

# Comment on the articles by Beall, Hassim and Todes, and by Meintjes

## Does South Africa attend to issues which affect women the most? A reflection<sup>1</sup>

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In this reflection I pose this question and thus reiterate a concern that has been raised by different scholars writing on gender and social justice. This question has been posed from a variety of angles to list a few: by scholars writing on HIV and AIDS (Mswela 2009, Muthree and Maharaj 2010), women's inability to enforce the use of condoms (Boonzaier and de la Rey 2003, Mash et al 2010), and intimate partner violence (Fox 2007, Norman 2010). Despite highlighting these concerns, there are a number of human rights gains that South Africa and the world at large can list with regard to the emancipation of women. A significant decade for women was the 1980s and the policies that emanated from the Beijing conference. Resulting from this landmark conference, numerous discussions and a number of programmes aimed at improving women's lives have been spearheaded by the UN and some sovereign countries, including South Africa. Invariably, a call for the recognition of women as equal citizens is made by Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes (1987), Bennetts (1993) and Meintjes (1996). Concerned about issues that affect women the most, these subjects are insistently probed by these authors both as **social and institutional** issues and at an **individual level**. Whilst on one hand, as a social and institutional issue, it is at the level of the political struggle, education, government and labour, on the other hand it is at an individual level too, and relates to various kinds of violence and abuse that women face. On the whole, the interest of these authors is in the practicalities of designing and facilitating structures or organisational interventions that accord unyielding respect for women.

In the article “‘A bit on the side?’: Gender struggles in the politics of transformation in South Africa”, Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes (1987:4) question the disappearance of women’s struggle under national struggles. They call for a middle ground, arguing that women’s demands will neither be solely met within a strong radical women’s movement nor within an all-encompassing organisation that is blind to the politics of gender. It is to this end that these authors say the context in which women’s struggles occur is not only important but that issues that differentially affect men and women need to be articulated by people that experience them directly. Hence, prior to discussing any policy formulation, both genders should be involved as ‘gender struggles are important in determining the nature and implementation of policy’ (1987:6). For Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes women continue to be treated as less important and so are their struggles. This realisation brings them to the conclusion that women’s status will only be fully recognised when there is acknowledgement that varied facets of women’s struggles exist at international, national, and personal levels. Further, this paper draws attention to the manner in which women have contributed towards bringing about peace during various conflicts in their communities. It notes that although ‘women lacked the confidence and the skills to address large gatherings’ (1987:14), they engaged best in peace mediating processes, equally bearing their wifehood, motherhood and other identities – a contribution that has not been given much prominence and yet an area that has been defined by some scholars (for example Moore 1994, Mama 1997, Ortner 1997 and Hassim 2005) as a significant issue that affects women the most.

In similar vein, from a legal point of view, Tom Bennett (1993), through a discussion on human rights and the African traditional culture ponders on the debates that have been advanced in support of both communal or individual rights, and their value for gender equality. His discussion on the subject begins by questioning the relegation of women’s rights and matters of significance to women whilst loyalty to cultural common interests is propounded. Cultural relativism is found by Bennett as an excuse for failing to advance and be accountable for gender equality. Employing an array of sources, he argues that the African cultural tradition has been defined as a linear, homogenous phenomenon that had always had the man as the head of the household; it has been ‘shown to be too vague and value-laden to account either for the coherence to society or for social change’ (Bennett 1993:35). Sadly, such definitions have been carried over to contemporary

times ignoring the fact that ‘many modern city dwellers are single parents; many households are headed by women, not men (...); and many rural households contain only women, children and the elderly (...)’ (Bennett 1993:34). In this article Bennett does not only demonstrate how culture has been used to serve linear motives but that in doing so, issues that affect women the most, in turn, get ignored.

Sheila Meintjes picks up Bennett’s disquiet but locates her dissatisfaction in the manner in which women’s issues are handled within organisations that should ironically be advancing women’s participation in decision-making processes. In her article, ‘The women’s struggle for equality during South Africa’s transition to democracy’, Meintjes (1996) takes the reader through struggles which women have had to go through in their attempts to participate either within organisations that consist of both men and women or that have only female membership. In both instances, she points out that, at most, women’s concerns are considered to be in the realm of the ‘private’ (Meintjes 1996: 51-53) and thus not regarded as a priority. Within the private sphere, warns Meintjes, exist diverse issues and struggles – with women in rural areas being in many ways more disadvantaged than their counterparts in the urban areas. Thus, though treating the “women race” as equals continues to be a problem because their struggles vary, it is crucial not to use blanket solutions for all women. Heartening aspects of Meintjes’ article are references to the launch and institution of legal instruments, policies and structures earmarked for advancing women’s equality. Whether these processes and legislations have led to concrete forms of dealing with women’s problems, and the hopes and needs that matter most to them, is debatable. Scholars writing on similar issues presented by the authors under review put the spotlight on additional issues of concern for women that do not feature in these authors’ discussion. This spotlight, it can be argued, implies that, in recent times, the nature of women’s concerns has not only diversified but also deepened. The said issues range from poverty (Benjamin 2007 and Maree 2010), partner infidelity (Ragnarsson 2010), to concerns peculiarly affecting HIV positive women (Varga and Brookes 2008).

### **Has South Africa attended to issues which affect women the most?**

A common answer to this question, reiterated in the articles discussed above is that ‘because of their gender, women have earned punishment through varied kinds of *violence* that they and their children experience on a daily

basis'. Gains from the South African political and economic processes following the advent of democracy are differentially experienced by men and women. For those who believe that we all have equal opportunity and we all control our own context and destiny, this is a reasonable response.

Gender relations and the stark inequalities thereof, including the resultant impact on women's lives is the debate that the three articles stimulate, at both theoretical and practical levels. Although the articles were all published almost two decades ago, most of the issues they raise are still of grave concern for women in 2011. At the heart of the debate is that South Africa is, despite a number of transformation processes, a patriarchal society that employs culture (as a tradition and a sophisticated contemporary structural system) to deny women their rights and means of voicing issues that affect them the most.

Some evidence related to the manner in which the women race has been violently dealt with in the public sphere (with strong reference to the domestic sphere) is exemplified in the most power-based and culturally-loaded legal cases, against Julius Malema, the ANCYL President, Jacob Zuma, the current President of the Republic and the incident of stripping women wearing trousers at KwaZulu-Natal's Umlazi T section. Debates generated by these public cases have indicated the kind and extent to which misconceptions about women exist. Also, they can serve as one of the windows into understanding some of the vulnerabilities and concerns that the women in contemporary South Africa face. Magwaza (2006: 03) cites some of these cases and notes, 'embedded in the misconceptions is what has always troubled feminists of all times: the abuse of women or justification thereof, under the rubric of culture'.

It is worth noting that in most expressions, culture is referred to as a 'dynamic phenomenon that cannot be fixed to any particular period or context'. In many instances, however, where men are accorded rights, recognition and resources, and women deprived of similar privileges and protection against public and domestic violence, we learn of a number of arguments that agitate for the imbalance. This stance towards women is referred to by Mama (1991:79) as a common attitude in which African traditions and culture are conveniently appropriated and interpreted in selective ways that enhance male power and authority.

Concomitant with this attitude is the shunning of issues that matter most to women as expressed in the above-mentioned articles. The lesson for all is, *choose your gender wisely, for that does much to determine your future*

as a social being in South Africa. As this is highly implausible, the fight towards attending to matters that affect women the most continues. Women, though sharing a number of challenges, are vastly diverse and experience similar challenges differently. This is a factor that ought to be taken seriously. In order to have a fair-to-good sense of the issues of concern for women, it is crucial that women are engaged more, their differential experiences and circumstances are recorded, and possible solutions are related to their differential experiences. Acknowledging that South Africa is a gendered state (Seidman 1999), we need more studies like the one conducted by Ashley Fox and her colleagues in 2007, entitled, 'In their own voices: A qualitative study of women's risk for intimate partner violence and HIV in South Africa'.

## Note

1. On Meintjes 1996, Bennett 1993, Hassim et al 1987.

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