

Moving beyond the public

THE CHALLENGE OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL ORGANISING IN THE TIME OF AIDS

High vulnerability to HIV and high rates of infection amongst women and girls is an entrenched part of the epidemiology of AIDS in Africa. In this article **Sisonke Msimang** and **Sharon Ekambaram** question why, despite our knowledge of 'women's vulnerability', little seems to be done to overcome the social and political determinants of HIV infection in women. They link their explanation to the inability of the women's movement to contest gender inequality in the private spaces of life, and argue that HIV shows the need for a movement of poor, unemployed and peasant women to challenge power relations.

Introduction

In the early 1980s, gay activists in the United States launched a confrontational and sustained onslaught on the U.S. government, forcing it to speed up funding and research. As a result of their efforts, the technology that identified the HI-virus was developed (Shilts, 1988).

In South Africa, the government has finally conceded to the provision of antiretroviral therapy for people living with HIV/AIDS. It has been a difficult campaign, requiring court cases, acts of civil disobedience and shouting matches between senior officials and AIDS activists. The State has been dragged, kicking and screaming, but it has finally come to the party. This shift would not have been possible without the efforts of thousands of HIV-positive activists and their allies, who have formed a mass movement to demand their right to health (Freidman & Mottiar, 2004).

The United States of America and South Africa offer models of remarkable activism, in which the interests of marginalised people have been advanced through persistence, strategic action and the might of numbers.

Yet in the years between San Francisco and New York in 1985, and Soweto and Kwa Mashu in 2004, AIDS has ceased to be 'a gay disease.' Somewhere along the way, it has become a heterosexual disease, and the faces of black women and girls have replaced those of gay white men.

As AIDS has taken hold in many communities, it has become clear that those with the least power and the least access to information and health services are most at risk of contracting the virus. The community of NGOs and activists working to prevent new infections and mitigate impact has known for years that the impact on women would reach these proportions. Despite this, little has been done to systematically address the gender inequalities that fuel soaring female infection rates (Human Rights Watch, 2003; United Nations, 2004).

In sub-Saharan Africa, UNAIDS estimates that women constitute 58 per cent of people living with HIV/AIDS – a higher proportion than in any other part of the world (UNAIDS, 2004). In Southern Africa, where HIV infection rates are highest, no group has been as badly affected as women and girls (UNAIDS, 2004).

In the last few years there has been no shortage of prominent individuals and institutions championing the cause of women and girls.¹ Yet the rhetoric has done little to change the status quo. The numbers of women and girls being infected continues to rise, and the numbers accessing treatment remains pathetically low.²

Thus far, much of the energy of those activists who have attempted to address the gender dynamics of HIV vulnerability has focused on expanding existing HIV programmes so that they take the needs of women and girls into account.

This article takes the debate a step further, arguing that, in part, the failure of governments and international agencies to adequately address the issues of gender and HIV/AIDS can be attributed to an over-emphasis on developing technical solutions to major social challenges; and furthermore, that many of the problems women encounter as they attempt to protect themselves against HIV infection are best dealt with through sustained political action.

Despite strong evidence which suggests that poverty, gender-based violence and the cultural norms that police women's sexuality make women and girls more susceptible to HIV infection, national women's movements have not yet fully taken up the challenges that HIV and AIDS pose to their own organising tactics. Since independence, organisations aligned with the women's movement in Southern African countries have tended to use methods that are better suited to meeting the needs of middle class women than they are to dealing with the challenges of poverty and sexuality that so profoundly affect poor and working class women (Mama, 2002).

We argue – as others have – that the women's movement increasingly comprises non-governmental organisations more concerned with providing services than mobilising women in defence of their strategic political rights (Lewis, 2002). Indeed, we note the

¹ Champions for women's rights issues in relation to HIV/AIDS include Stephen Lewis, the United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa; Jim Morris, Executive Director of World Food Programme; and actress Emma Thompson.

² Treatment figures for Africa are not yet gender-disaggregated, even though the keeping of statistics only began in the last two years. It is therefore difficult to estimate what proportion of people on ARVs are women. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in lower middle income countries with relatively good health infrastructure, women have better access to drugs because PMTCT programmes are being used as an entry point. However, in poorer settings, women and girls tend to have less access than men because most ARV access is through private hospitals and through employment programmes. Men tend to have more income and represent a larger percentage of the workforce than women, and therefore have better access to ARVs in such settings.

problematic nature of their claims to represent women's interests³ when often they interact with women in poor and marginalised communities in ways that cast them as 'beneficiaries' rather than as equals. Making the women's movement accountable to an active and vocal constituency rather than to boards of directors, donors or state institutions is a key challenge of our times.

The smaller, less politically connected AIDS Service Organisations (ASOs) that can be found in communities all over the region are often in a better position to articulate the interests of those women who are poor, alienated and vulnerable to HIV infection, than are large women's organisations.

However, ASOs are not necessarily capable of this articulation, because they are not primarily concerned with challenging patriarchy. Their broader community development focus often means that they see their mandate as one of addressing basic needs and alleviating poverty rather than fighting to transform culture. Indeed, these organisations often reflect deep gender inequalities, using women to provide the bulk of services linked to care and support, and relying on men to make decisions about funding allocations and other matters related to planning.

Despite these challenges, we assert that AIDS as a social and political phenomenon has the potential to inspire new models of organisation amongst women. We argue that a viable politically oriented women's movement can emerge from the social conditions created by HIV/AIDS. The survival of this movement will, however, depend to a large

³ In the language of development, gender interests are those issues that are significant in relation to women's political identity as women. The notion of women's gender interests was first introduced in 1985 by Maxine Molyneux, a political theorist who wrote about women's emancipation in Nicaragua after the revolution. Molyneux's ideas were then incorporated into gender and development analyses by Caroline Moser in the early 1990s. Gender interests are divided into two categories. Strategic gender interests refer to long-term challenges. Addressing strategic gender interests begins with the assumption that women are subordinate to men as a consequence of social and institutional discrimination against women. Thus, strategic gender needs are addressed when the power relationships between women and men are challenged and confronted. A key strategic gender interest is to control their sexuality. Other strategic gender interests include access to land, credit, and inheritance rights as well as access to abortions and the skills and services related to sexual and reproductive decision-making. Practical gender interests (usually referred to as needs) are related to gender roles. For women, practical gender needs relate to fulfilling their productive, reproductive and community roles and responsibilities. In most cases, addressing practical gender needs allows women to do more work in less time, but does not address the fundamentally unequal nature of relationships between women and men. Many AIDS programmes fall into this category, providing access to condoms but not working with women and men to address the gender inequality that makes it difficult for them to be used effectively.

extent on the ability of national women's organisations to shift their agendas and transform their practices in ways that facilitate rather than obstruct the interests of poor and marginalised women.

Section 1: Getting it wrong?

In contrast to East Africa, the AIDS epidemic was slow to arrive in the Southern Africa region. When it exploded in the early 1990s, few people were ready for it. Denial and stigma amongst leaders only gave way to action in the late 1990s. At this stage, most states focused their efforts on establishing HIV prevention programmes located within national ministries of health. Typical prevention programmes disseminated information about HIV transmission and prevention to the general public, promoted the use of condoms, encouraged and provided voluntary testing and counselling services, and provided screening for sexually transmitted diseases.

When critics suggested that health ministries alone would not be able to tackle HIV/AIDS, national governments and NGOs began advocating for multi-sectoral responses to the pandemic. It was clear that entire societies would need to be mobilised, using all arms of the state machinery.

As the epidemic unfolded, many began to realise that awareness would not be enough to change sexual behaviour. Yet in the early years there was optimism. Indeed, even today many AIDS programmes assert that with the right mix of information, skills training and access to health services such as voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) and treatment and management of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), countries can respond to the epidemic.

This is a simplistic approach. For women and girls, vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is symptomatic of profound social inequalities. Women who are poor, or socially stigmatised (for example, sex workers, lesbians, women with disabilities, women who live on the streets, widows) still find it difficult to fully take advantage of programmes that offer even the best, most appropriate information, skills and services.

While the management and efficacy of AIDS programmes – how many people they are reaching, how often, and with what degree of success – should be open to scrutiny, critiquing HIV/AIDS programmes for the ways in which they do not address women misses a more fundamental point. Such programmes are a technical and relatively small-scale response to much larger developmental challenges, most of which are structural in nature.

The perceived failure of AIDS programmes to bring down HIV prevalence rates is exogenous to the programmes themselves. While HIV prevention programmes are often flawed and produce messages that are inappropriate to women's experiences, of greater concern is that states and international agencies have put too much faith in their ability to solve the problems that lead to HIV infection. Ignoring the economic and social crises of structural poverty and gender inequality and the ways in which they intersect and fuel the epidemic, in favour of HIV/AIDS interventions that focus either on mitigating the impact, teaching skills or extending services will continue to yield unsatisfactory results.

Section 2: What should we be doing?

As the epidemic worsens in Southern Africa, the need to intensify efforts to foster gender equality at the most basic levels – in the household and in the community – becomes more urgent. Most critical among the challenges that must be addressed if meaningful progress is to be made in reducing HIV prevalence among women and girls, are poverty and violence against women. Too often, however, the links between poverty, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS are not made explicit. If appropriate developmental and political responses are to be crafted, these connections will need to be explored in a more rigorous manner as the epidemic unfolds.

Reducing poverty

There is a cyclical relationship between poverty and HIV/AIDS. On the one hand, HIV infection leads to illness and reduces the capacity of an individual to earn an income. The costs of medication and treatments exacerbate the situation. Within households, family members often undertake extra work to supplement the lost income, and often children and women within the household are forced to spend increasing amounts of time caring for the sick.

Women and girls in poor households are often forced to sell sex in exchange for money, food or other goods and services such as transport. In these types of sexual exchanges, women often find it difficult to place conditions – like condom use – on sex.

While poverty drives negative coping strategies, it is the ways in which poverty and inequality intersect that is worrying in this region. For many poor young women who are living alongside the wealthy, the only way to access luxuries – in the absence of functioning economies and educational institutions – may be through 'transactional'

sex. The choices of girls and women are dramatically constrained by the inability of both the state's and international institutions to provide them with meaningful opportunities.

Women and girls represent a disproportionate number of the poor (Whitehead, 2003), and their access to education and employment opportunities tends to be lower than that of men and boys (International Labour Organisation, 2001). As such, engaging in sex for cash, cellphones and clothes can be seen as a rational response to poverty and structural inequality.

Whereas poverty can be a function of low wages, in Southern Africa it is largely a function of unemployment. Because structural unemployment is high, many people will never be employed. Throughout the region, unemployment figures remain stubbornly high while access to cash through the informal sector is painfully low for many households (Friedman, 2002). Increasing the state's responsibility to alleviate poverty is therefore critical. The proposal for the South African government to adopt a Basic Income Grant (BIG) is interesting in this regard. Rather than providing targeted means-tested assistance, which can be expensive and difficult to manage, the BIG would put R100 into the hands of every South African each month from the time they are born until the day they die. While this is a small amount for an individual, the theory is that individuals within households would then be able to pool their resources and use the additional income in whatever ways they saw fit.

According to a study by the South African Medical Research Council (MRC), 20 per cent of women in a Soweto survey had had sex in exchange for cash or services in 2002 (Dunkle, Jewkes *et al*, 2003). In households where there is additional income, the need to engage in potentially risky and unwanted sexual activity may be reduced simply by having more income available.

Although the BIG initiative is not a direct response to HIV and AIDS, it may offer some important benefits to households affected by HIV and AIDS, and more importantly to women and girls within households. While having more cash does not eradicate gender inequities within the household, it may offer some room for manoeuvre among those with few options. In the absence of macroeconomic environments that are conducive to job creation, the role of the state will be critical in this regard.

Stopping violence against women and girls

Attempts to deal with poverty require significant state intervention, and are largely dependent on broader economic processes at global and regional level. As IFAD notes, 'everywhere, economic life is increasingly determined by private investment and private exchange within a global system of trade and finance. Governments and their partners can seek to create the conditions for insertion of local economies into this system, but local wealth and well-being are ultimately determined by the market' (IFAD, 2002:1). The efforts of activists attempting to address poverty and its intersections with gender need to be relatively complex. On the other hand, in addressing violence against women there are more possibilities for local action to shift individual and collective behaviours and attitudes.

Although the chances of becoming infected with HIV through a single sex act with an infected partner are relatively low, the likelihood increases when sexual intercourse is violent because there is likely to be increased tearing and bleeding (United Nations, 2004). Because many countries in the region have high numbers of reported sexual assaults, the risks of infection through rape are not insignificant.

In addition to physical violence, women's vulnerability to HIV infection is increased by the *fear* of violence and emotional abuse. Worrying about their partner's response often makes it very difficult for women to take measures to protect themselves from HIV infection. Where women are in violent relationships, whether or not they have ever actually been raped by their partners, a study by the South African MRC indicates that they are often less likely to be able to negotiate condom use than women in non-violent relationships. The study concludes that women who are beaten by their husbands or boyfriends are almost 50 per cent more likely to become HIV-positive than their counterparts in healthier relationships (Jewkes, 2004).

Numerous studies indicate that women who are abused as children tend to exhibit unhealthy sexual behaviours later in life. They are more likely to have more sexual partners, to have sex while drunk or under the influence of drugs, to have anal sex, and to have sex with partners they know might be at risk of having STIs or HIV. Given the high rates of abuse and violence against children, there are many women who as a result of traumatic childhood sexualisation put themselves at risk (United Nations, 2004).

While these standard links between violence and HIV/AIDS are important to understand, they do not begin to describe the myriad violent experiences which women in this region are subjected to on a daily basis. Aside from violence that is exercised on women's individual bodies, we are concerned about the violence that is perpetrated on women collectively under the guise of protecting or promoting traditional cultures. Of particular concern in this regard are increased reports of virginity testing in some parts of South Africa, and the public stripping (and recent gang rape) of women and girls perceived to be dressed too scantily by men in Swaziland (see box below).

Virginity testing

Advocates of virginity testing argue that the traditional practice (which had all but died out prior to the late 1990s) helps girls to respect themselves. These advocates have powerful allies. Attending a virginity testing ceremony in the Eastern Cape, the Deputy President of South Africa noted that traditionally, 'Girls knew that their virginity was their family's treasure. They would only have sex when permitted to do so by their families after marriage' (BBC, 2004).

Yet, as the Commission on Gender Equality has noted, virginity tests are highly inaccurate, often unhygienic, and a violation of girls' rights to equality and human dignity (Reuters, 2001). Underlying virginity tests are cultural norms that dictate that women should be virgins, and that family honour is somehow linked to women's maintenance of their virginity. Therefore girls who aren't virgins should be ashamed of themselves, since they bring shame upon their families. The spotlight on girls' sexuality underscores the fact that boys and young men are not expected to adhere to the same standards of sexual behaviour as their female peers.

That Zuma was present at the testing, but not as an ally of girls attempting to stop the violation of their rights, is worrying. In spite of the South African Constitution's emphasis on human rights, Zuma's attitude endorses a policing of women's sexuality that is deeply ingrained.

It is a policing that finds its worst expression in the events that have recently unfolded in Swaziland. Early in 2004, conductors at a taxi rank had 'banned' women and girls from wearing miniskirts in the area. Police, frustrated by the lawlessness, abandoned the area and ceased patrolling it. By mid-year, there had been two reported incidents of women wearing miniskirts who had been stripped naked by bus conductors claiming outrage at their modern dress.

On September 22, an eighteen-year-old girl on her way to a friend's birthday party was dragged off the bus by conductors who then cut off her skirt with a knife and raped her repeatedly. The police did not show up for hours, even though a station is located two blocks away and there was a considerably noisy crowd.

In a news report, an eyewitness stated that 'The girl's screams were drowned out by the crowd, all men, who whistled and cheered on the conductors, who continued with their raping even though the girl was bleeding heavily.' The report went on to state that 'Some women attempted to intervene, and wrapped a Swazi cloth (*lihiya*) around the naked girl's waist. They were reportedly pushed aside by the conductors, who continued to rape the girl' (UN IRIN, September 23 2004).

Despite the fact that the assailants were seen by a crowd of people, they were only arrested four days later after complaints from the public. Instead of being charged with rape, 'they were charged with indecent assault as a brush handle had also been used in the attack' (UN IRIN, September 23 2004).

This incident underscores the importance of moving beyond laws and policies in the fight against violence against women. As long as this type of publicly sanctioned violence is possible, the fear that keeps women silent about matters related to sex will remain pervasive. If women do not feel empowered to negotiate safer sex, refuse sex altogether or express their desire to have sex when they want it, AIDS messages and prevention programmes will have limited impact on behaviour change.

Yet the Swazi example does not stop with the rape. In the week following the rape, Swazi women of all walks of life organised a march, and over a thousand women protested, calling on the government to change the customs and laws that keep women in a subordinate position in Swazi society. As one protester noted, 'Women cannot purchase land or sign contracts, we cannot take out a bank loan without the sponsorship of a husband or male relative. Legally, we are children. How can a country treat its women like this today?'

The linkage between the ways in which women's sexuality is policed and other forms of inequality is clear. As both the examples above illustrate, reducing violence against women depends in large measure on changing the attitudes and behaviours of women and men. As outlined below, women's movements have a significant role to play in this regard.

Section 3: Reinvigorating women's movements

Defining feminism

The word 'feminist' is often used as a curse. It has come to mean angry, loud, mannish, sexually unsatisfied. While the purpose of this paper is not to debate the term feminist or any of the words that have been sought to replace it, it is important to understand some of the theories and debates surrounding feminism and women's activism in Africa in order to strategise around the potential that exists for women's movements to make a serious impact in addressing HIV/AIDS.

Feminism is a social and political movement that advocates the equality of the sexes. Feminists believe that across societies, male dominance of women is socially constructed, upheld by laws, institutions, individuals and social norms and cultural beliefs which keep women, as a group or class, subordinate to men. There is a range of feminisms, all of which put forward different methods of overthrowing patriarchy.

Josephine Donovan (1985) suggests that two themes are central to the practice and theory of feminism. The first is that women should be treated as the equals of men; the second, that the qualities of women (inherent or otherwise) should be respected and serve as a basis for women's power in society. These contradictory tenets and the ways in which they diverge have marked much of feminist thought not only in the U.S. but globally. Simply put, it has been described as the clash between liberal feminism and cultural feminism.

In the tradition of classical liberalism, the law exists to protect human beings from themselves. Hobbes argued that 'man' in a state of nature – without laws or government – was constantly at war with himself. Without laws, Hobbes famously believed, life was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' He argued that the only escape from this misery was to establish a government that would ensure order, as did Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and argued that laws were necessary for human beings to live peacefully together. Although Rousseau was less pessimistic than Hobbes – he believed that humans in their natural state were peaceful – he nonetheless argued that the process of modernisation had corrupted the innate goodness of man. Like Hobbes, Rousseau suggested that survival in modern times was contingent upon the existence of a social contract agreed to by all members of society. Without such a social contract, both men feared chaos. All feminist politics – to some degree or another – are based on these fundamental tenets of fairness and order. Liberal feminists believe in women's rights to participate in the making and maintenance of the social contract.

Cultural feminism supports the notion that women are 'inherently kinder and gentler' than men, a belief that can be found in many cultures. In it, the social differences between men and women are often amplified and come to mean that women are by their nature nurturers and carers, while men are biologically hard-wired to hunt and provide food. Cultural feminists have asserted that while differences between women and men might not be biologically determined, they are so thoroughly ingrained as to be intractable. As such, cultural feminists seek to build on 'women's culture,' often through separatist efforts that attempt to disengage from patriarchy (Tong, 1989; Jagger & Rothenberg, 1993).

Because cultural feminism can play into the hands of patriarchy, often reifying stereotypes about the differences between women and men, it has been rejected by mainstream feminists in many parts of the world. Indeed, the arguments against women's emancipation that have been put forward by traditionalists and nationalists in post-independence Africa have found resonance with cultural feminist ideas (Shohat, 1997).

In many parts of Africa, the term feminist has been rejected. Instead, some have called for the use of the term womanist, while others prefer suffixes – Third World, black or African must preface 'feminist'. For the purposes of this discussion, the term 'feminist' is used in describing those whose values and political actions put them in the 'feminist camp' even if they avoid the use of the term.

African feminist efforts have generally been liberal in approach, using the law as an instrument to equalise society (Mama, 2002; Hassim & Albertyn, 2003). These approaches have tended to focus on the public arena, ensuring that women's concerns become a matter of public policy. Because so many of the ways in which gender inequality is expressed occur in the private sphere – within the home and in the bedroom – a key strategy of feminist organisers has been to make the private realm more visible and bring it into the public domain. This has meant a significant push to criminalise acts like rape and sexual assault.

African feminist expression: independence – 1985

In Africa, women have organised around their needs and political interests for centuries (Lewis, 2002). The history of resistance to colonialism contains many examples of marches and protests by women objecting to the imposition of taxes and regulations that affected their lives.

In Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular, women's involvement in resistance to colonialism in the 1960s meant that women were relatively well-represented in the post-independence state (Lewis, 2002). In Southern Africa, Zimbabwe and South Africa stand out as countries in which women who had participated in the liberation struggle were also able to articulate specific demands that challenged sexism, both within their liberation movements and in broader society.

Post-independence, however, women's political claims have grown narrower and less transformational. The depoliticisation of women's demands for social and economic justice is a subject of much contention among African feminists (Mama, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Ngwezu, 2002). The take-up of gender equality as a priority theme by the United Nations and other multi-lateral institutions beginning in the 1970s, meant that gender inequality was reduced to a technical problem that could easily be fixed with the right economic and social policies (Lewis, 2001).

This approach to resolving gender inequality has resulted in a focus primarily on improving female participation in the political and economic arenas. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many women's groups, informed by the debates around women in development (WID) and gender and development (GAD), concentrated on scrapping institutionalised forms of discrimination against women. Laws that had designated women as legal minors as a result of the intersecting patriarchies of colonialism and customary practice were revised, and new policies were introduced to ensure women's access to credit, land and a range of other resources. Some attention has been paid to women's health, and particularly to matters of reproductive health and family planning, but as Lewis notes,

While the strategy of focussing on political representation, extending laws to protect women in the 'private domain,' and bringing more women into the formal economy has been somewhat successful, it has also meant that 'democracy for women has come to be counted by the achievement of rights and representation in the state (public citizenship), rather than by the capacity of individual women to exercise agency in the 'private' sphere (private capabilities)' (Albertyn & Hassim, 2003:151).

The results have been that poor, marginalised and socially excluded women have generally not been able to make much use of the gender advances brought about during the last twenty years (Hassim & Albertyn, 2003). The existence of a law or a

service is an important precursor to access to equality, but it does not necessarily deliver tangibly on that potential. The ability to access and use the service or the law – substantive equality – is a much more difficult goal.

In countries where women have the right to own and inherit land, dispossession and asset-grabbing from widows are still commonplace, and few cases are ever reported to the police. A young Zambian woman attests to this: 'After my father died, everything was taken by my father's family. I was six years old. The sister of my father took everything. It doesn't matter if you take it to court' (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Where family planning and maternal and child health services are available, often maternal mortality remains stubbornly high and contraceptive prevalence rates remain disturbingly low because men tend to make decisions about the health of their wives, often without consulting them. In Malawi, 70 per cent of married women report that their husbands are the sole decision-makers in relation to their health. In Zambia, only 30 per cent of women actually make decisions about their own health, and in Zimbabwe the figure is closer to 50 per cent (Central Statistical Office, 1999; National Statistical Office, 2000; Central Statistical Office, 2001).

Even where states have correctly made commitments to gender equality, and have put in place measures guaranteeing such rights, women have bumped up against the boundaries of the private sphere, where the desire for closeness may often clash with the fear of infection. One might ask why women's organising has not focused on these more difficult and complex issues. In part, it is precisely because they are complex and difficult. The trouble with desire and sexuality is that they are difficult to regulate and legislate. They fit into the tricky realm of social transformation which is in large measure the responsibility of the women's movement. Yet the women's movement in Africa has virtually ignored sexuality. Lewis (2002) notes that there have been 'social and academic silences surrounding sexuality in Africa.' In part she suggests that these silences are born out of the 'tacit or direct rejections of colonial stereotyping of African (and especially African women's) 'hyper-developed' sexuality (in refuting the stereotype, African women writers and researchers may have shied away from the exploration of sexuality altogether)'.

The less tricky 'soft targets' have been states. Post-independence, Southern African states have increasingly been seen as existing to safeguard and protect the rights of citizens, despite the fact that they have often failed to do so. As Mama has noted, 'on

the African continent, feminist strategy has often been very state-focused'. She suggests that this has largely been because women have sought 'to ensure that the modern state acts as a bulwark against the often abusive excesses of both imperial and traditional constructions of women' (Mama, 2002).

Mama argues that it is an approach that has been strategic. Yet she also notes that even where states make concrete commitments to gender equality they seldom do more than co-opt the language of gender equality. The structures of the state and the ways in which it functions often remain intact. For example, many states have established gender machinery to monitor and evaluate government efforts around gender equality. These institutions are usually under-resourced, lack authority to challenge the actions of line ministries and tend to have unclear mandates (IDASA, 2003). In general, however, the take-up of gender issues within the organs of the state and in the law has been far easier to achieve than within communities.

Aside from the efficiency argument – that it has simply been easier to push for public change than to advocate for long-term individual behaviour change – there is also the reality that feminist activists in Southern Africa have tended to be educated, middle class women for whom progress in the public arena has made a genuine difference (Mama, 1997; Lewis, 2001). While these changes have been important, in general they have been of the greatest benefit to middle class African women, a sticking point for many feminists in the global south. The fact is that many of the national organisations speaking on behalf of women are NGOs and professional women's associations.

This point is not made to undermine the efforts of women's movements, but to point to their limitations. These critiques usually come from traditional and religious leaders who are opposed to the notion of gender equality because it is unnatural or against God's way, and can easily be disregarded. Yet increasingly the gap between women's rights groups and the women they claim to represent is uncomfortably large. The strategies that guide African women's activism in relation to gender issues are often written by middle class women whose connections to poor women are tenuous at best.

Therefore, poor women are continually bumping their heads against the limitations of middle class women's articulations of the problem. These strategies are in large part shaped by global processes and models of development rather than by demands from women at community level. As Hargreaves notes, 'the key to achieving a gender equality that has meaning for the majority of [...] women does not lie in a celebration of the mere construction of a gender machinery and the adoption of politically correct policies

– although these are needed – but in our commitment to defining the macroeconomic obstacles to the elimination of poverty’ (Hargreaves, 2001). Mama underscores this point, arguing that ‘ill-conceived and poorly-conceptualised or passive adoption of generic frameworks and checklists that are not sufficiently animated by local realities, which profess to be neutral rather than attempting to attend seriously to constantly shifting power relations and gender relations are likely to fail, and in any case are easily subverted’ (Mama, 2002).

Development vs politics: the limitations of feminist organising 1985 – present

When the U.N. Decade for Women ended with the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1984, an important era of feminist mobilisation was born in Africa. The Nairobi conference was fundamental in shaping the way that women’s movements in Africa articulated their concerns, particularly as they related to the state. Those who attended the conference also emerged with clear critiques of the ways in which women in development (WID) programmes were functioning. Yet the Decade, and the conference that marked a new chapter in women’s development issues, was also a demonstration of the power of ‘trans-national’ gender theories. Grewal and Kaplan (2000) use the term ‘trans-national’ to describe how Western feminist thinking has travelled around the globe in ways that are never ‘free of asymmetrical power relations’.

The influence of trans-national feminism is particularly problematic because it usurps the expression of local feminisms. A monolithic, globally driven feminism can never be a valid reflection of the multiple realities of women – it must necessarily exaggerate, minimise and blend complexities. The result is often a bland gender inequality soup that can only be consumed in ‘global spaces.’ Within local arenas this feminism is often looked at suspiciously, or worse yet, is not even recognised as feminist, so watered down has it become. By the time trans-national feminist ideas are turned into projects to train police officers on gender-based violence they are merely shadows of feminist theory and practice, toothless technical responses to technical problems.

With the NGO-isation of the women’s movement, discussions about women’s needs take place within the frame of ‘development,’ rather than in the context of political action for social justice. Thus women’s claims are only ever voiced in narrow terms that seek to understand how programmes and projects can be designed to address needs rather than how to bring about the kind of fundamental social transformation that is required to make communities more just.

Because NGOs work with people at a grassroots level, they are often seen as representing the concerns and interests of the people who live in the communities that NGOs service. Therefore, people who work for NGOs are often called activists. This is certainly the case with women's organisations, perhaps more so than in other sectors. Women's organisations are often seen by governments and international development agencies as 'activist' groups fighting for change. While for some this may be true, NGOs often simply provide services, or run projects in order to carry out specific activities. These activities are usually part of a broader agenda for social change, but just as often they exist solely to provide food, or child-care or counselling services. These are important activities but certainly not activist in nature. Yet the tendency to call all non-state actors 'activists' is troublesome.

Simply aligning oneself with the term 'gender' appears to be enough to earn the label of 'activist'. This is problematic because, for the most part, technical gender experts tend to work *within* NGOs and in international agencies, operating 'in the system.' Many may be rooted in the women's movement – although with the proliferation of women's studies programmes at university level this is decreasingly the case – but their location within institutions that often behave in ways that are not in the interests of women means that they are not activists (Lewis, 2001).

That they are called activists is worrisome because women's NGOs are often seen as representing the interests of women, as activists conventionally do. This leaves less and less scope for the voices of poor, rural and marginalised women to be heard by powerful institutions. Instead, the voices of professional women who work within development agencies are taken as authoritative sources of information about what all women want and need.

Moving forward

Perhaps it is time for a more confrontational social discourse that links women's struggles for basic needs more coherently with gender consciousness. This would allow women's movements greater scope to talk about and challenge the deeply held norms that police women's sexuality.

With the advent of AIDS, the need for activism that challenges the core 'values' that make women vulnerable to infection and to exploitation is urgent. In Swaziland the first ever women's protest symbolises an important step forward for that country and its women. The spontaneous action, which brought together women from all walks of life

demonstrates that the fear of AIDS may finally be inspiring women to act on the violations that have always endangered their lives. Using that fear and outrage to inspire grassroots action presents an important new challenge.

In South Africa, the proliferation of AIDS support groups, most of which are established and run by women, also provides a potential site of activism for women. AIDS support groups are small and intimate spaces in which women talk not only about their HIV status but also about other aspects of their lives, including issues of sex and sexuality.

Given the politics of AIDS in South Africa, support groups and their relationship to TAC branches and branches of the African National Congress are sites of serious activism (Friedman & Mottiar, 2004). Demands for treatment have come not from a small clique of NGO directors in Johannesburg, who claim to represent the nation, but from thousands of people whose political power lies primarily in their numbers. The fact that they have managed to force open a debate and reinvigorate the culture of mass movements in South Africa implies that there is a space for others to build on their foundations.

Across the region, because of concerns about HIV infection, *lobola*,⁴ widow inheritance and child marriage – traditions that were born out of a complicated mix of concern for protecting women from poverty, and the notion that women and their sexuality can be communally owned – are increasingly coming under fire, not only from feminists but from the women whose lives these practices affect most directly.

The backlash against the questions and agitation of women will be severe – witness the emergence of virginity testing and the use of gang rape as a mechanism of punishing girls who are perceived to be too modern. Yet women's response to this backlash may inspire the kind of movement that is necessary to effect genuine change. As Amina Mama suggests, 'perhaps it would be more realistic to envisage and work towards a series of interconnected mobilisations and strategic alliances, whose strategists navigate the complicated politics of state and international funding so skilfully that they are able to retain a degree of independence and self direction. This clearly requires a high level of analytic and strategic capacity, which combines locally-acquired experience and knowledge with international acumen' (2002).

⁴ *Lobola* is a Nguni term used to describe bride-price. The custom is commonplace throughout Southern Africa. Traditionally it involved negotiations between families of prospective spouses leading to an agreement on the amount of cattle that would be provided by the man and his family in exchange for the women's family's consent for their marriage. Today lobola agreements include other non-livestock items such as cash and appliances.

Working with small groups of women to deconstruct gender norms, to inspire anger and outrage, and to develop responses to the political crisis that AIDS has wrought on women, the gender inequalities that fuel HIV/AIDS can be confronted. The state can attempt to be just, and international development agencies can tinker around the edges funding projects and supporting state processes, but these institutions cannot transform patriarchy. Indeed, they are often imbued with patriarchy themselves, carrying vested male interests into each interaction with 'communities.' Transformation is the task of movements. Moving into the second decade of the new millennium, women are attempting to live and love in a time of AIDS. Yet their allies in development institutions tip-toe around the obvious, afraid to talk about what happens in bedrooms and backstreets, concerned that conversations about pleasure and pain, blood and sex can only lead to trouble. Yet women are already in the kind of trouble that only a movement can address. As we have argued, Southern Africa is in need of a highly localised and politicised web of women's organisations. The ability of these organisations, operating separately in communities throughout the region, to come together at important moments under the banner of the women's movement will be a deciding factor in whether or not women can win the fight against gender inequality and within that context, against HIV and AIDS.

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A Tough Life for Swazi Women

Swazi women took to the streets in an unprecedented protest march on Thursday following the public gang rape of a teenage girl at a bus rank in the commercial city of Manzini. 'Abuse of women is getting worse, and we must stop it because the next time there might be a public murder,' said one of the march organisers, Brenda Nhlabatsi, of the Swaziland chapter of the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS.

Condemning the rape by bus conductors and drivers of an 18-year-old student, Prime Minister Themba Dlamini expressed concern over the possibility of HIV infection: 'What the young woman was subjected to could be tantamount to murder, as the health status of the perpetrators is not known.'

The grandmother of the victim criticised police for their inaction. Officers from headquarters just two blocks away did not appear on the scene for two hours. Sources told IRIN that the police had long ago ceded security of the bus rank to vigilante groups made up of drivers and conductors, who earlier this year had banned women passengers from wearing mini-skirts.

'Conductors stripped women in mini-skirts naked twice before this year, but this week's incident shows that violence against women is escalating, exacerbated by the lack of law enforcement,' said Nhlabatsi. The victim was headed for a girlfriend's birthday party when she was pulled off the bus by conductors. Cutting off her skirt with a knife, the conductors, aged 17 to 24, raped her repeatedly. When arrested on Wednesday after a rising public outcry since the first reports of the incident appeared on Sunday, they were charged with indecent assault as a brush handle had also been used in the attack. 'The girl's screams were drowned out by the crowd, all men, who whistled and cheered on the conductors, who continued with their raping even though the girl was bleeding heavily,' an eyewitness said. Some women attempted to intervene, and wrapped a Swazi cloth (*lihiya*) around the naked girl's waist. They were reportedly pushed aside by the conductors, who continued to rape the girl. 'Why are women treated like second-class citizens in this country, and why is government silent on these daily rape cases?' asked Gugu Phungwayo, an organiser with the Swaziland National Provident Fund. About 1 000 marchers, including school children, joined the protest action at the bus rank on Thursday, with speakers demanding the abolishment of outmoded customs that keep Swazi women in minority status. 'Women cannot purchase land or sign contracts, we cannot take out a bank loan without the sponsorship of a husband or male relative. Legally, we are children. How can a country treat its women like this today?' they asked.

IRIN News 23 September 2004

Swazi Busmen Say Rape Apt Punishment For Miniskirt

Bus conductors in Swaziland have vowed to assault and rape female passengers who wear miniskirts, sparking outrage among women's groups in the conservative African kingdom. The threat followed this week's arrest of two conductors and a bus driver who were charged with indecently assaulting an 18-year-old high school pupil.

The pupil was attacked at a bus rank in Manzini, Swaziland's commercial centre, by a group of men who shouted at her for wearing a miniskirt, cut it off and then gang-raped her, witnesses told local media.

About 1 000 women marched on the bus rank on Thursday to protest against the attack. They were met by bus crews carrying signs reading: 'We'll get them with our brushes' – a reference to the reported use of a brush handle in the rape. A bus conductor calling himself only Licandza said: 'Women who wear miniskirts want to be raped, and we will give them what they want.'

The bus drivers banned miniskirts on buses earlier in the year, saying they were distracting and encouraged lustful thoughts. Although there have been incidents of women having their clothes ripped off at the bus rank, this was the first reported case of rape.

'This is madness. This has no place in modern society,' said Nonhlanhla Dlamini, director of a local NGO, the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse. She said three women had since come forward to her group to report being raped at the bus rank earlier this year.

'We are talking to the bus owners. We want them to make a code of conduct. We are urging the Road Transportation Board to revoke the operating licences of the involved buses,' she said. The kingdom does not have a state transport system and relies on privately owned minibus taxis to fill the gap.

Police who were criticised by the pupil's grandmother for being slow to arrive on the scene, said they would be vigilant in case of a repeat of the incident. 'No-one has a right to harass anyone because of what the person is wearing,' Superintendent Vusie Masuku said.

Swazi women generally wear modern Western clothing and have worn miniskirts since the 1960s although the government at one stage considered banning them on moral grounds. Some tribal chiefs, however, do ban women wearing miniskirts in their areas. The governor of the royal village Ludzidzini, the most powerful traditional figure in the kingdom, has stopped women from wearing trousers in the village and at the royal palaces.

MEDIA ARTICLE

Speakers at the protest said the attack was symptomatic of a society that discriminated against women. 'There is a connection between customs that say we cannot own property or be parties to legal contracts, and bus conductors who want to dominate us by telling us what to wear,' said one speaker.

The government said it condemned the crime. 'What the young woman was subjected to could be tantamount to murder, as the health status of the perpetrators is not known,' Prime Minister Themba Dlamini said.

Swaziland is ruled by sub-Saharan Africa's last absolute monarch and has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world.

Reuters, Cape Argus (Cape Town, South Africa, 29 September 2004)