is based on National Feminist Forums. Since the first AFF in 2006, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda have created National Feminist Forums. It is at the national level that feminists are able to set the agenda based on the reality of organising in their national context as well as to identify and nominate representatives to attend the continental forum. Thus, attendance at the AFF will follow participation in national processes. Outside of these spaces created by feminist movements themselves, feminists have also convened around the Commission on the Status of Women, and African Union and other related processes to ensure that women's issues are on the agenda and to organise around any other emerging issues.

At the southern Africa level, OSISA has launched the Young Feminists annual festival, which aims to create space for young women from the region. The initiative brings together about 120 young feminists from the 10 southern African countries that OSISA covers, to share their experiences, network, exchange ideas and receive training on specific skills that will enhance their activism.

There is an urgent need for women's movements to do some very honest and critical re-thinking and reassessment, and this requires the creation of convening spaces for dialogue. These spaces are also critical for constituency as well as alliance building. In addition, creation of these spaces

could build bridges with women who are involved in other social movements and help them all to make the connection between what happens to women as women and what happens to women as a result of other marginalised identities. At the same time, these processes could be part of a broader strategy to rebuild and re-energise regional African women's rights alliances and agendas to ensure that they address the critical issues facing the majority of African women. These spaces could be convened regionally as well as nationally and could include a diversity of actors from activists to researchers. In addition, these spaces could also be used to exchange ideas and experiences in order to generate fresh knowledge about movement building in different contexts; to forge new alliances, agendas and strategies for the future; to share assumptions and highlights about movement building and identify cross-cutting elements, principles and lessons; to reflect and explore how context (political, economic, social, historic) and focus shape different entry points, agendas and strategies; to identify and debate core concepts, ideas and values associated with movement building; and, to clarify points of potential synergy and collaboration.

The longer term strategy could include convening strategic spaces for dialogue with other movements in order to ensure there is solidarity when it comes to public demonstrations or campaigns on broad economic, social and political issues, and that women's concerns are an integral part of the long-term agendas of other civil society movements. Furthermore, spaces could be created for the well being and healing of activists.

#### **(iv) Alliance building and strategic partnerships**

Alliance building and strategic partnerships are critical cogs in the movement building machinery. While feminist movements have recognised and celebrated the importance of convening spaces

for feminist movements only, there is also room to dialogue with other key players to share information and analysis, and to develop collective political agendas that would influence mainstream human rights and development agendas, which would lead to sustainable change and enhance women's human rights. This is an area where the feminist movement could be more proactive, and not act solely when there is an important issue at hand. Not only is it important for the feminist movement to do some internal reflection, critical re-thinking and assessment through discussions among feminists, it is also crucial for it to engage with players outside of the movement.<sup>46</sup> While such dialogues and conversations have usually happened around key campaigns, they have also taken place at the World Social Forum. The importance of this for the feminist movement is that it informs its overall strategy based on a better understanding of how others see the movement from the outside and acknowledges that feminists are an integral part of other movements. As an ongoing feminist strategy, there is a need to work out how to continuously engage with those who are not 'the usual suspects', but who could still – by keeping them close and ensuring that they really understand the feminist agenda – help to advance the feminist agenda. One such possibility exists with emerging groups and coalitions that are working with men to achieve gender equality. While these groups would consider themselves part of the feminist movement, there would still be moments when they would be excluded from key spaces to ensure that the agenda is completely driven by women (and especially those most affected by the issues).

#### **(v) Collective actions and solidarity**

Collective actions and solidarity are one of the most critical ingredients of movement building. All the above-mentioned movement-building moments would have resulted in a political agenda as well as an identification of key actions

that would help to bring about the desired change. But collective action and solidarity provide the strength to make a real difference. An example of collective action is the well known 16 Days of Activism, which was originally conceptualised at a global leadership training held by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership and is now marked around the world – and should be regarded as an important achievement of the feminist movement. At the same time, the fact that the awareness generated by the 16 Days has not resulted in sustainable change indicates that there is much more work to be done.

Other collective actions include protests, mobilisation, vigils, petitions, media campaigns and broader public education. Solidarity actions are often connected through a common objective, linking together different women in different contexts, who can carry out the solidarity actions at the same time. The Women's Transformation Watch mobilises around key moments when women's democratic rights are under threat. While Codepink is an example of when women were mobilised to raise awareness of a particular issue and on occasion to subvert definitions of womanhood and to cause outrage as an impetus for people to act against injustice. Finally, institutionally targeted strategies such as law reform would also elicit another set of actions. Although collective actions and solidarity seem to be the more visible aspects of a movement, and often ensure it is recognised and known, the actions in-between and the less visible aspects such as consolidation, analysis, learning and constituency building are also critical parts of the whole.

There is certainly room for coordinated solidarity action regionally that highlights women's issues in a way that captures the imagination of the wider society and not just decision-makers. All the above processes would contribute to a broader agenda and set of solidarity actions that would help to shift power relations. These activities and actions would harness a communications strategy that uses a diverse range of available and

accessible technologies. A critical element would also be to increase the communication capacity of movements to influence public opinion in the pursuit of social transformation.

### **(vi) Building new knowledge and knowledge politics**

While constituency building, alliance building and solidarity actions are important parts of movement building, the area of knowledge generation is also crucial. For feminist movements, the changing contexts and ways that power manifests is reason enough to reflect and analyse power. As noted by Antrobus, without reflection and analysis, movements would end up simply directing their actions at visible power and not at the resistance that is deeply embedded in the culture of patriarchy.<sup>47</sup> The opportunity to build new knowledge and knowledge politics is premised on the recognition that feminist organising provides a key opportunity for informing dialogue and debate that is critical to how theories of social change are developed. Secondly, while the body of work and knowledge on movement building seems to be growing in the African region, analysis and reflection continues to be sporadic. This is partly due to the fact that most activists are so immersed in the work of movement building, organising and mobilising, that they have very little time or space for reflection and documentation. There is a need for a holistic analysis that provides a true picture of movement activity and movement building efforts in the region. This knowledge generation needs to happen at the same time as mass mobilisation and alliance building is underway in order to ensure that the knowledge that is produced is interrogated, deconstructed and reconstructed. Feminist Africa<sup>48</sup> is one such initiative that attempts to bridge the divide between academics and activists to encourage reflection and documentation. The Agenda Feminist Journal is another initiative aimed at facilitating dialogue and debate among activists and researchers within the women's movement

and other sectors of society. Both of these are critical institutions in supporting the growth and strengthening of the feminist movement.

More recently, OSISA has launched BUWA!<sup>49</sup> – a Journal on African women's experiences, in response to the need to expand the space and tools for African women, in their diversity, to debate, dialogue, reflect and document their experiences.

There is still a need for more such strategic knowledge generation – and as a result development of new strategies critical for movement building. The argument for a range of actors to reflect on movement building and to document the 'herstories' of movements has already been made. To ensure that this is done, women's movements have to build capacity for this as well as devote resources such as time and money to enable it. This should be seen as a critical component of the movement building cocktail mix.

### **(vii) Communications and Technology**

Another important tool for movement building is good communications, particularly given the expanding range of new tools, since this is a critical means of explaining experiences, strategies and struggles to both internal and external audiences. In 2010, around 94 percent of urban Africans were already living near a GSM signal (for SMS and mobile internet) and by 2020, 80 percent of all Africans will have access to a mobile phone.<sup>50</sup> These present key opportunities for feminist movements in terms of communications and there are some really interesting campaigns and strategies that are currently in use. For example, Radio Feminista in Costa Rica uses Internet broadcasting and Women's Net in South Africa is a portal with a range of materials. Gender Links in partnership with Women's Net also hosted what was called cyber-dialogues up to 2004, which combined live events with cyber-dialogues

on issues of violence against women. Meanwhile, the Association for Progressive Communications and Isis WCCE (Uganda) develop the technical capacity of feminist activists and movements to leverage the use of technology and combine it with communication strategies that will ultimately bring together advocacy, networking and convergent media technologies.

---



# 5.

## Some concluding reflections

**M**OVEMENT BUILDING IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT MOBILISING a range of people and connecting efforts that advance social justice. There are a number of strategies and models that could possibly apply to the southern African context as illustrated by the various examples in this paper. Although none of the above strategies on its own would be sufficient as a movement-building model, a combination built on a focused strategy could harness the diverse approaches to women's activism and strengthen them and thereby facilitate a deepening and strengthening of movements at local, national and regional levels. The resulting reframing of forms and strategies, which includes the leadership of those previously disconnected from mainstream movements due to social, cultural and economic identities, could go a long way in claiming the ultimate prize of social justice.

In assessing what lessons could be relevant for the southern African context, it is important to keep in mind that southern Africa is quite diverse. It requires recognition and appreciation of the diversity and subjectivity of perspectives among feminists and women activists around advocacy platforms that have been core to women's movements as well as their political and ideological differences, while at the same time providing a way to persist in debating and strongly articulating the points of commonality.

In southern Africa, the reality is that women are organising in their multitudes based on the issues that are the most important to them. This is happening at regional, national and local levels. The key challenge is the connections between these different responses and initiatives that would result in it being named a movement. In addition, there are several key issues in southern Africa that provide opportunities for mobilising women, including poverty, violence against women, HIV and AIDS, women farmers, sex work and sexual rights. While all of these could result in the continued polarising of actions, it provides an entry point into a dialogue that is critical for movement building. The challenge here is to find ways to highlight efforts around which to dialogue, mobilise, communicate and take action.

While there is greater visibility and some analysis of women's movement processes and activities at the macro and even national level, there still remain gaps in the analysis and documentation of how concepts of identity, autonomy and political opportunity play out in organising at the local level and the connections between that and national and regional processes. This would allow for a much more comprehensive understanding of the ideological and material conditions under which mobilisations actually take place. However, it must be added that in southern African, even at national and regional levels documentation and analysis could still be increased.

Southern Africa has certainly advanced in the area of political participation. But a general fatigue has set in as women have become disillusioned in instances where they have managed to get institutionalised gender machineries as well as greater participation of women in decision-making. Despite international conventions such as CEDAW, the African Protocol on the Rights of Women, the SADC Gender Protocol, there is still a need to revisit feminist strategies towards the state. There is also sense that many movements are simply doing what they know and have done for the last two decades. A process that identifies how the feminist movement should engage with the state should surface assumptions about what this means, but should also look at how to strengthen strategies and action with the broader participation of women to leverage accountability mechanisms.

The sustainability of feminist movements is another issue that deserves some attention. One area of sustainability that should be part of the agenda is certainly the involvement and leadership development of young feminists. The case for this is very clear especially as younger feminists bring different eyes and ideas to the process that could strengthen strategy development of the movement. In addition, the exhaustion and burnout of activists is a serious concern, since they are exhausted by the need to keep both ends of the candle burning, by constant confronting power and by simply trying to do too much – and weighed down by burden of violence. This sustainability issue is particularly visible in southern Africa where women have borne the brunt of organising and responding to HIV and AIDS and to violence – and to so much more. Feminist spaces that prioritise well being are absolutely critical in building, sustaining and strengthening what already exists.

## Endnotes

1. [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_poverty\\_economics/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/)
2. [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/violence\\_against\\_women/facts\\_figures.php](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/violence_against_women/facts_figures.php)
3. UNAIDS (2008). Report on the global AIDS epidemic. [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)
4. Imam, A (2006). Fundamentalism and women's rights in Africa. Paper presented at the African Feminist Forum in 2006.
5. see Reinigorating the Women's Movement in Southern Africa, unpublished research report, 2005, pg 5.
6. Ibid.
7. Rudo Gaidzanwa, Conceptual Paper on the Women's Movement in Southern Africa, 2006, pgs 8-9; 13.
8. Batliwala (2008).
9. Hoodfar, H (2008). Against All Odds: The Building of a Women's Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Association for Women's Rights in Development.
10. Hassim S (2004). Voices, Hierarchies and Spaces: Reconfiguring the Women's Movement in Democratic South Africa. A case study for the UKZN project entitled: Globalisation, Marginalisation and New Social Movements in post-Apartheid South Africa. University of Witwatersrand. South Africa. <http://www.udw.ac.za/ccs/files/Hassim%20Womens%20Movement%20RRR.pdf>
11. Miller V, Veneklasen L, Reilly M and Clarke C (2006). Making Change Happen: Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice Equality and Peace. Just Associates.
12. Kaye, J (2009). Democracy and the Rise of Women's Movements in Sub-saharan Africa. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 34, 2009
13. <http://www.codepink4peace.org/article.php?list=type&type=3>
14. Pilgeram, RYANNE. (2009). "Think Pink: Codepink, Third Wave Feminist, and the Anti-War Movement Organization" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, Aug 08, 2009 <Not Available>. 2010-07-08<[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p306927\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p306927_index.html)>
15. <http://www.justassociates.org/observatorio.final.pdf>
16. Gbowee, Leymah (2008). Movement Building Lessons from the Liberian Women's Peace Building Network. Presentation at the Feminist Leadership Advocacy and Movement Building Institute. Entebbe. Organised by CREA and Akina Mama wa Afrika.
17. <http://www.ipu.org/iss-e/women.htm>
18. <http://www.mwcoalition.org/quotas/index.html>
19. Liz Frank and Elizabeth /Khaxas. Sister Namibia: Fighting for all human rights for all women. Profile. *Feminist Africa*, Issue 6, 2006.
20. Implementing Gender Quotas: Spotlight on Sudan. Website: <http://www.mwcoalition.org/quotas/index.html>
21. Mama, A (2005). The Ghanaian Womens Manifesto Movement. In *Conversation. Feminist Africa*. Issue 4, 2005.
22. Wilson S (2009). Interview with Hamida Harrison of Abantu for Development as part of an assessment of the impact of funding provided by Comic Relief and African Women's Development Fund.
23. Figueroa Romero D (2008). Indigenous Women's Political Struggles: Engendering the Agenda of Indigenous Organisations
24. Andharia J and the ANANDI Collective (2008). The Dalit Women's Movement in India: Dalit Mahila Sahiti. Association for Women's Rights in Development.
25. Just Associates (2009). Needs Assessment for Movement Building in Zambia. Unpublished report.
26. Abeysekera, Sunila (2004). Social Movements, Feminist Movements and the State: A Regional Perspective. [http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=518&Itemid=207](http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=518&Itemid=207)
27. Alpizar, L (2007). Building Feminist Movements and Organisations: Learning from Experience. Building Feminist Movements and Organisations, Editors: Alpizar, Payne and Russo. Zed Books.
28. Batliwala (2008) Building Feminist Movements and Organisations: Clarifying our Concepts. Association for Women's Rights in Development.
- 29 & 30. *ibid*
31. Just Associates (2009). Needs Assessment for Movement Building among groups working on HIV and women's rights. Unpublished report.
32. JASS Southern Africa (2009). Reflections on organising in Zambia and Malawi. Unpublished report.
33. *ibid*
34. Everjoice Win (2009). Give me back my movement. Blog, November 19, 2009. <http://www.jassblog.org/2009/11/give-me-back-my-movement.html>
35. Mtati, Siphos (2008). HIV Movements in Africa: Losses and Opportunities. Presentation at the Feminist Movement Building and Leadership Institute, Entebbe, October 2008.
36. Batliwala (2008)
- 37 & 38. *ibid*
39. Clark C, Sprenger E, Veneklasen L (2006). Where's the Money for Women's Rights. Assessing resources and the role of donors in the promotion of women's rights and the support of women's organisations. Association for Women's Rights in Development.
- 40 & 42. Batliwala (2008)
41. Clark C, Sprenger E, Veneklasen L (2006).
43. Malek, G (2010). How is young feminist activism helping our movements grow. Blog. <http://yfa.awid.org/2010/06/how-is-young-feminist-activism-helping-our-movements-grow/> 15 June 2010.
44. The consultations in Malawi and Zambia were part the JASS Feminist Movement Building Process Needs Assessments conducted of which the author was part of. Reports of these assessments refer.
45. Antrobus P (2004). The Global Women's Movement. Origins, Issues and Strategies. ZED Books.
46. Mangulabnan-Zabala, E (2004). Examining the Women's Movement. *Women in Action*, 2004: 2, Isis International, [http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=519&Itemid=207](http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=519&Itemid=207)
47. Antrobus (2004)
48. *Feminist Africa* is a journal by the African Gender Institute aimed at producing relevant, cutting edge analysis and dialogue about feminist organising on the continent.
49. BUWA! is published biannually by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa. You can access in on [www.osisa.org](http://www.osisa.org) or write to [publications@osisa.org](mailto:publications@osisa.org)
50. <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/default,date,2010-03-25.aspx>



The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) is a growing African institution committed to deepening democracy, protecting human rights and enhancing good governance in southern Africa. OSISA's vision is to promote and sustain the ideals, values, institutions and practice of open society, with the aim of establishing a vibrant southern African society in which people, free from material and other deprivation, understand their rights and responsibilities and participate democratically in all spheres of life.

Open Debate is funded by OSISA and is intended to spark debate on critical issues. Feel free to join in the discussion, send your thoughts to [opendebate@osisa.org](mailto:opendebate@osisa.org) or [alicek@osisa.org](mailto:alicek@osisa.org) or comment on the website: [www.osisa.org](http://www.osisa.org)

### Johannesburg Office

Phone +27 (0)11 587 5000  
 Fax +27 (0)11 587 5099

[opendebate@osisa.org](mailto:opendebate@osisa.org)  
[www.osisa.org](http://www.osisa.org)

### Physical Address

1st Floor, President Place  
 1 Hood Avenue / 148 Jan Smuts Avenue  
 (corner Bolton Road)  
 Rosebank

### Postal Address

PO Box 678  
 Wits 2050  
 Johannesburg  
 South Africa



# OSISA

Open Society Initiative  
for Southern Africa

---

**Shamillah Wilson** is an independent feminist consultant focusing on women's rights, leadership development and movement building in Africa. She holds a BA (UCT) and an MBA (University of Liverpool). Her experiences include the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) and the Speakers' Forum of South African Legislatures and the Association for Women's Rights in Development. In addition, she is currently a working group member of the African Feminist Forum and also of Feminist Alternatives (A Southern Africa based group focusing on grassroots feminist political education and organising).

