

CONFERENCE ON WOMEN AND GENDER IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: ANOTHER VIEW OF THE DYNAMICS

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1991 started off with a Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa, at the end of January in Durban. This event was the result of 18 months work, and was a historic event, being the first of its kind in South Africa. The Conference also gave expression to some fiery conflicts which sparked off from the first day already, and which subsided into a ripple effect spreading into activist and academic circles, universities and organisations far and wide. The Conference dynamics have been widely discussed and written about (Bazilli, 1991; Lund et al, 1991; Shefer and Mathis, 1991). Beyond this, one has only to raise the subject of the Conference in any left-wing social gathering, to get a wide range of strongly-felt (and often contradictory) impressions as to what those dynamics were all about.

As a participant at that conference, and listening to the ripples, and reading what has been written about it, I cannot help feeling that we are hearing a whole haphazard collection of facts, some universally true and pertinent, others maybe a bit subjective and reflecting a particular self-interest. But not a collection of facts which necessarily fits into any discernible pattern. As a Marxist I find this a bit unsatisfying, because this collection of truisms does not really bring us any closer to an understanding of the political dynamics which were being played out at this conference. As a feminist I also find it unsatisfactory, because all it offers us in our struggle is some basic practical tips of which we are probably aware already, namely that we must do research in an accessible way; that we must search for feminist methods of conferencing; that we must avoid reproducing the racist and sexist structures which exist in our society; that we must find a way to make academic work accessible to the masses. Somehow one feels that there must be something more to be gained from the experience.

Political Context

A more important fact to bear in mind is that the Conference took place in the context of a highly divided women's movement. The women's movement to which I am referring is the broad group (not in any way formally consolidated) of women's organisations which happen to exist in South Africa. UDF-affiliated regionally-based women's organisations had been attempting since the early 1980s to re-launch a national Federation of South African Women. These attempts had failed to get off

the ground. Instead, the regionally-based women's organisations themselves periodically experienced conflicts which led to further splits. The ANC Women's Section, having been unbanned in February 1990, had only just started launching the structures of the ANC Women's League since about July 1990. Some of the UDF-affiliated women's organisations had consequently decided to disband in favour of putting energy into strengthening the structures of the ANC Women's League, but this was also not a smooth process, and was accompanied by many localised conflicts.

In addition, on the political scene, the 1980s have been a period of political intolerance among activist militants. This has been accompanied by periodic waves of anti-academic and anti-intellectual sentiment. None of this has been transcended by the women's movement, which instead has been pulled this way and that by militants wishing to secure easy and compliant support from the mass of women. Reports at the recent ANC Women's League National Conference in Kimberley of (mainly male) youths interfering in the formation of ANC Women's League branches in their areas, is the most recent and alarming testimony of this still-continuing trend (ANC Women's League conference report-back to southern Natal Region, 5 May 1991 in Durban).

The other significant factor to remember is that the first session of the Conference on Women and Gender, after the opening evening, contained two papers which were critical of the broad political women's movement to date, and of its failure effectively to challenge women's subjugation. These were the papers by Shireen Hassim, and Andrew Charman et al, discussion of which completely overshadowed responses to the other very interesting paper in the session by Thoko Ruzvidzo from Zimbabwe. Many of the women at the conference who identified themselves as activists constantly expressed frustration and resentment regarding the contents of these two papers, and reacted in extremely defensive manner to the criticisms contained in them. And it was in the very next session, after a break, that tensions erupted.

I believe that these two papers were highly provocative to the political activists at the conference, and the criticisms of the political women's movement of the 1980s brought to the surface nascent anti-academic sentiments. Hence the recurrent polarisation into the categories of 'activist' and 'academic'. Most of the anger against academics (even on the part of other academics) immediately became focused on the conference organisers - Shireen Hassim, the author of one of the offending papers, had the misfortune to be one.

Loyal activists were outraged at what they saw to be a lack of accountability to the mass political organisations on the part of the conference organisers and feminist academics in general. On many occasions when this factor was being discussed, it was pointed out by other activists that the structures of the mass organisations were all heavily male-dominated, and so it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get a mass mandate for a proper feminist conference. This became a point of some

argument between activists themselves. The idea that the range of activists who had now met at the conference should initiate another conference, more for feminist political activists, was then raised instead and discussed enthusiastically. But by the end of the conference, the activists' meeting which was to take this further had dwindled down to two people.

As Bazilli (1991) points out, the activists were not a homogeneous group. In the activists' meeting (for the purposes of which 'activists' were self-defined) there were: academics who also belong to women's or political organisations, academics who were black and felt that this distinguished them significantly from white academics, trade unionists, members of youth and civic organisations, returned ANC exiles, foreign visitors from the USA, Canada, Zimbabwe and Mocambique. The only thing they had in common was that they were all women. Unfortunately this did not prove to be of much value. There was no real consensus between the activists as to what the problems with the conference were, or how major or minor they were. Consequently, the characterisation of the conference dynamics as centring around tensions between activists and academics is, in my view, completely misplaced.

Scapegoating

I would venture to say (and no doubt be shot down for saying) that the major source of discomfort lay in divisions between activists themselves. However, it was possible to achieve some degree of consensus on certain secondary problems - features like the inaccessibility of the language in many of the papers, the shortage of time for debate after the presentation of papers, and the fact that the conference did not depart significantly from the traditional form of white male conferences. So these factors were picked out and offered to the conference and in the post-conference writings as the major shortcomings creating the tensions. As a result of the activist intervention, the time given to conference participants for delivering their papers was cut from the 15 minutes they had been given by the conference organisers, to five minutes. This now made it virtually impossible for many properly to share their work and research with the people who were at the conference to hear it, thereby making this work even more inaccessible to the masses. But the unfortunate conference organisers could not win. They were even blamed by some of the frustrated paper-presenters for now being responsible for the five-minute limit.

However, because the conference organisers had been so meticulous in their efforts to avoid many of these problems in the 18 months before the conference (they took the chance to point out the great lengths to which they had gone), in the end they are not held primarily responsible for all problems, except maybe in the behind-the-scenes discussions which continue to ripple on with a momentum of their own. In the written accounts, there is a hodge-podge of contributory factors to which the conference dynamics are attributed.

Where is Patriarchy in all this ?

What should have been the major unifying factor in the course of all this, namely opposition to patriarchal domination, proved not to be such a unifying factor. The most difficult task in our struggle against patriarchal domination is to construct unity between feminists, and all women committed to the emancipation of women. As we saw at the conference, that unity does not come naturally. Feminists need to develop the ability to act organisationally and strategically - to avoid the irresistible temptation to be diverted from the struggle against patriarchy into a competition for moral high ground among ourselves, ruthlessly pulling to pieces the attempts made by other women in trying to confront some of these tasks in their own arena, making a host of impossibly contradictory demands upon other feminists with the effect of evoking the guilt reactions with which we are all, as women, so familiar. If feminists cannot succeed in this, how will we ever deal with the inevitable backlash that arises when (and we hope that we will indeed reach this point) the majority of women start to become significantly empowered in society? What the conference showed me is how little we, as feminists, have so far succeeded in moving in this direction. This unfortunately put us in the embarrassing position of having male conference participants, instead of squirming in their seats with the uncomfortable exposure of relations of patriarchal domination in all areas of society, being able to patronisingly bewail the lack of sisterhood among feminists, and sagely pronounce that the women seem to be fighting each other rather than fighting patriarchy.

Having been filled with hope by the ANC statement of May 1990 on the Emancipation of Women, I had forgotten that a statement from above could not, in one fell swoop, eliminate the historical divisions in the political liberation movement or the women's movement which still mirrors many of these divisions. The political intolerance of today, which has now assumed alarming proportions of violence, is a major inhibiting factor to the development of a strong new political force of feminism on the South African scene.

The conference also reminded me that, while there are many feminists in South Africa, the loyalties of activist feminists to our political organisations are still by and large much stronger than our commitment to unite with all women to challenge the patriarchal domination we all feel so keenly. This is a major problem for the liberation struggle of women in South Africa today. If we, the activists, do not unite with all women interested in working towards the transformation of patriarchal society, across all organisations big and small, and fail to take our struggle any further than before, we will merely be continuing to actively perpetuate our own oppression as women, no matter what we think or say we are doing.

The National Question

So where does this lead us, beyond a call for sisterly unity and an exhortation that we should not wash our dirty linen in front of the men? Why is it that the women's movement is so divided, and why is it that in South Africa, women's loyalties are

primarily to national political organisations?

Our years of struggle against apartheid have unfortunately led to a conceptualisation of the National Question in South Africa as a struggle primarily against race oppression. The struggle against class oppression does have a place in this, but usually a secondary one. (Hence, when it comes to class analysis of South African society, the adoption by our liberation movements of special brands of South African Marxist analysis such as 'Colonialism of a Special Type' and the 'Two-Stage Theory' of Socialist Revolution.) The struggle against gender oppression, however, only features as an addendum or an afterthought in our liberation struggles, to the extent that it features at all. With this general understanding of the National Question, how can feminists ever hope for the struggle against patriarchy to take anything but second, third or last place to what are regarded as the primary political questions of the day? How can feminists ever hope not to be divided along sectarian political lines before they are united around their common fight against patriarchal oppression? How can conferences on Women and Gender fail to produce political conflicts?

What the Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa has given us is a practical demonstration of some of the problems which go hand-in-hand with the incorrect formulation of the National Question in South Africa, and the urgency of the political task of reformulating it. Feminists (ie the people who are committed to struggle to free society from patriarchal oppression) are the people who carry the responsibility for putting gender struggles high up on the political agenda. Ultimately this points to the need to form democratic mass-based feminist organisation which includes feminists in political organisations, feminists in women's organisations, feminists in trade unions, feminists in youth organisations, feminists involved in theoretical analysis, communist feminists, radical feminists, etc. In the meantime, the Conference on Women and Gender was one such initiative by feminist academics to place gender in a prominent place on the agenda of political theory and analysis. As a result of the conference, gender issues were indeed placed higher up on the agenda (albeit not right at the top).

However, when feminist initiatives and feminist struggles insert themselves into the overall political situation, they enter into an interactive situation with a range of other political forces (such as those described above) at the same time. This interaction can and does often include a certain amount of conflict. The existence of this dynamic of conflict is not to be bewailed, but should be anticipated and hopefully transcended.

Conclusion

Possibly, in the light of the above, the Conference organisers, instead of being criticised for causing conflict because of the way they organised the Conference, should rather be found to have been lacking in not better anticipating the inevitability of political conflicts arising at the Conference for reasons beyond their

direct control. Consequently they failed to strategise for the Conference to try to steer some of these political conflicts along the rocky path to identification of common ground (if any) in the desired struggle against patriarchy. Sisterhood was assumed by many to be in existence already, rather than taken as an organisational goal yet to be striven for in the future intensification of this struggle.

One of the post-Conference challenges is the correct identification of these shortcomings, and a decisive departure from the more comfortable option of staying with the more obvious secondary criticisms of the Conference. Without the Conference having been held, it would have taken much longer for us to be able to grapple with this type of challenge.

I therefore see the Conference on Women and Gender, and the conflicts which accompanied it, as having provided an invaluable milestone in developing our understanding of the complexities of our struggle against patriarchy. I hope there will be many more such initiatives.

References

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