



Published on *openDemocracy*

South Africa: patriarchy, paper, and reclaiming feminism

Shereen Essof, 21st February 2012

It's not an individualist but a collective feminism that we need, one that measures success not by how high a woman can climb, but by the condition in which most women remain, says Shereen Essof

On the 4th of April 1981 hundreds of people from all over the Western Cape in South Africa gathered in the hall of the St Francis Cultural Centre in Langa to participate in the first Conference of the [United Women's Organisation](#) [14] (UWO). At that meeting [Dora Tamana](#) [15] spoke with fire in her heart:

"You who have no work, speak.

You who have no homes, speak.

You who have no schools, speak.

You who have to run like chickens from the vultures, speak.

We must share the problems so that we can solve them together.

We must free ourselves.

Men and women must share housework.

Men and women must work together in the home and out in the world.

There are no crèches and nursery schools for our children, no homes for the aged, or people to care for the sick.

Women must unite to fight for these rights.

We must go forward!....."

Has anything changed for women since that day when Tamana spoke? Women know intimately how the last 30 years in South Africa's history have been stamped with two outstanding achievements: the birth of a constitutional state and multiparty democracy, and the constitutional commitment to eliminating racial and gendered discrimination.

The years post 1994 were filled with hope and promise that things would be better. For some women things did get better: women participated in key positions of power; in parliament and government, as voters, legislators, members of the judiciary, members and leaders of political

parties, civil society activists, political analysts, media agents, public servants, public intellectuals and more generally as citizens exercising their agency in the broad spectrum of their daily lives and that of South African society. The lives of many women living in South Africa improved with some becoming the rich class.

But too many women continue to live in [poverty](#) [16], too many black women are amongst the poorest of the poor. Too many are struggling without basic services, are stretched by the impacts of HIV/AIDS and a failing health care system that does not prioritise sexual and reproductive health needs. Women in South Africa know about the betrayals and [empty achievements](#) [17] that came with a New South Africa.

But what we are facing today is both the failure of, and reaction to, the attempt to end patriarchy via paper. Commitments to ending gender inequality through enshrining clauses in constitutions, via parliamentary legislation, state policy and national gender machineries is not unique to South Africa. But policy reform is not an end in itself and has led to the consolidation of political power and capital that in no way has helped to dismantle patriarchy. Feminism remains a “dirty” word, often interpolated as anti-nationalist and pro-imperialist, by those who do not like to see women act autonomously and claim equality.

In reclaiming feminism we need concepts and thinking tools that reflect our reality and serve our purpose. The feminism we need is anti-essentialist. It sees gender as lived in many different ways. So it makes sense to talk about masculinities and femininities in the plural. It's not an individualist but a collective feminism, measuring success not by how high a woman can climb, but by the condition in which most women remain.

The feminism we need goes beyond simply remarking on the difference between women's and men's life experiences. A feminism of this kind sees, and tries to understand and challenge this patriarchal gender order. That's what it's for. But we want to take one step more now, and carry this feminism into an engagement with the oppressive ideologies of nationalism and militarism that flow from patriarchy.

These 'brother ideologies' have similar consequences for women and men, for gender relations. Patriarchy, nationalism and militarism reinforce each other. Nationalism's in love with patriarchy because patriarchy offers it women who'll breed true little patriots. Militarism's in love with patriarchy because its women offer up their sons to be soldiers. Patriarchy's in love with

nationalism and militarism because they produce unambiguously masculine men and submissive women.

In South Africa today new forms of patriarchy masked as a conservative traditionalism and militarism are on the increase. Some examples can be found in the uptake by popular culture of things like the song 'Umshini Wami / we baba / awuleth' Umshini Wami' (my machine gun / oh father / please bring me my machine gun) a song historically associated with the liberation struggle but now adopted in an unreconstructed way as the signature tune of President Jacob Zuma. It is not only militaristic, but carries heteronormative sexual innuendo, and it entangles us in a seamless masculinity with little place for a range of gendered identities in the current dispensation.

Neoliberal capitalist agendas have intersected with patriarchy, nationalism and militarism in ways that have reasserted and redefined the roles of men and women, as well as who constitutes a citizen in this country. The [hate crimes](#) [18] that we are witnessing: xenophobic [attacks](#) [19] against 'immigrants', corrective rape of lesbians, the stripping of women who are transgressing gendered norms - all examples of the violence of transgression of this triage and the identities that it constructs and condones. We have to ask what does this mean for women and society at large?

In this period too our political language of struggle as women has been usurped by the system and depoliticised. Thabo Mbeki, more than any other president, male or female, took the project of liberal feminism further than anyone else. The Mbeki project was driven by the desire to give women equal representation within the confines of the existing power structures. It gave women recourse to the law, to equal representation through the language of quotas and gender parity and it opened up the project of building South Africa as a competitive capitalist democracy to the participation of women.

What is the problem here? Is it one of insufficient commitment to and implementation of the project of gender equality? Or is it a problem that stems from the limitations of the project itself? Today in 2012, we have the laboratory result of what you get if you fight patriarchy within these limitations. Women's [land](#) [20] and housing rights are still limited and [insecure](#) [21]. Too many women continue to live in [poverty](#). [16] One in every three women in South Africa is in an abusive relationship, a woman is killed by her partner every six days, and there is a rape every 35 seconds. For women struggling for the emancipation of women, there are many platforms from which to fight this fight. In South Africa there is a long history of feminist activists located within movements

whose primary interest is not feminist, like working class movements, unions and community organisations. A lot of time has been spent thinking about how to make these formations more feminist, how to “mainstream” a women’s agenda.

But these attempts have diluted the feminist spirit and agenda because the proverbial ‘starting point’ must always be negotiated or fought for. There is always need to justify the focus on the liberation of women as a means to some other end, whether it’s national liberation, socialism or working class emancipation despite it being politically correct and sometimes strategic for leftist organizations to have women on board. In this context women are weighed down by having to right the wrongs being done to us by the organisational forms we *choose* to work within, as well as by the system within which we live.

It’s the same old story, women work in supporting and building the struggles and organizations, but the campaigns are designed in ways that do not accommodate women’s agendas. When women challenge male leadership in our moments of radicalism around our own agendas we find that the spaces become hostile, and our male comrades - and other women - become agents that police our radicalism too.

In an environment of deepening polarisation, alienation and misogyny, when the world’s socio-economic and political paradigms are failing us, it is important that as feminist activists we re-evaluate our strategy in order to be clear about which platforms allow us to engage in activism that contributes to building a free world for all people by dismantling patriarchy and its brother ideologies..

There are critical questions for women’s organising and how we engage in mixed gender spaces and struggles. How do we organise for our own sense of power and agency? How do we ensure our safety and well being? How do we organise for the backlash that will come? Currently, our needs are not being addressed, and spaces and opportunities to further radicalise struggle are being lost. Are we satisfied doing the same things in the same way? Are our actions taking us closer to where we want to be, if our ultimate goal is the emancipation of all women? We’ve come a long way and that has to be acknowledged and celebrated. But we have not arrived.

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Created 02/21/2012 - 07:41

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