

## Article

# The limits of popular democracy: women's organisations, feminism and the UDF

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### Introduction

As the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) approaches, it is likely that analysts will begin to re-examine the watershed political era of the 1980s. Increasingly, popular discourses are romanticising the 1980s as the grand era of democratic politics in which politics was driven by 'the people' in marked opposition to the era of formal democratic politics, in which power appears to have shifted to party-political elites.<sup>1</sup> Precisely for this reason, the organisations and political values that underpinned the UDF deserve honest and critical analysis.

During the course of the decade, the primary location of resistance shifted from exile to internal and localised forms of resistance to apartheid. The civic movement that emerged sought to 'develop loci of grassroots power among ordinary people to promote an ultimately untheorised process of radical, mass-based transformation from below' (Adler and Steinberg 2000:4). Although the civics were part of the revival of the 'Congress tradition', the movement also aimed to lay the basis for an alternative form of democracy to existing models. This form of democracy was inchoately expressed; as Steinberg notes it often emerged in a 'silent and unregistered manner' (Steinberg 2000: 199). In broad terms, democratic visions were understood as emerging from the grassroots, political organisations were 'people-driven' as opposed to elite-driven, took localised forms and aimed at laying the basis for reconstruction of political order after apartheid. In particular, the civics movement articulated a political approach to the ending of apartheid as opposed to the guerrilla warfare preferred during this period within the ANC, and represented a shift away from the identity politics of the Black Consciousness Movement that had dominated the internal political landscape in the 1970s. These developments opened spaces for the political

mobilisation of women in the workplace, in communities and within households on a scale unseen since the 1950s.

The political values and organisational forms of the new civic movement, and particularly the ways in which civics related to the broader goals of the anti-apartheid movement, are explored in some detail by Jeremy Seekings (2000), Ineke van Kessel (2000), and in the Adler and Steinberg edited collection (2000). However, apart from Ineke van Kessel's book and article in *Transformation* (2001), there is no discussion in this literature of women's roles in the civics or of women's organisations in alliance with the civics.<sup>2</sup> In this article I aim to provide more than simply a 'gender corrective' to these histories.<sup>3</sup> Rather, through the lens of two UDF affiliates, the United Women's Organisation<sup>4</sup> and the Natal Organisation of Women, I seek to explore two key questions: firstly, to what extent did the civics movement and the UDF in practice give voice and power to 'the grassroots'; secondly, did the notions of democracy offered by the civics movement encompass the interests articulated by its women's movement affiliates? I argue that the aims of feminists within women's organisations went beyond the vision of democracy offered by the civic movement and the UDF. Feminists sought not merely a regime change, nor even more broadly the expansion of democratic decision-making to reflect 'people's power' but also a reconsideration of the ways in which private inequalities shaped the differential capabilities of women and men.

This article draws on archival material and interviews with participants in the two women's organisations, the United Women's Organisation in the Western Cape (UWO) and the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW).<sup>5</sup> These organisations were important to the political landscape of the 1980s for several reasons. Firstly, they had close relationships to the anti-apartheid movement. Their leaderships were bound by numerous political and social ties to that of the major civic organisations and trade unions. Secondly, in part because of these links, UWO and NOW were regarded by the ANC in exile as central foci for instilling ANC loyalties and adopting ANC-sympathetic strategies. Thirdly, together with the ANC Women's League and the Federation of Transvaal Women (Feddraw), NOW and UWO provided the leadership and the constituency for the Women's National Coalition, the umbrella body for the women's movement during the crucial years of the transition to democracy. The outcome of struggles waged by and within these organisations shaped the ideological content and strategic direction of the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s.

### **Early forms of organisation: building grassroots democracy**

The revival of large-scale women's organisations had its roots in the highly localised, neighbourhood-based associations that were part of the emergence of community-based civic organisations. On the new terrain of battle inside the townships, women's gendered responsibilities for household and community reproduction acquired a broader political significance. As in the military dictatorships of Latin America during this period, organising around what has been termed 'practical gender needs' (Molyneux 1986) – the 'bread and butter' issues such as high rents, lack of services, and corrupt local councils – catapulted women into public view as political actors. These were, as Kaplan (1997:187) points out, new opportunities to link the social and the political. The revival of trade union activism in the 1970s also spread consciousness among women workers about political and economic injustices. However, women's struggles were not confined to the public sphere. Gradually, women began making links between exploitation in the workplace and subordination within the home. It was within the unions, in particular, that women forged strong ideas about the relationship between public struggles for social and economic justice and gender relations in the domestic realm. As a woman member of the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) pointed out,

We are oppressed at work and we are oppressed at our location and in our houses. We are sick and tired of this. At work we work hard. There is the machine you have to push. At the same time you must come home and cook and do this and do that... Now why should I fight at work against hard labour and maternity leave and not fight at home? If we women do not fight for ourselves there is nobody who is going to fight for us. (*Speak* 1988)

Active involvement in the unions often put women into direct conflict with their male partners who resented the time women unionists spent away from home at evening meetings (Barrett et al 1985). Women interviewed by *Speak* during the 1987 strike organised by the Catering and Commercial Workers' Union (CCAWUSA) at the OK Bazaars and Hyperama supermarkets in Durban, for example, complained that their husbands opposed their actions. One shop steward pointed out that her activism was only possible because she was a widow. 'My husband didn't want me to move at all. Not even to work. Only to go to the church and the market' (*Speak* 1987a). MamLydia Kompe, a trade unionist and later founder of the Rural Women's Movement (RWM), recalled how male co-workers would expect her to buy

them lunch, make them tea and wash up during her lunch breaks. At home her husband complained incessantly about her participation in the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). 'These men feel threatened when we push to be equal' (Barrett et al 1985:105-106).

This kind of male opposition to women's activism explains why women found it much easier to be involved in community-based women's organisations, where mobilisation took place in 'the church and the market'. There women could meet as part of their daily activities, in close proximity to their homes and often among friends. Yet even in this more conducive environment, women struggled to combine household labour with political work. Discussions about the unequal burdens of domestic labour and childcare became increasingly common in women's groups. Shamim Meer (1998:96) comments that in the early 1980s, 'whenever women came together it was... personal struggles that held us back. Women in communities talked in their women's groups about difficulties in getting to meetings because of husbands who expected their meals on time'.

Discussions about 'personal struggles' encompassed both workplace experiences of sexual harassment and lack of benefits for pregnant women and new mothers as well as internal domestic struggles between women and men. In women's community groups and in women's meetings within trade unions, discussions about violence against women and about the extent of rape (*Speak* 1986) and battery (*Speak* 1987) within marriage became common. The raising of these issues found a mixed response among the political leadership. On the one hand, the civic leadership was keen to pursue the mobilisation of women at street and district level – women constituted a significant part of the 'mass base' of the movement, a key 'sector' along with 'the youth' and 'the workers'. Struggles against the local state were encouraged and politically validated within the broader strategy of 'people's power.' In the process of mobilising women the new organisations were also developing the localised understandings of democracy, participation and accountability so valued by the civics movement. On the other hand, issues relating to personal autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights were not defined as 'political' and indeed were seen as divisive by male leadership and by nationalist women activists. Grassroots power and women's leadership was rhetorically encouraged while decision-making was confined to a small group of men.

These contradictory responses produced a form of political schizophrenia for women activists who were grasping for new and relevant definitions of

the aims of women's organisations. For some activists the lack of serious attention to women's issues and to the potential for women to emerge as leaders meant that women's organisations were important as relatively 'safe' spaces within which women could debate the content of their struggles and determine strategic goals. For other activists, the emergence of women's organisations was seen from the purely instrumental perspective of encouraging the 'sectoral' development of the anti-apartheid movement. The resulting tensions between different conceptions of women's organisations pushed the organisations into an ongoing process of negotiating their relationship to the national liberation struggle.

The political context for exploring this relationship was heavily weighted against the women activists. At the early stages of civic organising, women's participation was not always recognised or even welcomed by men in the community. In a perceptive study of political organisation in the Crossroad squatter camp in Cape Town, Josette Cole (1987) argues that tensions between men and women were increasingly apparent from the late 1970s. Women had to 'battle against traditional views which saw politics as the realm of men' (Cole 1987:64). Women were removed from positions in the Crossroads Committee in 1979 and the Women's Committee was 'effectively "banned" from having meetings' (Cole 1987: 65). In the combined conditions of both state repression and male hostility, it was difficult to sustain a women's organisation and 'the women of Crossroads were not able to regain the political position they had once held' (Cole 1987: 67). But such experiences fed into the increasing desire among women activists for separate and strong women's organisations that could cross the boundaries of individual townships and provide avenues for solidarity and mobilisation.

Like the civic organisations (Cherry 1999; Seekings 2000), building grassroots democracy was an important part of the organisational culture of the newly emerging women's groups. This was reflected in the participatory process of developing organisation and the attempts to reach decisions in an inclusionary and consensual manner. The Phoenix Women's Circle's constitution, for example, was drafted by a working committee that included two people from each street. One member commented that 'we feel everyone must have a say and that our officials alone can't make decisions. This is why our meetings are important. So that we can discuss things and have our say before we decide anything' (*Speak* 1983). Grassroots organisations such as the Phoenix Women's Circle were vital for processes of democratisation, even though their aims and membership might have been diverse and they

may not have explicitly articulated political ideologies. On the one hand, as Alvarez notes in her discussion of such organisations in a similar political context in Brazil, 'these grassroots struggles bore witness to women's and men's unyielding resistance to authoritarian policies,' exposing the 'regime's inherent contradictions' (Alvarez 1990:39). On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly for the long term prospects of democracy, they also began to open spaces in which to imagine new forms of political culture. Thus, the importance of grassroots activism was not simply to expose the illegitimacy of apartheid or to broaden the mass base of the nationalist movement, but to lay the basis for a sustainable popular movement of women that would define the shape of post-apartheid society. Temma Kaplan's comparative study of grassroots movements underscores this radical potential of localised movements. She argues that grassroots activism in itself poses a particular conception of democracy:

The term suggests being outside the control of any state, church, union or political party. To the women claiming its provenance, being from the grassroots generally means being free from any constraining political affiliations and being responsible to no authority except their own group. Though such women generally recognise their seeming powerlessness against corporate and governmental opponents, they also assert their moral superiority, their right to be responsible citizens, not according to official laws, but on their own terms. (Kaplan 1997:2)

The desire of women's organisations to build a space of organising that was outside of the control of political movements – a political space in which women would be organised around issues of their own choosing rather than as a sector of the anti-apartheid movement – and the attempt to build on the early traditions of direct democracy was deeply felt within women's organisations. UWO and NOW sought to build on early and localised forms of organisation while drawing women into the larger political landscape. The extent to which they would be able to sustain these aims was shaped by the broadening of highly localised women's groups into regional women's organisations, by their affiliation to the UDF, and by increasing state repression during the 1980s.

### **Expanding from local to regional organisations: the role of the activists**

Within a short three years of the emergence of local activism, women activists began to debate the need for larger and more powerful organisations that linked the local women's groups. In the Western Cape, the UWO was

formed at the end of 1978 as a loose structure, comprising women who had been involved in a range of activities: civic organisations, trade unions and detainees' support committees.<sup>6</sup> The formation of the UWO was rapidly followed by that of the NOW in 1981. The membership base of these women's organisations was primarily African working class women, a significant number of whom had been active in local community groups (Jaffee 1987; Patel 1988).

Anti-apartheid consciousness did not automatically imply consciousness of gender inequalities. The shaping of the connections between local struggles, national political movements and gender consciousness – the translation of needs into rights-based demands – was made by a small layer of activists who moved between different levels of struggles as well as across different organisations. Feminist activists were particularly important in the attempts to build consciousness of gender inequalities into broader political struggles. Stepping beyond the ambitions of the national liberation movement, such activists and organisations were concerned about developing women's agency and autonomy to effect changes in gender power relations *as well as* racial power relations. However, in the 1980s feminist activists were in the minority within the anti-apartheid movement. For many women leaders the aim of 'activation' of women had less to do with addressing the structural roots of gender inequalities than with linking internal struggles to the exiled national liberation movement, and with uprooting the apartheid state rather than with developing a democratic culture. Nevertheless, where the connections between economic and cultural forces and women's oppression were made – however they were made – there was a shift, in Molyneux's (1986) terms, from emphases on 'practical gender needs' to 'strategic gender interests,' understood as the struggle to end the gender inequalities of power. This was a process of politicisation that facilitated the emergence of a distinctive feminist consciousness that integrated race, class and gender oppressions as mutually determined.

The role of political activists in forging linkages between localised struggles around immediate needs and the broader political movement was not uncontested. There was often a gap in experience between women residents and activists who had already become politically involved. Many women in the civic movement hoped for tangible, local and immediate changes in the townships and looked to civic organisations for direct assistance. Shamim Meer, an activist social worker in Phoenix, recalls that there were tensions between activists and township residents over the

politicisation of issues such as high rents. This was exacerbated by the fact that many activists in the Phoenix Working Committee did not actually live in the township. 'People from Phoenix would argue that the rent boycott meant that there was no electricity. They would say "you guys come from town and push a rent boycott"' (Interview March 22, 2000). Indeed, as Seekings (2000: 54) has argued, 'the redress of civic issues was not itself the ultimate goal of the civic strategy... In practice...the relevant strategic objective was what might be termed an intermediate goal, building a movement of strong, local-level organisations with broad and sustained popular participation'. Not surprisingly, given Seekings' assessment, at the grassroots level the tensions in women's organisations were not so much between white or black women, or even feminists and nationalists, as between community-based activists and those operating at what Meer (Interview March 22, 2000) has termed the 'big' political level—that is, in the broad anti-apartheid movement – who sought to accelerate the level of protest.

The role of leadership in women's organisations was also central to defining and/or mediating between different conceptions of what issues were 'appropriate' and 'political' in the context of the struggle against apartheid. The political outcomes of building women's organisations could not always be contained by the civic leadership or the UDF, and the demands of women's organisations for more expanded understandings of what constituted 'political' issues are one example of this dilemma. Phumelele Ntombela-Nzimande, who was active in NOW as well as *Speak* magazine, points out that there was a distinction between the ways in which 'women's problems' were defined by *Speak* readers and by political activists within NOW. *Speak's* coverage of issues such as maternal health, rape and battery and women's experiences on the shopfloor were well received by readers. This reflected the organised working class constituency from which *Speak* took its direction; some unions were taking these concerns up as part of their demands for a safer workplace and for maternity benefits for women workers. On the other hand, within NOW there were concerns that *Speak* was focusing on 'non-essential matters' or on issues that might hinder the process of drawing in a broader range of women, largely conservative, into a political organisation. 'NOW comrades said people should speak about the state of emergency, not about wife battering... I felt overwhelmed by the fact that it wasn't appropriate' (Interview March 16, 2000). For activists like Meer and Ntombela-Nzimande, however, 'political' issues such as the state of



emergency and 'private' issues such as wife battery were neither separate nor mutually exclusive as the basis of organisational strategies. But 'we were operating in an environment in which there was a male-defined concept of what political issues were. If women stood up to speak on political platforms, they wouldn't be shouting down with rape but down with the Botha regime' (Interview 16 March 2000).

The definition of what constituted women's issues and how these would be linked to the universalistic political goals of the anti-apartheid movement preoccupied women's organisations. As the next section argues, such discussions could not be divorced from the context in which women's organisations operated, their organisational structure and their internal culture.

### **New structures, new strategies**

At the outset, both women's organisations debated the aims of the new formations. At the launch of the UWO in April 1981 a constitution was adopted that located the organisation at the grassroots level with a focus on 'activities which involve the day-to-day problems of people in oppressed communities' and on women's agency in 'solving all problems and matters affecting them in the community and places of work' (UWO 1981a). The organisation's demands for equal pay for equal work, a national minimum wage and an end to unemployment reflected its broad definition of 'women's issues.' The UWO demanded full democratic rights for all South Africans, and a fundamental transformation of power relations in society. It also demanded 'the right to live with our families where we choose and to have equal rights and status to men in marriage and under all laws' (UWO 1985a). Similarly, NOW defined its goals in broad terms, seeking not just a regime change but also 'the removal of all laws and customs that act against women' (*Speak* 1984).

While the interconnectedness of race, class and gender oppressions was based on a deep understanding of these linkages in the daily experience of women, particularly African women, it was neither theoretically nor strategically easy to reconcile struggles against gender oppression with those against race and class oppressions. It has become common to present the theoretical dilemmas as reflecting two competing forces within the women's movement, one black and nationalist and the other white and (implicitly) radical feminist (Hendricks and Lewis 1994; Lewis 1992). Yet closer archival research suggests that rather than a clear racial polarisation,

black and white feminist activists and researchers were indeed concerned to forge an 'indigenous' feminism that accounted for the interplay of race, class and gender inequalities, and that many activists who were concerned with national liberation saw this as a springboard for addressing gender inequalities. Even though feminism as a term was deemed politically problematic, a distinctive 'South African feminism' was indeed emerging during the 1980s.

This incipient indigenous feminism was shaped by the twin but not always compatible needs to address the interplay between gender, race and class identities on the one hand – that is the recognition of complex differences among women – and on the other hand a moral imperative to base women's organisations on the idea of non-racialism – that is, on the notion of some commonality of women's interests that extended beyond apartheid-defined identities. The link between these aims was provided by the ideology of motherhood and the political language of 'motherism': a celebration of women as mothers, a link between women's familial responsibilities and their political work, and an emphasis on this aspect of women's roles as cutting across class and race barriers. As several authors have pointed out, 'mother' became a central trope in national liberationist discourses on gender (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989; McClintock 1993). This politicisation of traditional roles was part of a revolutionary nationalism, in which woman, mother and nation were part of a continuous discourse. Several campaigns that included different races of women, such as protests against troops in the townships and against detention of activists, were conducted under the banner of motherism. As Radcliffe and Westwood (1993:18) have pointed out, motherist strategies are 'predicated upon overcoming the public/private divide as it impresses upon women's lives...[bringing] mothers in their domestic clothes to the centre of the public stage.' Western Cape activist Gertrude Fester (1997:46) argues that 'motherism and "working shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk" can be seen as a form of South African feminism.' Yet the exploration of feminism as the source of theory and activism, even those versions that sought to integrate understandings of race and class in the construction of inequalities, was delegitimated. Within the civic movement it was seen as divisive, or at least politically unstrategic, to take up issues of women's power and agency in an organised fashion. Gender activist Sheila Meintjes comments that 'feminism was what we *did*, but not what we *spoke*' (Meintjes personal communication). In retrospect, Fester argues that 'even though some of us saw ourselves as feminists we would not raise it

when representing the organisation except in our personal capacities' (Fester 1997:46). Yet, without this coherent theoretical framework, it was difficult for gender activists to articulate the fuller implications of women's struggles at the local levels for the understanding of democracy more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

The unresolved tension over who the political subject of the women's movement was to be – and indeed, whether such a thing as a women's movement should exist as an autonomous political entity – had far-reaching consequences. In terms of organisational structure, two distinct positions can be identified in the early 1980s. The first position emphasised a bottom-up development, consolidating organisation in communities first and building leadership with clear mandates from working class women (UWO 1981b). While concerned to develop links between national political struggles and local community struggles, proponents of this position did not want to begin with mobilising women for national political campaigns. This approach favoured a less prominent political profile for the women's organisation as it built a sustainable structure. The second position, supported by the ANC underground structures, favoured the creation of a 'mobilising vehicle' for women that would function explicitly within the political arena as a means to draw women as broadly as possible into the national liberation struggle. As NOW activist Hursheela Narsee (Interview May 19, 2000) puts it,

we felt there were already women out there who were political and we needed to consolidate. We felt the need to make a clear political statement irrespective of state repression or whether it might push some women away. We wanted to function as women within the political arena.

From this point of view, it was necessary to develop a women's movement that would act as an arm of the national liberation with particular responsibility for women – a version of the 'sectoral' model prevalent in the ANC. In the UWO, on the other hand, there was a significant faction determined to fashion a women's organisation with a strong emphasis on democratic culture and consensus-building influenced by discussions with trade unions, rather than simply adopting a Congress tradition. This difference in overall strategic direction shaped the extent to which the two organisations were able to develop effective structural forms to facilitate mobilisation. Rapid mobilisation against the state or in order to be part of campaigns developed by other anti-apartheid organisations precluded careful building of branch structures and attention to consensual decision-making.

Yet in the long run neither UWO and NOW were able to escape the tensions between an emphasis on national liberation and an emphasis on building a women's organisation. Organisational responses to these tensions were driven by both the nature of their membership bases and by the broader political context in which they were located. More than half of the members of the first executive of the UWO were active members of trade unions, a factor that played a formative role in the organisational culture of UWO (Interview with Sheila Meintjes March 3, 2000; Interview with Anne Mager May 16, 2000). Jenny Schreiner, former Secretary of the UWO (and underground ANC activist), commented that the UWO tried to balance 'trade union accountability and short-term accountability, democracy and the payment of subscriptions by standing structures' (cited in Udit 1997: 140). The union influence also emphasised order and discipline within the UWO, with regular and carefully minuted meetings of all levels of the organisation, mechanisms for communication between branches and leadership and ongoing debate about the programmes and direction of the organisation. In a speech at the 1983 annual conference of the UWO, General Workers' Union (GWU) organiser Zora Mehlomakhulu cautioned against a vanguardist approach to organising: 'there is no better way of destroying an organisation than that.' Rather, she advised, 'it takes time and patience to build solid organisation. We must see to it that decisions are taken by the majority of people' (UWO 1983c).

In Natal, too, NOW began with the intention of building a strong grassroots organisation (NOW 1985) but was unable to fulfill this because of its overall emphasis on the immediate political context. The branch structure of NOW never developed in strength, due in part to the repressive measures of the state and in part to the mobilising style of the organisation, which focused on high profile campaigns from the beginning rather than expending energies on branch development. The leadership was under constant threat of detentions and debates about organisational development became a luxury. NOW leadership was decimated by state repression almost immediately after its launch: the first Chairperson Phumzile Ngcuka had to flee into exile, her successor Victoria Mxenge<sup>8</sup> was assassinated on August 2 1985, and the next Chairperson, Nozizwe Madlala,<sup>9</sup> was detained later the same month and held for over a year during which time she was subjected to repeated torture. Other executive members were also detained for shorter periods or had periodically to go into hiding. The detention of Madlala was particularly damaging for NOW. A member of the ANC underground, she

was an extremely strong and articulate leader. Hursheela Narsee comments that with Madlala's detention, 'we didn't lose the organisation, but we couldn't regain the stature, clarity of thinking and legitimacy when Nozi was detained' (Interview 19 May 2000).

The broad strategic direction of NOW was developed through debate and discussion at irregular workshops and, inevitably, decision-making was frequently crisis-driven. At the workshops, strong attempts were made to develop a democratic culture and to develop leadership and organisational skills such as minute taking. Translations into English and Zulu were provided in order to ensure that all participants could engage in the debates. While this was often tedious, it was rigorously adhered to even when it drove away some members. The leadership was committed to building internal democracy. 'For us, consciousness raising was important, building leadership from below was important. We consciously inverted the [organogram] – we always put membership at the top and leadership at the bottom to remind us all the time to be inclusive and to listen' (Interview with Nozizwe Routledge-Madlala September 7, 2000).

Unlike the UWO, union women did not form the core membership of NOW. It is not clear whether this was a consequence or a cause of the decision to create an overtly political structure in Natal, as opposed to the slower route of building a grassroots organisation in the Western Cape.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the underlying reasons, the composition of NOW's membership had an impact on the nature of the organisation. The bulk of the constituency was older African women whose children were active in student organisations such as the Congress of South African students (COSAS). NOW became characterised as a 'gogos' organisation,<sup>11</sup> and many politically active young women tended to work within the civics or trade unions. Older women were wary of the young women in NOW, often considering them to be disrespectful and 'too westernised' (ANC 1986). The older women constituents were by no means apolitical. Many had participated in ANC and FSAW activities in the 1950s, and almost all supported the UDF and the aims of national liberation. Despite this earlier activism, they represented a socially conservative constituency, perhaps because women's organisations in the 1950s had chosen to limit their political focus to national liberation and steered away from issues relating to the private sphere.

Certain NOW activities – sewing groups, savings clubs and the like – were remarkably similar to those of the Inkatha Women's Brigade, the women's wing of the traditionalist Zulu Inkatha movement, and suggest that both

organisations were mobilising similar constituencies. In Inkatha, such activities were supported by funding and other resources from the homeland government and were unambiguously welfarist, and its membership expanded fairly rapidly (Hassim 1993). By contrast, NOW struggled to sustain such projects.<sup>12</sup> Organisers – usually younger women with a more political orientation – did not have the time, skills or inclination to provide sewing lessons for members (Interview with Hursheela Narsee May 19, 2000). The NOW leadership regarded these activities as strategic. 'They were a way of organising women... We went in for sewing classes because that is what the women wanted – a possibility of a livelihood. If we didn't [have these projects] we would lose members' (Interview with Veni Soobrayan May 21, 2000). As repression increased and states of emergency were imposed, NOW 'went into a more traditional women's organisation role of organising memorials for comrades, supporting the families of detainees, etc. It was unavoidable. For our constituencies these were very important things. Deaths and mourning were a huge cultural procedure' (Interview with Veni Soobrayan May 21, 2000). Within a short space of time, women were afraid to be openly associated with NOW; 'having actively characterised ourselves as political meant the challenge was greater in attracting women to join – it was dangerous' (Interview with Nozizwe Routledge-Madlala September 7, 2000).

The organisers constantly juggled the need to respond to women's self-identified needs – however welfarist in tone – on the one hand, with the mobilisation of women as a political constituency on the other. These demands made it difficult to take forward a political education campaign that drew the links between structural conditions of racial capitalism and women's oppression. Although early campaigns such as equal pay for equal work suggest an impetus to raise these structural and systemic dimensions of women's subordination, 'we rarely used the term feminism. Rather, we spoke of people's rights and people's power. The term [feminism] had no currency. There was no attitude towards it, it was meaningless' (Interview with Veni Soobrayan May 21, 2000).

It is not surprising that activists in UWO and NOW hesitated to adopt explicit feminist language to articulate their programs. Activists struggled to find an ideological framework that would appeal to women with little political experience and be acceptable to male political leadership. There was tremendous hostility to autonomous organisations within the civic movement, particularly in Natal where the lines of loyalty were being demarcated

between Inkatha and the UDF. There was little room offered (by either side) for organisational independence. This was compounded by hostility to feminism itself, which was perceived as promoting separatist and divisive politics. Both within the ANC and the UDF leadership there was little support for the idea that women might have interests that were not fully represented within the liberation movements (Anon nd). Feminist activists were constantly criticised and even personally derided when issues of gender were raised in strategic planning meetings (Interview with Shamim Meer March 22, 2000; Interview with Pregs Govender January 19, 2000).

### **UDF affiliation**

In both the UWO and NOW, attempts to develop sustainable organisations were greatly affected by the decision to affiliate to the UDF in August 1983. Anne Mager (Interview May 6, 2000) describes this as a 'dramatic turning point.' There was no debate about the necessity to join the new front; rather, it was considered a logical development of both organisations' stance that women's struggles should be integrally connected to struggles for democracy (Interview with Hursheela Narsee May 19, 2000). It was only after affiliation that tensions surfaced over the decision to affiliate, with some women activists questioning the politics of alliance (UWO 1984a). The two organisations were caught in the familiar tussle between their perceived role as 'the women's auxiliary,' and their ongoing attempts to retain autonomy over 'the choice of issues to be fought and the manner in which they are fought' (Hassim et al 1987:46). UDF affiliation undoubtedly privileged the importance of women's auxiliary role. In effect, UWO and NOW became the women's wings of the UDF in the Western Cape and Natal respectively, through its branches helping the UDF to set up area committees and to broaden its mass base. Delegates of the two organisations were called upon to represent 'the women's voice' at innumerable meetings.

Increasingly, NOW and UWO began to take up issues defined in terms of the UDF's priorities rather than those of the branches. A significant amount of time was spent by the executive on attending UDF meetings and workshops, often to the detriment of the women's organisations (UWO 1984b). There is constant reference in the UWO's executive committee minutes about the 'rapid pace' of UDF campaigns, and the difficulties this imposed on communications between branches and executives, with the result that 'a number of mistakes have been made because of inadequate preparation' (UWO 1983a). Fester describes the UDF as 'a fast-paced male-

dominated organisation' (Fester 1997:49). Early in the discussions to form the front, the UWO expressed concerns that the process of building the UDF should not be 'rushed. The first task should be with people working door-to-door in their areas, and organising area meetings' (UWO 1983d). However, it proved difficult to hold on to the branch style of organisation that was the cornerstone of the UWO. It was not always possible for UWO branches to discuss the appropriateness of the UDF's campaigns, or how the UWO could shape the style of the front. This went against the previous culture of decision-making within the organisation. In 1985 the secretary commented of the UDF that 'we have let our child run away with us and take a direction that we have not always thought was the best road' (UWO 1985b).

Anne Mager comments that ironically the membership of the organisation grew 'in order to be part of the new fashionable movement of the UDF - it was almost a social thing,' but this did not result in a strengthening of the grassroots power of the movement. Rather, where previously there had been conscious attempts to resist elitism through the participation of branches, 'we became elitist as a result of joining the UDF... There was much less organising going on on the ground and more "politicking"' (Interview with Anne Mager May 6, 2000). For example, there were divisions in the Executive Council of the UWO over whether to support the UDF's Million Signatures Campaign, launched in September 1983 to declare opposition to apartheid and to the government's constitutional reforms. Several branches abstained from ratifying the executive's decision to participate in the campaign because they felt branches had not been given time to discuss its organisational implications (UWO 1983d). Despite the organisation's position that the national liberation and building the women's movement were mutually complementary processes, there were tensions around which issues were to be prioritised and which organisation should have prior claim on activists' time. But there was little space for UWO to resolve these tensions; the organisation was swept along on a national tide.

The breakdown of the internal structures and decision-making procedures of the UWO was a setback to the organisation. UWO meetings were banned under the emergency regulations and contact between the executive and the branches became increasingly difficult. By January 1986, the executive felt that 'the struggle had developed so dramatically in the last six months that we needed to assess our organisation's direction and programme of action' (UWO 1986). The new leadership sought to build 'tight discipline and democracy' in a context in which internal tensions had led to the formation



of factions within the organisation, mostly divided over whether the organisation should emphasise underground activities or strive to maintain its legal status (UWO 1986). There was limited success around campaigns to oppose high prices, identified by the branches as a key women's issue. The mass campaigns of the UDF such as the hunger strike, all imbued with a sense of urgency, deflected attention away from the UWO's own plan of action. Detention of leaders and the collapse of open organisations demoralised some members, particularly in the white branches (ANC 1989). In the African townships, the organisation persisted for longer, with women continuing to demonstrate against the presence of police in the townships. The increasing violence in the townships opened new areas of struggle around sexual abuse of women (mainly by police) and the torture of women in detention. The presence of troops in townships mobilised many women who had previously been uninterested in politics to act in defense of their children. With the collapsing structure of branches, however, it was difficult for UWCO to attract them into the women's organisation.

Not all of the consequences of affiliation to the UDF were negative. The UWO secretaries pointed out that women 'have developed an understanding of how other organisations work. This has broadened their understanding of the struggle' (UWO 1984a). The formation of the UDF enhanced the national political power of community-based organisations and connected women's grassroots activism to national politics. It gave impetus to the organisation of women by providing a political home to women activists within the Charterist fold. The presence of women in national campaigns revealed women's capacity for political mobilisation, in a very few cases opening up leadership positions to women. The significant involvement of women in the UDF hinted at the political possibilities that might exist when women's political roles were central to the survival of broader national politics. In the new context of intense mobilisation and with the stirrings of local feminism among many women, the 1980s offered the opportunity for women's organisations to finally break out of the mould of 'women's league' that had characterised earlier women's structures within the democratic fold. Yet this centrality was neither acknowledged by the male leadership nor effectively leveraged by women's organisations and the ironic consequence of women's organisations' successful mobilisation was the weakening of their structures.

The most visible gain of women's participation in the UDF was the insertion of the values of gender equality into the vision for a democratic

South Africa. However, the UDF paid little more than lip service to issues of women's participation for women's equality. Despite the crucial importance of women as a 'sector' of the community, and the role of the UDF women's organisations in building a mass base for the front, women had a second-class status within the organisation. Women were not significantly represented in leadership positions<sup>13</sup> and there were reports of sexual harassment within the organisation (UDF 1987a). Nor were the flagbearers of grassroots democracy, the youth, always allies in the struggle for gender equality even though they opposed traditional lines and conventions of authority. A spate of 'witch' killings in 1986 and the sometimes vicious enforcement of consumer boycotts – for example, forcing women to drink cooking oil that had been purchased at non-township stores – evoked fear and anger among women who were frequently the targets of such actions.

A UDF Women's Congress was formed in April 1987, attended by 100 elected delegates representing a range of women's organisations within the UDF fold which were seen as sharing the basic principles of 'non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy' (UDF 1987b). All these organisations were affiliated to the regional structures of the UDF, and had relatively clearly developed political profiles. Nevertheless, at the launch meeting, the great diversity among these organisations was also recognised and was seen as the outcome of the different 'objective conditions in each region and the needs expressed by the membership (most of whom are working class women)' (UDF 1987b).

The UDF Women's Congress was seen in part as a response to the debilitating effects of the state of emergency: the shift away from open organisational strategies, the torture, rape and killing of many activists including women, and the fragmentation of organisational structures and processes of decision-making. Pregs Govender comments that the Congress was founded in the hope that a national structure would help to rejuvenate regional structures by providing coordination for national campaigns, accelerating political education and by 'asserting women's leadership and women's issues in a more forceful way within the UDF' (Interview with Pregs Govender January 19, 2000). The top-down approach did not work, however, and the UDF Women's Congress was soon disbanded, with both women leaders and the UDF acknowledging that the decision to launch the structure had been 'a mistake' (Simons nd). Despite the soul-searching that accompanied the evaluation of the UDF Women's Congress, the issues raised by women at the launch of the Congress were not addressed within

the organisation (UDF 1990). The decision by the UDF-affiliated women's organisations to disband as regional structures abruptly ended any further debate about how to address the democratic shortcomings of the UDF.

### Conclusions

By the end of the 1980s, women's organisations had been through a major learning curve: the experience of organisation and mobilisation, albeit not successfully sustained, gave new hope to women activists that a women's movement could be built. Debates about equality and the nature of women's oppression in South Africa had advanced significantly through a combination of practical struggle and theoretical debate. Progressive civic and political organisations could no longer avoid at least the rhetoric of women's emancipation and the necessity for women's participation. Women activists, too, felt they were part of an 'exhilarating' movement.<sup>14</sup> *Speak* editor Karen Hurt captures the sentiments of many activists interviewed when she says: 'For me, it was a time of awakening and of understanding power relations in society. I was lucky to be active among people who understood the bigger picture' (Interview with Karen Hurt May 17, 2000).

Despite the heightened mobilisation and organisation, however, in some respects the picture of women's organisations at the end of the decade was depressingly similar to that at the beginning of the decade: women's organisations were weak and demobilised. Writing in the first issue of the new feminist journal *Agenda* in 1987, feminist activist Shamim Marie (Meer) commented that

The organisations that exist at the present time are reliant on a few very committed women who tirelessly give themselves to sustain their organisations. The masses of women remain outside of these organisations... Women's organisations in this country have not yet made their mark as women within broader struggles. We have been too busy taking up general community struggles. Very seldom have issues affecting women been taken up. (Marie 1987:72-3)

A key explanation for this demobilisation must surely be the extent of repression women activists faced, particularly in Natal. The external conditions under which women's organisations worked – of states of emergency and targeting of women leaders for detention by the state – was not always conducive to their attempts to build democratic, accountable structures. This is not a sufficient explanation, however. This study of UWO and NOW suggests that some attention must also be placed on the extent

to which the broader politics of mass mobilisation shaped the trajectory of women's organisations. Women's organisations needed a measure of autonomy in order to build their structures and articulate their interests in their own terms; such autonomy was barely tolerated within the broader progressive movement.

Women's organisations were weakened in many ways by affiliation to the UDF. Firstly, the halting journey towards establishing organisational autonomy and political space *vis-à-vis* civic associations and trade unions was derailed. Looking back, Pregs Govender of NOW notes that the UDF 'didn't allow [women's] organisations to continue on our own path and for organic leadership to emerge. It didn't allow women to determine and shape the way in which they worked' (Interview with Pregs Govender January 19, 2000). Jenny Schreiner of the UWO comments that the organisation's branches 'became more focused on mobilisation than capacity-building' (Interview with Jenny Schreiner May 20, 2000). Secondly the loss of an experienced cohort of leadership into the UDF structures affected the ability of women's organisations to devise strategies that would respond to the states of emergency in 1985 and 1986 or to new political opportunities offered by engagement with the UDF. Finally, women found it difficult to participate in some of the political tactics employed by the UDF. The focus on public protests such as sit-ins in foreign consulates, large campaigns such as the Million Signatures Campaign, mass rallies and international mobilisation rather than mobilisation at a local level favoured the political participation of men. Women's dual burden of work and home, their lack of confidence in public speaking (especially in English), among other factors, made many of these strategies women-unfriendly (Hassim et al 1987). This mode of organisation also undermined the painstaking bottom-up style of organisation attempted by the UWO, and aspired to by NOW. Ironically, while seeking to mobilise 'the masses,' mass-based organisation suffered drastically as a result of the UDF national campaigns.

By the mid-1980s, women's organisations had not yet built up deep levels of leadership in their branches; UDF-style mobilisation exposed the top structures of the organisation while not allowing time for new leaders to emerge. Seen from a longer term perspective, demobilisation of the aim of building a women's movement with a democratic culture and shaped by women at the local level was inevitable once all women's political energies were directed into the UDF. From women's perspective, the promise of the civics movement – that democracy would be re-shaped from below – was

broken very much earlier than the existing literature on the UDF suggests. The romanticisation of the movement carries the danger of ignoring the limits to power and voice that women encountered within the movement and the extent to which notions of democracy offered by the civic movement were rather more circumscribed than the existing literature suggests. What this study of women's organisations shows is that at the grassroots level women's visions for a new democracy encompassed political *as well as* social and cultural transformation. Although relatively muted by the priorities of the civic movement, the distinctiveness of feminism in this period lay in the articulation of linkages between gender oppression in the private sphere and race and class oppression. Women's organisations opened new political spaces for women alongside the mainstream of male-dominated union or civic organisations. Women's organisations forced open, in different ways, an understanding of the scope of politics that went beyond the formal political realm of parties and movements to encompass the daily and intimate forms of oppression and exploitation that characterised women's experiences.

Women activists had to confront not only their immediate comrades in the civic associations and unions – many of whom, both female and male, were either dismissive of the particular character of women's demands or angered by what they termed divisiveness – but also the political canon of the liberation struggle with its hierarchy of struggles in which women's liberation featured only vaguely in a utopian future. Despite the emphasis of political leaders within the UDF on the narrowly *political* aspects of revolutionary change, women's organisations linked women's 'private' household struggles to larger questions of economic marginality and articulated the need for social and cultural transformation as integral to liberation. Although nationalism was not displaced as the over-arching ideological framework of struggle, women activists debated the consequences of this emphasis for women's autonomy and for the likely trajectory of post-liberation political developments. In the process, women activists sought – ultimately unsuccessfully – to build a women's movement that, while part of a broader movement against oppression, nevertheless retained relative autonomy from the dictates of male-dominated political organisations. Although attempts to establish autonomy were halting and frequently undercut, the political values and organisational styles that developed remain important for contemporary struggles to realise democratic political participation.

## Notes

1. An example in academic writing is the use of the David and Goliath metaphor used by Adler and Steinberg (2000) in their characterisation of the civics versus the apartheid state. I do not wish to suggest here that the civics movement was not an important counterpoint to the vanguardist approaches to revolutionary change within the liberation movement up to the late 1970s. Indeed, as the article shows, the civic movement's focus on local struggles was a crucial enabling factor in the re-emergence of women's political activism. I am, however, arguing for a more nuanced history and for one that includes the perspectives of women rather than merely those of 'the youth' and 'the workers', which are the typical categories of analysis in existing literature.
2. Tom Lodge (personal communication) made the perceptive observation that this 'blind spot' in the literature might arise from the 'Transvaal-centricity' of much of UDF analysis. Women's organisations in the Transvaal were indeed slow to develop and played a relatively smaller role in the UDF. The flagbearers of grassroots democracy are seen to be the youth, not women. However, see also Seekings (1991).
3. There are several contemporaneous studies of women's organisations in this period which offer interesting perspectives. See Patel 1988, Hassim, Metelerkamp and Todes 1987. Meintjes 1998. Udit 1997.
4. The United Women's Organisation merged with the Women's Front Organisation in 1986 to form the United Women's Congress (UWCO).
5. Much fuller descriptions of these organisations and discussion of their particular contexts and strategies may be found in my PhD dissertation (Hassim 2002).
6. There appeared to be some early opposition to the formation of a separate women's organisation. 'A member of the organisation said that the women of Gugulethu had long been discussing how to begin such an organisation. Eventually they called a meeting in the civic hall. Some men were against it and tried to break up the meeting but the women were too strong for them' (UWO 1979).
7. Elsewhere (Hassim 2002) I have argued that once the women's movement became more willing to engage with feminism at a theoretical level, in the rights-based struggle over the drafting of the democratic constitution, they were able to make far-reaching gains.
8. Victoria Mxenge was a prominent UDF executive member, and the widow of popular township activist Griffiths Mxenge, who had been hacked to death in the Umlazi Stadium in 1981 by members of the security police. Her assassination sparked an escalation of confrontation between the state, the surrogate government in Natal of Inkatha, and UDF-aligned civics. Commemoration services were held around the province, which themselves became battlefields. For discussion of these events see Beall, J et al.

9. Currently Deputy Minister of Defence.
10. In the early 1980s the democratic trade union movement was wary of the overt emphasis on national liberation, which they considered would attract repression by the state and undermine attempts to build long-term sustainable organisations. In Natal, the political leadership was dominated by the underground ANC and the two patterns of organisation were considered incompatible. Political leadership in the Western Cape was more divided and unions had a much stronger impact on women's organisation there.
11. 'Gogo' is the Zulu word for grandmother.
12. One successful project was the production of leather sandals, which were sold to raise funds for the organisation.
13. With the notable exceptions of Albertina Sisulu, Cheryl Carolus and Sister Bernard Ncube.
14. Interview with Pregs Govender, 19 January 2000.

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