

## **JASS SOUTHERN AFRICA THINKSHOP 2010 CONTEXT**

A participatory contextual analysis produced by 22 women activists, researchers, academics and practitioners at a two-day Thinkshop organized by JASS Southern Africa.

### **State/Government**

#### **Constitutional and legal frameworks**

A key emphasis of women's rights organizing over the past two decades has been to push for more women representatives or more laws enacted. However, experience shows that we urgently need to develop alternative strategies to deal with the state. While legislation differs in each country in Southern Africa, the region shares a proliferation of mechanisms and frameworks that supposedly uphold gender equity. The reality, however, is quite different. Most existing laws are not financed, implemented or enforced, while some regulations produce negative impact. For example, quotas (mandating a greater percentage of women in decisionmaking) have been so depoliticized that they can work against us, encouraging political parties to practice tokenism, bringing in women who lack any connection to women's movements. The not-always-subtle message around gender mainstreaming is: don't expect more.

NGO legislation in the works in different countries aims to control NGO operations, access to funds and freedom of movement. Overall, the move is towards constricting space for effective NGO work, as governments seek to control these spaces. NGO legislation may specify, for example, where NGOs can operate, may stipulate that the majority of the board must be government officials or may mandate governments to prevent the registration or relicensing of NGOs that operate against (perceived) state interests. In Zambia, for instance, the Zambian government is trying to block the NGO licence of a conflict-resolution NGO. In Malawi, the Sedition Act controls NGO freedom of expression, while in South Africa, it's the media that the state is trying to control. The atmosphere creates fear among NGOs and media, even before legislation takes action.

The sustained mobilizing by civil society of constituencies requires resources. By channelling all bilateral aid through governments, the 2005 Paris Declaration on the new aid modalities has the effect of shrinking spaces and resources for women's organizing. Governments are less likely to facilitate or allow funding of women's organizing, especially of women's groups that take a critical stance. In Zambia for example, the government refused for two years to sign off on EU funding for civil society, because the government wanted to control the agenda. Finally, the EU pushed Zambian civil society to mobilize to pressure their government to sign onto the civil society provision.

Significant infrastructure development is taking place in most countries in the region. But who is getting the tenders in those countries? It is an open secret that the work goes to friends, as corruption is both common and hidden behind the old boys' network.

As roads and other developments are planned, very little trickles down to women. In national budgets, more money is allocated to air forces and military equipment than to meeting citizens' needs. In this equation, the rights of women to abortions and maternity leave are left off any agenda.

**2010 was one year that South Africa could have given women jobs – the president sat in his chair, talking about the 500,000 jobs he'd created to build World Cup soccer stadiums. But women's jobs were dusting the seats.**

An opportunity exists at regional level with increased regional mechanisms for accountability of each national state. The SADC Protocol, for example, mandates member states to hold each other accountable to deliver on commitments. If not. These other states, along with organizations within the country, can respond with pressure. Right now, this represents an opportunity rather than what is actually happening.

**States can be said to be creating poverty and using it to undermine empowerment. Our governments want to see people getting poorer so they can be seen to practice welfare in the form of food distribution and grants rather than empowering those people. For example, the Malawian government exports maize to Zimbabwe when Malawian women have no access to food. Why are those women not being paid to do the work so they can feed themselves? Perpetuating welfare helps governments maintain control.**

### **Political crises, militarization and fundamentalisms**

Whatever is happening politically impacts on our work, opportunities and safety. Women's movements' power to organize are weakened in the face of partisan battles and false agreements, whether we have a so-called "unity government" or face a messy constitution-making process or uncertainty at elections (all currently true in Zimbabwe). Several countries are moving slowly and quietly towards one-party states, using elections as a smokescreen and manipulating political consensus and legitimacy.

Conservative religious and other fundamentalists "in bed with the state" hold increasing sway in the region. They use religion and "morality" to police content, as the new conservatism is welcomed by states. As one example, the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa issued a press release when a conservative group delivered a new draft Bill against LGBT people.

Traditional formations and customary law are enormously powerful even when they are less visible. In Swaziland, for example, delegations of traditional leaders regularly meet with government. Our governments use the guise of an African version of democracy for their own ends. The Zimbabwean government, for example, will use culture as a

pushback against critiques. These are important elements of how our societies are governed.

We are witnessing the reconstitution of who is a citizen in our countries. Drawing on a particular kind of nationalist discourse, together with patriarchy, culture and tradition, you find that you count or you don't count. In the extreme version, people just disappear as participating citizens.

Militarized states are experiencing a surge in politically motivated sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Zimbabwe for one is a military state at a very practical level: "You don't see them or hear them, but they are running things." It is important to make trends visible, such as the targeting of gender justice activists in Zimbabwe. Throughout the region, unspoken fear holds people back from criticism of the state.

### **Dilution and co-optation of women's rights**

The language of rights threatens governments and so tends to be co-opted and diluted. Gender equality language has been watered down, as the key terms have shifted from "women" to "gender" to "vulnerable groups," thereby losing the essential element of power and injustice at the heart of women's inequality. As they co-opt our language, "gender" organizations demobilized our constituencies and reframed our analysis. We need to revive and re-politicize gender equality and women's rights.

**Try using the F word (feminism) in state-civil society processes in South Africa: you won't be included in the next consultation. Others will be constantly on platforms because they speak that "gender equality" language of the state. So it's not violent confrontation but rather a steady, nuanced marginalization of critical alternatives.**

One effect is that national budgets don't take gender seriously. We are losing ground on the pressure some governments once had to designate and track expenditures in relation to women. Gender mainstreaming no longer addresses women's marginalization clearly but is instead understood as "men and women".

Backlash begins with the extended family who may also be in the government: "You are embarrassing us." The state is not separate from social relationships. Pressures of identity and non-conforming are more real than we generally talk about. A woman activist carries numerous levels of threat: from being raped on her way home from a meeting to family pressures, as well as the actions of official state organs.

## **Market/Private Sector**

### **Recolonization?**

Another scramble for land is taking place. (Daewoo recently attempted to buy up whole swathes of Madagascar, for example.) This can be said to constitute a recolonization of

the region with deep impact on women's already fragile land rights. "Communal" land is being sold off to South Africa and to Asian countries who want the rights to minerals and other resources to fuel their own economies. Food will be grown in these places and sent back to those countries.

**Land is the new oil.**

Increasingly, money and investment flows into the region originate from the East, especially China. The Chinese are investing in infrastructure in most Southern African countries; almost a third of any flight into Zambia are Chinese passengers. What does that mean for small businesses in Zambia? Will they benefit from increased investment without policies in place to protect them from getting swallowed up by the giants? Does this look like a new form of colonization?

Much of the new "colonization" of the region is by South African white capital. Would it make a difference if it was black capital? Different kinds of patriarchies are associated with black or white capital – white Boer patriarchy vs. a Zulu man with a big car – both are patriarchy, but in different forms. In SA, we haven't changed the economic model. Instead, we've chosen BEE (Black Economic Empowerment), to get more black faces in power. This can be compared with getting more women in political decisionmaking, rather than shifting the whole model.

**White capital reinforcing our history of colonization is particularly painful.**

**Marketing "justice"**

Corporations are making inroads into the NGO world, skewing messages and struggles that are underway. South Africa is seeing increased corporate responsibility in the form of CSI (corporate social investment), which many view as a marketing gimmick to cover up the profit agenda. Examples of marketing social justice struggles include a campaign for Nelson Mandela Day, encouraging 67 minutes of "doing good", a big media hoopla with no real justice impact but enormously attractive to the corporate sector. Corporate giving is seldom linked to needs assessments and provides no back up for gifts. For example, computers are donated to areas with no electricity.

The media plays a role in bridging the state and the market in the way they construct the "citizen" in collusion with the state. Similarly, the media misrepresent social activism and popular demands, framing protests and actions as "spontaneous" rather than as the result of organizing. The Mozambique food crisis provides one example.

**We used to be a movement but we ended up being a brand on caps and T shirts instead.**

### **Corporations and globalization**

Globalization and neoliberalism enrich the few in our countries while relegating the majority to poverty. Deregulated market economies distribute resources globally, so that those with wealth and power can come and get rich at the cost of our land and resources.

We often look to the nation state to be accountable but in this economic context, it's not the state but the IMF who are actually setting the agenda. We need to identify more clearly who is the enemy and who is the decisionmaker for what happens locally.

In the context of the recent international financial crisis and the ongoing recession, it is clear that those at the top with the most money were not seriously affected. Meanwhile, those at the bottom of the economic scale have been hurting all along.

Unions are losing power as the new economic arrangements erode their numbers, strategies and influence. What stakes do trade unions have in toppling the system when jobs are dependent on capitalism? The context requires that we re-examine former frameworks. Many women are lose jobs as a result of the recession, outsourcing, and other shifts, and remain out in the cold, not organized or represented by unions or by women's movements.

We need to deepen our analysis of the market and how it informs our organizing. Just over a year ago, the entire world collapsed as a result of Wall Street shenanigans. This should have thrown the whole neoliberal model into question. Yet no alternatives have emerged and we're back to business as usual, with a few buffers. Alternatives seem to be radical and more left, and those forums (such as the Social Movements Indaba) still assume a quiet voice. Will they – will we – find ways to engage the majority around structural economic transformation?

### **Civil Society**

#### **Projects vs. movements**

Donor approaches – their priorities and timeframes – have a great deal to do with our ending up in project mode rather than movement mode. Many donors have minimal consultation with women's movements and organizations, instead plugging our organizations into boxes that have already been set in place. The effect is often to undermine, rather than support, women's economic roles, opportunities and rights.

Currently, more donors are promoting grassroots organizing, a shift that is both an opportunity and a threat in that, to meet funding criteria, organizations that shouldn't be doing grassroots work reinvent the wheel rather supporting what's already underway.

Organizations based in the Global North are under increased pressure to have a Global South base and to be more engaged with grassroots to get funds. This trend has huge implications for how the work happens. Often, the Global South ends up mobilizing resources that go to fund the Global North operations.

### **Men in women's rights**

The reframing of women's rights and struggles as "gender", with its tendency to call for neutrality and balance, opened the door to the increasing involvement of men and of men's organizations. While we need men as allies, especially men alive to the possibilities of their own transformation, this scenario presents major challenges. From the shrinking pot of gender equality funding, men's organizations now take a large share. Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that some men and gender groups show little or no accountability to women or women's movements; instead, men speak on our behalf. What's not happening so far – and needs to happen – is for us as women's rights activists to make a powerful case as to why women's organizing and women-only spaces are critical. Overall then, with regards to men in gender equality, we can't hate the players; it's the game we want to change.

### **The power of numbers vs. the costs of unity**

Civil society is riven by party politics in many if not all of our countries. Tied to that, we've lost ground and become fragmented. Our consolidated voice has been muted. There is a lack of cooperation. Instead, we work in issue silos and sectors – HIV, GBV, and poverty – with occasional linking discussions. Have we done the work of identifying common bottom lines? We risk leaving silences and gaps, for example between violence against LGBTI and gender-based violence.

The political situation in Zimbabwe led to a great deal of pain and distress on this question of division. At a certain moment, the whole pretence of unity was shattered. Some women in Zimbabwe will still argue with you as to whether political violence against women actually happened: "It was overstated, it was all MDC." How can women pretend to be together when deeply divided by ideology? We need to ask, more broadly, whether we want to be allied with certain groups.