Women-gov

A South-South project on making local governance work for women

SOUTH AFRICA: Preliminary Research Analysis

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University of the Western Cape, Cape Town

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Introduction

In contemporary South Africa over two decades after the first democratic election, the term "women's

citizenship' has settled down to acquire very and ameliorative meanings. Twenty years of democratic rule, and the gradual implementation of "gender equitous" legislation and policies at various levels - including workplaces, the primary and HE sectors, the corporate world, the political sector and the world of domestic relationships through the Domestic Violence Acts has reduced *some* of the glaring *formal* social, economic and political inequalities of the apartheid period. However, these changes have been made in a neo-liberal context, so that large numbers of historically disadvantaged women remain unaffected by them, and in many cases, ignorant of what they are and their implications.

Consequently, women's citizenship in the present, their formal rights and their right to belong to the nation continues to be undermined by entrenched power relations, the controlling role of the state as he "purveyor" of rights, and the ongoing contradiction- powerfully noted by Mary Hames - between paper rights and the de facto positions of women trapped in cycles of poverty, ongoing racial discrimination and lack of access to knowlege, including their rights.

Two students (who are participants on the project) and I recently published a paper where we argued:

Contemporary South Africa reveals far less evidence of the sustained and widespread debate, networking and activism that raised public awareness about feminisms in previous decades. During the 1980s, organisations aligned with the United Democratic Front

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offered spaces for working women, students and activists to craft feminist discourses and activism in relation to anti- apartheid politics. By 1992, the Women's National Coalition, drawing together numerous women from different regional coalitions, community organisations and political parties collaboratively pursued the integration of gender transformation into the new political dispensation being negotiated at the time. Kemp et al remark on the way the Women's National Coalition allowed diverse groups of South African women to "identify common concerns...[and to] command an authority that none of them could achieve alone" (1995: 151). Feminist activism and discourses during the 1990s also incorporated animated controversy about race, class and knowledge production. Teresa Barnes' (2002) analysis of feminist conferences and workshops throughout the 1990s reveals how students, activists and academics engaged in difficult debates about power relations among South African women and feminists.

The visibility and impact of discourses about gender transformation in the present day are significantly different. At one level, gender activism has become increasingly issue-driven, with women farm workers, domestic workers or sex workers, for example, tackling policies or circumstances that directly affect their members.2 At the same time, "gender activism" has increasingly taken the form of assimilationist politics, where a minority of women achieves positions of power and rarely acts to ensure the empowerment of the majority. As Shireen Hassim argues, "The idea of gender equality is thus increasinglyreduced to a vague set of 'good intentions', which are rarely translated into meaningful policy and ideological demands" (2006: 368). Sectoral forms of gender activism and inclusionary politics fail to "impact laterally on the political agendas of other social movements and in civil society more generally" (Ibid.). This situation does little to galvanise public debate about deeply entrenched power and injustice – especially among young women, who are unable to find inspiration in past experiences or memories of intellectual and political activism. (Feminist Africa, 18, p 44)

The South African Intervention: Challenges of Action Research

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The Intervention driven from the Western Cape has, from the start, sought to address the importance of building women's *active* citizenship in order to ensure that women establish control over information and how it can be used, use information in ways that directly enhances their needs and the needs of their communities, and, most importantly, mobilize, and inventively adapt information to take collective action against various forms of injustice.

(inventively re-using information rather than re-using information)

In South Africa we chose from the start to focus on young women (18-29), with out project being title YoungWomenGovern South Africa. 1730306723 Socially marginalized young women constitute a group that is possibly more alienated from and ignorant of public information (See evidence in quantitative study). Having grown up as the inheritors of post-apartheid change, few have been involved in NGOs, CBOs or trade unions in the ways that a previous generation was. (See quantitative study). At the same time, their youth, sense of restlessness, and the fact that they are far more familiar with modern ICTs than a previous generation all mean that they form keen and enthusiastic participants in an ict feminist activist project.

Our previous technical reports have detailed the challenges experienced with working with an organization in a climate where NGOs nd CBOs are severely constrained by funding, and where leadership, financial organization and the management and control of staff are all adversely affected by deep suspicion anxieties about basic resources.

Chrystal Orderson, at the time the project coordinator, and I worked hard to accommodate the financial and administrative challenges experienced by the Young Women's Chapter. Following consultation with the project partners at ITfor Change, however, it was realized that the project would be threatened if we continued to work with this organization, and the MOU was therefore terminated.

(termination of contract with YWC was a key point of tension)

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With the shift of the project to the University of the Western Cape from the end of 2012, the Project was immediately able to set in place sound financial and accounting systems. Moreover, the Project was able to rely on a large group of university students who were eager to enhance their political skills and knowledge through involvement in this project. Our goal at this time was to draw on two distinct groups of young women: UWC students with fairly solid research and ICT skills, and young women from NGOs and poor areas surround the university, who have strong leadership, mobilizing and other political skills. (students more articulate than young women from NGOs and communities)

We have experienced a number of challenges with recruiting and retaining a consistent group of non-students because of transport difficulties, their interest in material incenstives, and the absence of a coordinating person who is presently deeply immersed in various NGOs in the Western Cape.

Silvana: what is the nature of young women's invovlement with NGOs?
Des: practical issue-based affiliation with NGOs rather than a critique of gender power, which university students bring...

We have, however made considerable headway within one year on the key project parameters:

Parameter 1: Informational power.

On the basis of participant observation, interviews and focus group discussion, it has been clear that, to date, the main form of information power acquired by young women students and non-students has involved their growing confidence in becoming interlocutors in local, regional and national affairs. 1730306728 The production of their knowledge here has involved visual material, articles, short blog essays, artwork, and oral input for community TC and national TV stations. We believe that young women have acquired the confidence to produce their own intrepretations of current affairs including the reasons for poverty and

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unemployment, the scourge of violence against women in South Africa and the limitations of how this scourge has often been written and spoken about in the public domin, and the connection between public transport facilities and the needs and vulnerabilities of women, especially young women.

Weekly training sessions have assisted young women with developing the analytical and political skills to produce this knowledge. At the same time, we are aware that young women are often more keen to "do", than to "think". The plan for the Project in coming months is to encourage much more focused research activities and to ensure that a smaller number of capable participants take main responsibility for developing and reviewing information about rights and entitlements. This would also be connected to more proactive efforts to involve policy-makers, planners and government officials in the work that the young women are doing.

It should be stressed that approximately a year after we began to use film, including short bits of film, sound and text, (which the coordinator dubbed the digital activism message), this form has acquired renewed interest among NGOs. Replacing the former genre of digital storytelling, which stressed autobiographical and testimonial information, these forms focus on consciousness-raising and encourage viewers to reflect and take action. We believe that these are the forms of information that have been most successful among our participants.

Regarding women's access to information, and their participation in our local information network, we have established a website, where project participants have been trained to upload relevant material.

Information is also shared via facebook. Towards the end of 2013, concerted attention was devoted to publicing the project to ensure that as wide a group of women as possible could become involved.

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While the participants' involvement in the IC4D conference in November 2013 was not strictly speaking a "political" activity, it clearly confirmed the ability of participants and project resources to convey the political value of their ict strategies and their political ideas among experts on icts and development in the global south.

Parameter2: Associational power and collective action

The main strength of the associational power generated by the project has been the project's success in attracting young women who often experience frustration with topdown and bureaucratic ventures.(See D Lewis, T Huseen and M vn Vuuren, Feminist Africa 18). Young women have participated actively in our on-campus and off-campus activities, with students having been able to recruit participants via facebook and advertising through electronic media. Project participants and leaders have been very encouraged by the spirit of solidarity, deteremination and enthusiasm experienced among the young women. (Evidence of this is provided in the gallery sections on our website).

An ongoing challenge for developing our associational power would be to harness young women's activities, such as skits, poetry, photography, installations and talks in forums where government officials and decision-makers can hear them.

The associational power of the young women has concentrated on building associations among themselves – clearly an important starting point in any feminist venture, but a process that is also limited and needs to be taken further.

Communicative power

The Project has committed itself to a wide range of media, genres and ideas in order to ensure that young women are able to communicate their political ideas as spontaneously and originally as possible. Although the website is not open to all submissions, we have tended to encourage open participation during certain sections of our pubic activities.

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Our most focused communicative activity revolves around our three themes, themes that are directly relevant to the provision of services to communities at local government level. These are:

1. Access to public tansport (see website)

2. Bodily integrity (we decided to use this term rather than violence to avoid victimisation)

3. Unemployment

Activities and workshops on these three themes have sought to deal with social issues holistically, so that rather than these being seen as stand-alone issues that can be solved in isolation, they are conceptualised as symptoms of underlying social problems. One facet of our communication here (which has worked very well) has been to communicate messages to other young women, assisting them with finding a focus for problems that may seem overwhelming. A less successful goal has been to create an audience among role-players who are responsible for planning and implementing change at the local, provincial and national levels. Although efforts have been made to do this in the past (for example, participants' involvement in debates on community and national television), the consolidation of this audience must be an important priority as the project reaches its end.

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