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## **Struggles for Gender Equality:**

Reflections on the  
place of men and  
men's organisations

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liberation struggles.***

# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing focus on men and men's organisations within development is seen by some as a new fad, the latest silver bullet to achieving gender equality, and a threat to women's organisation and women's movements. In this view, donor attention to men's organisations seems to signify a shift of support away from women's empowerment and women's leadership, and a handing over of the reins in the struggle for gender equality to men. Men are once more in charge – only this time they're in charge of women's liberation struggles.

As confusion sets in over the core issues (is it masculinity?) and the leading actors (is it men?) in struggles for gender equality, the hard-won focus on women's position within development, and the role of women's movements in redressing women's subordination, and their strategic gender interests seem to be under threat. The confusion over core issues and leading actors takes place in a context of backlash against feminist gains. Feminist movements are in decline, and feminist demands have been depoliticised within development.

## The relationship between **men's organisations** for gender equality and **feminist organisations** is an **uneasy** one.

**C**ONCEPTS DEVELOPED IN FEMINIST movements, once they entered the fields of development organisations and the arenas of state, were stripped of all notions of power and politics and were given meanings more suited to the technical worlds of development and state institutions. Feminist gains in getting development and state institutions to take notice of their demands thus led to new struggles, and over the past decades an ongoing feminist concern has been how to re-politicise feminist concepts.

Gender, stripped of ideas of male privilege and female subordination, came to mean that women and men suffered equally the costs of the existing gender order. Women's organisations were increasingly asked 'if you are working on gender, then where are the men?' and they were increasingly pressurised (particularly by donors) to include men. On the heels of this pressure, a new development actor came into focus – men's organisations. The existence of already-weakened women's organisations was now further threatened, and feminist attempts at movement-building faced additional challenges.

The relationship between men's organisations for gender equality and feminist organisations is an uneasy one. Should feminists embrace this new ally? Or are feminists wise to maintain a suspicious and safe distance as they find ways to regroup, so

as to re-politicise and continue their struggles to advance women's rights and gender equality in the face of backlash?

In order to understand the place of men's organisations in the struggle for gender equality, I suggest we go back to basics, to remind ourselves of the core issues in the project of gender equality. We need to locate an understanding of men's movements within a broader understanding of the rise of feminism as a response to women's subordination, and within an understanding of how feminist demands have been depoliticised within development. It is only against this backdrop that we can begin to understand how men's organisations have become a part of the development landscape, and we can then begin to frame informed and meaningful questions about the place of men's organisations in struggles for gender equality.

Following this logic, in chapter two of this paper, I look at the rise of feminism in the 1960s, and at the understandings and strategies that fired feminist ideas and the practice of women's liberation.

In chapter three I attempt to understand the shifts that took place and the trends that developed as ideas of women's liberation travelled from the brave world of movements into the technical field of development. These included shifts from women in development, to gender and

development, to gender mainstreaming, rights and development, and to work with men.

In chapter four I look at men's responses to gender relations, and at strategies for working with men. I look firstly at men's responses to the rise of 1960s feminism in the USA. I then provide an overview of men's organisations in South Africa, and look at the developing trend of women's organisations working with men around violence against women.

In chapter five I reassess the core issues, leading actors, and key strategies in struggles for gender equality, and attempt to unravel the confusion created by the de-politicisation of struggle concepts within development and the focus on men.

In chapter six I look at two organisations in Southern Africa – Padare Men's Forum (based in Zimbabwe), and Sonke Gender Justice (based in South Africa). I argue that these organisations could more meaningfully contribute to gender equality through consolidating their work in communities with both women and men through an approach which considers the intersections of race, class, gender and other social relations from a feminist perspective.

Finally, in chapter seven, I offer some conclusions.

## 2.

## Feminist understandings and actions

**A**ROUND 1960, WOMEN ROSE UP in what has come to be known as second wave feminism<sup>1</sup>. This was a time of movements, and a developing counter-culture which challenged all forms of authority, and which envisaged far-reaching social change. In the US, the black civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War challenged the establishment. In Britain and across Europe, workers and students challenged oppressive class relations, and advanced struggles for socialism. In Africa, Latin America and Asia, national liberation movements intensified their struggles for freedom from colonial rule.

Building movements of the affected was a key strategy to achieve change. Black people were organising to advance their rights in the context of racial oppression and domination, workers were organising to advance their rights in the context of oppressive class relations, socialist and nationalist movements were advancing the rights of oppressed nations. Women began to organise for women's liberation in ways never seen before. Women members of the social movements of the time began to question their position of subordination, both within their social movements and within society. Their political schooling within left

movements made clear to these early women's liberationists that the only way to win their liberation was to consciously work together as women. Women began to organise themselves in separate women's groups, women's caucuses, and women's wings. Through consciousness raising, political awareness and action, they began to challenge the men in their movements and within broader society, and they began to win gains for women's rights (Watkins, Rueda and Rodriguez 1992).

Women in the US civil rights and anti-war protest movements began to meet separately from their male comrades in consciousness-raising groups. Women members of socialist organisations and trade unions in Britain and across Europe formed similar groups. Meeting separately as women, they began to question relations that had up to now been accepted as the natural order – relations in their families, their position in society, and their junior status within the mixed-gender movements for social justice and change.

The increasing numbers of women who were college-educated and the increasing numbers of women in the work force had raised expectations. They felt equal but were still trapped

in roles of looking after men, and striving for male attention and approval. This was so in their families, their workplaces, and society. Even within protest and labour movements, women found that they had secondary roles to men. They were expected to make coffee, type leaflets, and when they attempted to speak up for their rights they were put down by movement and union men – often on the grounds that women's concerns were frivolous, and not the major contradiction that needed to be addressed. Movement 'chicks' were seen as having one particular role for movement men – providing sex (Watkins, Rueda and Rodriguez 1992).

It was the oppressive relations women found themselves in as a result of their gender that gave rise to feminism. Feminism as a political movement challenged relations between men as a group and women as a group, and rebelled against all power structures, laws and conventions that kept women servile and subordinate. Feminists challenged the division of labour that puts men in charge of the world while women slave away unpaid in the home, carrying the whole burden of family life.

Women's groups engaged in consciousness raising, self-defence, street theatre, women's history studies, and legal advice; they formed self-help health groups, and took up demands for abortion and contraception.

Feminist activism saw the personal as political. What were previously thought of as personal or private issues, not to be questioned, were now understood as resulting from unequal relations of power and women's subordination, and as legitimate concerns of feminism as a political movement.

Different experiences among women soon came into conflict, highlighting that women are

not a homogenous grouping, and that women's interests are shaped by their class, race and gender. Black women articulated their anger at a feminist movement shaped by the interests of white women, which excluded black women and their experiences. The title of the 1982 book *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men But Some of Us are Brave* by Gloria Hull Scott and Barbara Smith captured black women's anger at their marginalisation from the (male) black power movement and from a feminist movement led by white women. Lesbian women struggled to put their concerns on the agenda of mainstream women's liberation organisations, making clear the heterosexual (even homophobic) leanings of these organisations

In addition to differences of race and sexual orientation there were differences among feminists on the basis of their support for or rejection of capitalism. Liberal feminists supported the existing economic system, and simply wanted legal (formal) equality alongside men within this system. Marxist and socialist feminists saw women's liberation as part of a broader social change agenda that included the dismantling of the capitalist system and its replacement with more equitable economic relations. These differences made it clear that women are not a homogenous grouping, and that women's interests and the goals that feminists were working towards could not be taken for granted.

While organising separately was a key feminist strategy, this did not mean that feminists did not engage men – the men with whom they had close personal relationships and the men in broader social movements. Feminists who organised around violence against women challenged men to look at their personal practice and to take responsibility for their behaviour towards women. Socialist women made socialist men think about the relation between Marxism and women's liberation.

### The Southern African context

Women in socialist-aligned liberation movements in Southern Africa raised women's liberation as an integral part of their struggle against colonial rule. Women pushed for their liberation as women to be a part of national liberation struggles in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. They advanced the idea that women face triple oppression on the basis of race, class, and gender, and that all these forms of oppression needed to be addressed simultaneously. Men leading these national liberation movements began to address 'the women's question', and even if they tended to view women's liberation as a secondary and non-essential issue, women could draw on the gains made in bringing attention to their concerns. Women in Southern Africa drew, for example, on Frelimo leader Samora Machel's comment at the first conference of Frelimo's women's wing in 1973, that the 'liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for our revolution, a guarantee of its continuity and a precondition for its victory'.

*Gender-blind, male-defined conceptualisations of the household and communities were challenged within academia and within development.*

Women in trade unions brought their concerns to the attention of these male-dominated and male-led organisations. For instance, in the early 1980s, women workers in South Africa's trade union federation FOSATU spoke out about the problems they experienced around equal pay, maternity leave and childcare. They spoke out also about the restrictions placed on their mobility and time by boyfriends and husbands; of their heavy workloads from the double shift of household responsibilities and paid jobs; of violence, sexual harassment and rape in their homes, communities and workplaces. They spoke out too about the attitudes of fellow workers who saw them as 'tea-makers instead of speechmakers'. Women workers engaged male trade union comrades in discussion on what were up to now seen as private concerns and not the stuff of trade union activism. In July 1983 women spoke out on such issues at a FOSATU education conference. MamLydia Kompe, a trade union organiser, told the gathering how her fellow trade unionists were resistant to women in leadership positions. They saw her as inferior and expected her to make the tea simply because she was a woman. Other women workers spoke of the unfair division of labour which overburdened women. Women called for changes in their lives at home, in the union, and at work. (SPEAK 4, 1984 in Meer, 1998).

### New understandings of how ideas and institutional practices reproduce gender inequality

As feminist movements developed over the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, so too did feminist understandings about women's social situation in relation to men. Feminists argued that cultural ideologies favoured men and that social institutions reflected and reproduced these ideologies – that men as a group benefitted from the subordination of women as a group, despite the specific advantages of individual men or sub-groups of men (Gardiner, 2005).

Feminists showed how, although women and men are taught to see femininity and masculinity as natural and fixed, these are in fact social constructions which have changed over time and are capable of changing to create greater equality. Black and third world women highlighted the way in which gender relations are constructed in intersections with other social divisions and social differences – such as class, race, and ethnicity (see for example Combahee River Collective 1886, Gloria T Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith, 1982 and Angela Y Davis 1994).

Within academia, feminists challenged gender-neutral and gender-blind thinking which had hidden women from history (for example Gerda Lerner, 1981), ignored their reproductive labour in economics, and generally took men's experience as the norm. Gender-blind, male-defined conceptualisations of the household and communities were challenged within academia and within development (see for example Diane Elson, 1991, *Male Bias in the Development Process*). Feminist political theorists (e.g. Phillips 1991, Pateman 1992) exposed how democracy is gendered in ways that privilege men of the dominant race, class or ethnicity while subordinating women as a group. While women's experiences were also shaped by their race, class and ethnicity, what all women shared was marginalisation and exclusion because they were women. Women were relegated to the private sphere of the home and kitchen; they were not seen as full citizens with rights and agency, and were not seen as legitimate leaders. Men, on the other hand, were leaders – in households, in communities, and in states. Men were full citizens with agency and rights – including rights over their wives, sisters, daughters.

Feminists highlighted how these meanings of being a woman or being a man were produced and reproduced by institutions of the family, the household, the community, the market, and the state, through practices which determine women's lesser access and control over

resources, power and authority as compared with men of their race, class, ethnicity (Kabeer, 1994). What had to be challenged were both meanings and practices.

Feminists saw the need to change both the economic structure and the status order of society – there was a need both for recognition of women and their claims, and for redistribution of resources (Fraser, 2000). Redistribution could only take place on the basis of full recognition. Key to women’s subordination was that women were not seen as autonomous human beings. Instead women were identified in relation to a man (fathers, brothers, husbands, sons), and their access to resources (such as land) was framed through their relationship with men. Struggles for recognition would ensure that women were seen as autonomous human beings worthy of rights, and not just as the wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers of men.

What feminists highlighted most significantly was that a gender lens brought to focus on poverty would show that women and men experience poverty differently, based on their location within gender relations – women’s position as the subordinate gender, and men’s as the privileged gender. Women’s experiences had been hidden in conceptualisations that took male experience as the norm.

In addition to strategies of organising women separately and building women’s movements (which were still seen as the main organisational form to advance women’s liberation), by the 1990s feminists were demanding equal participation in parliaments, in local councils, in state bureaucracies, and in the workplace. Many women entered development and governance institutions in an effort to bring gender equality and women’s rights concerns into the centre of these institutions, and once they gained entry they confronted new barriers and challenges.

# 3.

## Feminist concepts in development and the state

**A**S FEMINISTS AND THEIR CONCEPTS TRAVELLED FROM THE world of movements into the technical field of development and into state assemblies and bureaucracies, they found that the concepts developed in the brave world of movements were now blunted and stripped of notions of power and dreams of transformation.

### Feminist gains within arenas of development

Among the gains was greater attention to women’s empowerment and women’s rights within international development from the 1970s. Feminists had provided the impetus for the UN International Women’s Decade (1976 to 1985), with UN women’s conferences held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995. Each of these conferences put the spotlight on women’s concerns and advanced agendas for greater attention to women in development (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004). In 1979, the UN General Assembly adopted CEDAW – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women – which set up an agenda for action by governments who signed the convention to end such discrimination.



*The **feminist agenda** of transforming gender and other oppressive social and economic relations was a **political agenda** which **did not sit easily with governments** and the international development agenda.*

Feminist activism resulted in advancing women's rights as human rights at the International Human Rights Conference in Vienna in 1993, and in ensuring that sexual and reproductive rights were incorporated into health policy at the International Conference on Population Development in Cairo in 1994. Up to this time, key human rights instruments (such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights) had not included women's rights, and health policy had not considered women's sexual and reproductive rights. These gains, which we take for granted today, were in fact massive gains at the time.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action that came out of the 1995 UN Conference on Women committed states who signed the declaration to advancing women's rights, empowerment, access to resources, and participation in political office.

Feminists challenged gender-blind and gender-neutral analyses which reinforced women's subordination within development programmes and planning frameworks. These challenges resulted in feminist attempts to introduce gender planning frameworks, which attempted to take into account the gender division of labour which increased women's burden, and women's lack of access to and control over resources (March et al, 2005).

Development institutions responded to feminist claims around the subordinate position of women in development programmes by developing approaches to 'integrate women in development' and to advance women's empowerment. As understandings of systems of gender inequality increased, the approach shifted to addressing 'gender and development' and to 'gender mainstreaming' as a strategy within development. This was followed in the late 1990s by rights-based approaches to development. Each of these shifts was an attempt to address what activists were continually highlighting – that despite the attention to women and women's empowerment, women's position and condition had changed very little.

Poverty was deepening across the world, and inequalities were increasing within and between countries. Neoliberal globalisation, which prioritises profit over people, left little space for the redistribution of resources and power. The market-led development path advanced by the World Bank, IMF, and bilateral donors (and adopted by national states) was hostile to redistributive measures. The feminist agenda of transforming gender and other oppressive social and economic relations was a political agenda which did not sit easily with governments and the international development agenda. Once these concepts travelled into international development and into government bureaucracies, they were co-opted and given new meanings (Batliwala, 2010). Gender mainstreaming, for example, was understood by feminists as an agenda to transform unequal relations of power, including unequal resource distribution. Within development institutions, however, mainstreaming lost its political edge and its transformatory power, and was reduced to rhetoric. The focus of mainstreaming became blurred (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2005).

At best women's agendas were watered down to something close to the liberal feminist agenda of formal equality between women and men within the existing capitalist economic order. Feminists concerned with advancing a transformative social

justice agenda engaged in ongoing struggles at the level of ideas and practice. While gains were made, there was constant need to guard these gains, to push agendas beyond formal and legal equality, and to deal with backlash.

The goal of gender equality became blurred as income-generation projects were taken to equal women's empowerment, and formal equality through laws was taken to mean equal rights. Depoliticised conceptualisations hid the fact that it is unjust and inequitable systems which enable a few to amass wealth at the expense of the majority, that the goal has to be substantive rather than formal equality, and organisation of the oppressed group is key to redressing the unjust order.

Women's practical gender needs – that is, needs that arose from women's existing roles and their position within the existing division of labour – were more easily addressed within development (see Molyneux, 1985). Women's strategic gender needs – which entailed transforming unequal relations of power – were by and large left unaddressed. More often than not, women had been seen as instruments to larger development objectives. Educating women, for example, was seen as a means to other ends (such as reducing infant mortality, and ensuring that children would not drop out of school), rather than a right or entitlement for women themselves.

Gender in itself lost the meaning that feminism had imbued it with. Gender as a concept was depoliticised – stripped of notions of power, privilege and subordination – and taken to mean 'women and men', as though these groups were equally affected and had the same relation to the system of gender inequality. That men have a different relation to the gender system from women, that men are privileged by the gender system while women are subordinated, and that men's gender interests may tend in the direction of maintaining their male privilege, were ignored as 'gender' translated into simply 'men and women'.



Alongside and contributing to the depoliticisation of meanings was the waning of feminist and socialist movements for change internationally. The movements of the 1960s, with their bold alternatives to exploitative capitalist relations and oppressive gender relations, had given way by the late 1990s to an increasing pragmatism that entrenched neoliberal economics and liberal feminism.

### Men as the new silver bullet?

Depoliticised understandings of gender as 'men and women' got donors asking women's organisations 'if you are working on gender, where are the men in your organisation?' The safe spaces women had created were under threat as women were pressurised to bring men into their organisations, and as donor support shifted away from women's movement building (AWID, 2005).

Working with men and men's organisations was now latched onto (in particular by UN agencies and bilateral donors) as a way of addressing gender equality concerns within development.

This support for men's organisations took place at a time when feminists were struggling against the effects of the depoliticisation and co-option of their demands for gender equality. Feminists were faced not only with the withdrawal of support for women's movement building (AWID 2005), but also with the emergence of a new constituency seemingly advanced to do the work of achieving gender equality.

What were donors thinking? At one level, men's organisations seem to be advanced as a means to broader development objectives. Similar to the way in which women were instrumentalised as a route to education or better health for children, men were now seen as a route to meeting objectives under health and HIV and AIDS programmes. As Win (2010) points out, donor

funding for gender equality in the AIDS sector is increasingly shifting to work with men and boys.

Feminists had achieved the acceptance by the development community that HIV transmission was fuelled both by unequal gender relations which limited women's ability to negotiate safer sex, and by violence against women. Studies had revealed the correlation between HIV transmission and violence against women. This realisation got donors thinking about ways to reduce gender disparities, and they hit on men as the way to do this. Working with men – from the donors' point of view – could reduce costs to the health care system, and thus meet efficiency goals prioritised by development organisations. This seemed to be a new silver bullet, which would give 'more bang for the buck!' The power that men have over women, and the possibility that it may not be in men's gender interests to transform gender relations or achieve greater equality, were ignored.

As donors began to impress on women's organisations that working on gender means bringing men into their organisations, and as donor funding sought out men's organisations, the number of men prepared to engage in such work grew. The demand, in other words, led to a supply. Often these were men not particularly concerned about women's rights and women's empowerment. They came to these organisations as to a job (although it needs to be said that this was the case within feminist organisations too – where women came to jobs, not necessarily fired up by the ideas of far-reaching change which had led to the formation of these organisations in the first place).

On the other hand, there were men inspired by feminism, genuinely searching out new ways of being men, and committed to transforming social relations of oppression and exploitation as a political project. Many of these men came from broader social movements, inspired by ideas and strategies to achieve social justice, but pro-

feminist men were a minority in a sea of broader hostility to women and women's interests.

In the face of increasing donor preference for men, feminists are concerned that with the loss of funding women are losing their safe spaces and their movements (Win 2010, Ludwig quoted in Sexwale, 2007). Win notes that it is time to reclaim women's spaces and to re-politicise women's movements with feminist politics. Win notes the disturbing trend in Zambia and Mozambique, where men have entered women's organisations as employees, in some cases out-numbering women on the staff of women's organisations.

Added to this is the trend of men on the boards of these organisations, flying in the face of efforts to advance women's leadership (Win, 2010).

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## 4.

## Men's responses to changing gender relations

**T**HE OVERWHELMING RESPONSE OF MEN TO ADVANCES IN women's rights since the 1970s has been hostility. Some men's organisations were set up to save men from the feminist onslaught, arguing that men suffered (and were worse off) as a result of advancing women's rights. Instead of recognising the ways in which dominant masculinity subordinates women and distributes power unevenly among men (on the basis of race and class, for example), feminism was blamed for emasculating men (Gardiner, 2002).

However, while most men in the 1970s responded to second wave feminism in the US by stunned silence or hostility, some college men started men's liberation groups to explore their own relation to women's liberation (Messner, 2000). Charting men's organised responses to feminism in the US, Messner (2000) notes that this was the first organised response by men to second wave feminism. While these men saw feminism as an important movement, they stressed the high cost of masculinity to men. Many of these men were psychologists. They drew on sex role theory which stressed that masculinity and femininity were social constructs, were not biologically determined, and therefore could be changed through consciousness-raising and behaviour change. They explored how socialisation pressurised men and boys to compete for success, and limited their emotional capacities. However, as Messner (2000) notes, while men's exploration of their masculinity was a positive feature, there were two problems with men's liberation. Firstly, role theory had the limitation of depoliticising gender oppression as something faced by men and women equally; men's privilege was masked in this view, as was women's oppression. Secondly, while men in consciousness-raising groups examined their personal experiences in the light of the feminist call that the personal is political, they lacked an analytical framework, and discussions took the form of guilty personal interrogation rather than critical social analysis (Messner, 2000).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Men's Rights Movement came on the scene. This was a movement of angry US men in backlash mode. In their view, men did not have institutional privileges, and were the group most oppressed by current gender arrangements. In their view, men had shorter lifespans, greater health problems, were victims of unfair divorce and custody settlements, and suffered domestic violence. Campaigns for father's rights and the construction of a healthy, peaceful, nurturing masculinity were key among their concerns (Messner, 2000).

The mid-1970s also saw the emergence in the US of radical men's organisations supporting feminists. These men, who came to be known as pro-feminists, acknowledged men's power, privilege and domination over women. They saw sexism as a system of male supremacy or patriarchy, and not just a set of attitudes or values that can be unlearned. They saw that men as a group dominate women as a group, benefitting from the oppression of women, and they saw rape and sexual violence as a key site of male domination. Following from this understanding, their practice focused on addressing sexual violence (Messner, 2000).

Yet another category was socialist feminist men, who saw class inequalities as being as important as gender inequalities. They stressed that while patriarchy benefits all men, class differences among men result in some men paying higher costs within patriarchal capitalism. They focused on the personal, on sexual relations, and on work relations within capitalism. Studies by socialist pro-feminist men highlighted working class masculinity as distinct from middle class masculinity. This offered a more complex way to think of masculinity – as a multiple reality constructed in relation to women and in relation to men's varying and opposing class position vis-à-vis other men. This gave rise to the understanding of multiple masculinities – some hegemonic, some subordinated. While the

feminist impulse of socialist feminism showed that men benefit as a group from patriarchy, the socialist impulse revealed that class inequalities among men distribute patriarchal benefits and costs unequally among men (Messner, 2000).

Socialist feminism emphasised that institutions such as workplaces and states need to be changed, and that the task was not simply to get individual men to change sexist attitudes and practices. However, inherent in socialist feminism, are the dangers that the women's question could be relegated to after the revolution; that economic reductionism could relegate race and sexuality to non-essential issues (Messner, 2000).

Messner (2000) argues that it is necessary to move beyond theories that tend to oversimplify the world by collapsing all forms of oppression into one supposedly primary cause – class in the case of Marxist explanations, and gender in the case of radical pro-feminism. Rather we need to explore theories that conceptualise multiple semi-autonomous, cross-cutting systems of inequality.

Messner (2000) notes that a focus on the costs of masculinity led men to organise to gain more power and control over their lives, whereas consciousness of men's institutional privileges led men to organise around the goal of undermining men's institutional power and privileges over women.

### Strategies of Men's organisations to end violence against women

Strategies developed by men's organisations working to end violence against women have included working with perpetrators and public education campaigns. They include consciousness-raising, rallies, marches, and workshops in schools, prisons and workplaces. Such groups can be found in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, but with the largest number is concentrated in the US (Flood, 2003).

Anti-sexist men's consciousness-raising attempted to get men to reconstruct their gender identities and relations, through becoming aware of and questioning their own sexist practices. Men's groups provided peer support for new ways of being men, and provided the basis for public activism. The more political groups saw the need to address power and politics, and to move beyond consciousness-raising and education, to raise questions of institutional functioning and culture, domestic work, equal pay, and their own exercise of masculine privilege (Flood, 2003).

In Brazil, for example, young men in favelas were encouraged to ask critical questions so as to raise their awareness of the power imbalances affecting their lives, of the violence they themselves practiced against others, and the need for collective action and group education (Esplen and Greig, 2007).

In South Africa, where gender relations are depicted as being in a state of emergency because of the high levels of sexual violence against women (Bennett), the engagement of men seems to have been the result of initiatives by women working on issues of violence against women, and initiatives by international organisations working on health. These efforts then engaged with work by government departments and UN agencies in advancing health agendas.

That these efforts take place within a broader context of backlash is important to remember for two reasons. It is important to remember firstly that pro-feminist men are a minority among men, and that most men resist women and their demands, or are even hostile to women. Secondly, pro-feminist men can expect to meet with resistance and hostility from anti-feminist and non-feminist men who see their masculinity as deviant, and that they could pay the price for deviating.

In Southern Africa the effects of a backlash against women were evident when in both

Zimbabwe and South Africa women were referred to by men as "Beijing" following women's gains at the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. Men in communities saw their problems as arising from the advances women were making. Padare Men's Forum was set up by men in Zimbabwe who were concerned at this backlash among men against women's rights.

In Kenya, the organisation Men for Gender Equality Now reported in 2010 that men were threatened by a focus on gender-based violence, and on girls and young women. Legal advancement in favour of women led to a backlash in the form of men's organisations which claim that the boy-child has been neglected (IDS News, 2010).

In South Africa, for all the formal commitments to gender equality, efforts to work with men in the labour union federation COSATU face challenges of sexism and homophobia from within the labour movement (Mbuyiselo Botha in Esplen and Graig, 2007).

### Men's organisations in South Africa

Morrell (2002) notes three categories of men's organisations in South Africa: those formed to defend male privilege, those formed to deal with a crisis in masculinity, and those working to advance gender equality.

Two organisational forms defending male privilege were the South African Association of Men and a loose formation concerned with father's rights. The South African Association of Men, set up in the 1990s, was driven by concerns about the erosion of white male privilege. Its members were white, middle-class, heterosexist men who saw affirmative action to advance women and black people as a threat. However when it became clear that

affirmative action was not as threatening as anticipated, the organisation lost impetus. This organisation stressed men's losses, and represented a backlash response to greater race and gender equality (Morrell, 2002).

Also in the 1990s, a loose formation brought (mainly white) men together to defend men's rights as fathers. These men organised against what they saw as unfair laws that denied fathers custody or access to children. There is little evidence to suggest that these men were concerned to share parenting and responsibility for children, and it seems to be the case that their concern was to challenge increased rights of women over custody of children (Morrell, 2002).

An organisation set up to address a crisis in masculinity in 1999 was the Promise Keepers of South Africa. The launch at a rugby stadium attracted thirty thousand black and white men, inspired by Christian fundamentalist principles, and an agenda to address crumbling families and help men to find their true selves (Morrell, 2002).

Morrell (2002) notes that the South African Men's Forum formed in 1998 does not allow for easy categorisation as either defending male privilege, or dealing with a crisis in masculinity, or supporting gender equality. Its membership comprises African middle-class men, prominent in business, education, government, service organisations and lobby groups. The organisation sought to 'restore the soul of the nation', and called on men to unite in rejecting and condemning brutality against women and children, and in addressing other social ills.

Initiatives to organise men around gender equality have centred mainly on domestic abuse and HIV and AIDS. Many of these initiatives were by women's organisations working on violence against women. They focused on getting men to understand the costs of masculinity, and they attempted to get men to change their behaviour. However they do not seem to challenge or contest male privilege in more direct ways.

*pro-feminist men can expect to meet with resistance and hostility from anti-feminist and non-feminist men who see their masculinity as deviant.*

The 5 in 6 Project set up in Cape Town in 1993 appears to be the first of the men's organisations working for gender equality to work on violence against women. Their focus is on raising the awareness of men in corporates, in government, on farms, and in communities (Sexwale, 2007). International organisations working with men in South Africa from 1998 include Planned Parenthood, and Engender Health's Men, both working on violence against women, HIV/ AIDS, and health more broadly.

The capacity of pro-feminist organisations to mobilise men for gender justice on any significant scale is open to question in South Africa or elsewhere (Morrell, 2002). Men's organisations do not reach large numbers of men, nor do many seem to have the capacity to endure. Attempts to engage large numbers of men in men's marches have been dismal. A men's march against violence against women in 1997 in Pretoria, for example, attracted a few hundred men instead of the targeted thousands. In 1999 a march planned in Durban was cancelled because very few men turned up. The international white ribbon campaign to organise men against violence against women has a membership of women in South Africa. Counselling support to male perpetrators of violence may have been the more successful response, but even here the extent of change achieved in individual behaviour is unclear (Morrell, 2002).

### **Women's organisations working with men for gender equality**

A category of organisations that needs to be considered separately is those organisations set up by women to support women who have experienced relational and sexual violence, who began in the late 1990s to work with men as the perpetrators of violence. These organisations began to address issues of masculinity in order to get men to change their violent behaviour

towards women, and in some cases (as with GETNET) their agenda included working with men in trade unions.

In 1996 the Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT) women's organisation based in Alexandra Township (Johannesburg) set up a unit to focus on advocacy, training, counselling and healing of male perpetrators of violence against women. ADAPT founder, Mmatshilo Motsei, inspired by a London-based men's organisation, started to train young black working class men who themselves had been violent, to counsel other perpetrators of violence (Sexwale 2007, Morrell 2002). The ADAPT initiative inspired other NGOs (both local and international), as well as government departments (Sexwale, 2007).

In Cape Town, Lilitha Labantu, a women's organisation working on violence against women, began working with men; and the University of Western Cape Gender Equity Unit began to include work on masculinities and workshops with men alongside its continuing focus on women (Sexwale, 2007).

The NGO Targeted AIDS Interventions shifted its focus from women to men. Masimanyane Women's Support Centre in East London began its men's project in 2000, aimed at ending men's violent behaviour. Thusanang Advocacy Centre in the Free State, set up to provide services to abused women, set up men's forums in three villages and worked at training men (Sexwale, 2007).

In addition to working with men as perpetrators of sexual violence, women's organisations in South Africa and elsewhere began to work increasingly on legal and policy change within the welfare, criminal justice and health systems. This increasing engagement with mainstream institutions led to a watering down of politicised feminist analyses and abandonment of an agenda to transform inequitable social systems that

perpetuate violence. Instead the orientation of these organisations shifted to managing violence in women's lives.

### **Donor pressure to work with men?**

The extent to which this concerted shift by women's organisations to work with men was the result of donor pressure, given depoliticised understandings of gender as 'women and men', needs further exploration. What also needs further exploration is the extent to which the shift to include men diluted these organisations' attention to women's interests and needs.

What is clear is that there is a world of differences between the thinking and action of feminist responses to women's experience of sexual violence and the thinking and action around men's responsibility for ending violence against women. How to hold these two ways of thinking and doing within one organisation (particularly when women survivors of violence need a protective safe space) must have constituted a challenge.

### **Feminist versus masculinist understandings and actions around sexual violence**

What are the differences between feminist and male-defined responses to violence against women? Feminist movements enabled women to understand their experiences of men's mistreatment, abuse, harassment, and violence. Women meeting in safe spaces – women's groups or women's shelters – named, analysed, and strategised to end this violence. They understood their experiences as arising from their subordination as women in interlocking systems of gender, race, and class oppression. Feminist understandings and action recognised women's experiences, and feminist practice

was to engage in political action to bring about change – from individual change to cultural change, and change in social, economic, legal, and religious institutions.

Work with men, on the other hand, has usually been based on understandings of the male perpetrator in crisis, and has responded by offering individual counselling in the hope of achieving behavioural change on the part of the perpetrator. Greig (in Esplen and Greig, 2007) notes that few pro-feminist men's organisations over the past decade seem to have gone beyond consciousness-raising and a focus on individual men. Larger questions about power and men's relationships were missing from much of the work done with men, and little was done to address gender regimes of power and oppression. The conservative politics of much of the masculinity discourse hid from view the structural and institutional power and injustice behind the emphasis on men's personal gender trouble.

Much work focused on the personal, and at changing men's sexual behaviour, men's violence against women, and relations of fatherhood. Little attention was given to masculine privilege and to issues such as equal pay, representation in politics, parental rights, domestic work, or changing institutions (Esplen and Greig, 2007).

This depoliticising of understandings of masculinity was in line with the de-politicisation of feminism within development, with donors, development organisations and governments very likely playing their parts in promoting a less politically charged agenda for men's organisations.

# 5.

## Core issues and leading actors: Unravelling the confusion

**M**ISOGYNY (THE IDEAS AND PRACTICES THAT DENIGRATE women and favour men) had set in motion a movement for women's liberation, most spectacularly in the 1970s. Women had felt the effects of misogyny in their personal lives and within movements. At a time when women expected better as a result of their increased education and their entry into the economy in greater numbers, they had continued to face barriers. Misogyny created feminist theory, and feminist theory in turn helped create the study of masculinity (Gardiner, 2005).

Gender understood as a social construction enabled women to explore meanings and practices that reinforced their subordination, and enabled men to explore their maleness. Feminists advanced understandings of systems of gender inequality in intersection with oppressive class and race systems, reproduced through the ideas and practices of institutions such as the household, the community, the market, and the state. An unequal and unfair division of labour put men in charge, and relegated women to the private sphere of the family. An unequal and unfair distribution of resources ensured men's advantages. Feminists showed how, since men were taken as the normative human being, women were hidden from history, their contribution not taken into account in economics, and their needs and interests ignored in development projects.

Feminists challenged notions of leadership and agency as male, and asserted women as autonomous agents (not just as daughters, wives, sisters, or mothers) with specific demands and able to lead. Feminist strategies have included organising separately as women as well as engagement within male-dominated and male-defined institutions of development and government.

Feminist engagement with development institutions (including donors) and with government bureaucracies has highlighted that structures of power are resilient. These institutions have overtly accommodated women and women's demands, while subverting women's agendas in unforeseen ways. Gender has been depoliticised and women's leadership in struggles for gender equality has been challenged. Depoliticisation strips away notions of power and hence a political response. If there is no subordinate group, then there is no question of struggle, and no question of building movements.

There is a need for new theories of change, for ongoing efforts of consciousness-raising, ongoing efforts to build a mass base, clearly crafted political agendas, and a new politics to address change not only at the formal level (Batliwala, 2008).

### Understanding gender

Problematic conceptualisations of women and men as equally vulnerable as a result of prevailing gender relations (and portrayals of men as being worse off than women) need to be challenged. Gender inequality needs to be understood as a system which privileges men and subordinates women. At the same time, the ways in which gender intersects with race, class gender and other social relations of oppression and exploitation need to be understood. A woman is never just a woman, nor is a man just a man. A man or a woman is at the same time a member of a particular class and race.

Men and women's interests are not shaped only by their gender, and in responding to and changing oppressive social relations, men or women seldom act from the basis of either race, or class, or gender oppression. Rather systems of oppression interact with each other, giving rise to a more complex reality.

Women and men's experience of class, racial, or national oppression is shaped by their gender.

### Transforming institutions

There is a need to transform the institutions that produce and reproduce unequal social relations of power. These range from the household to the market, the state, and the community, and include religious organisations and traditional institutions (which in the Southern African context are led by chiefs and traditional leaders).

This is in line with Kabeer's (1994) formulation of institutional sites of household, community, market and state - where organisations within each of these institutional sites produce and reproduce gender and other inequalities through procedures, rules, and who they allow entry. Barriers to women's equality are deeply embedded within families, communities, tradition, and taboo, as well as within states and economies. Change is needed in the beliefs, attitudes and practices in all of these sites. This includes changes in laws and policies, and changes in cultural and social systems. It means achieving individual, institutional, and social change.

Feminists have attempted to enter and transform key institutional sites and organisations, (most notably parliaments, local councils and political parties) in order to redress their exclusion and to ensure that their interests are addressed. They have been more successful in gaining entry (often through quotas for women's participation) and in making some advances in law and in policy than in achieving organisational transformation. Women's entry into parliaments and local councils has more often than not resulted in new struggles for the legitimacy of women's presence and the legitimacy of women's demands. This is illustrated, for example, by the experience of a woman elected to a local council in India who on attending her first council meeting was told by

the chair of the council 'my wife is in the kitchen...' In another council women were told by men not to discuss unmentionables when they proposed that funds allocated to women be used to set up a sanitary pad production project (Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2008).

In ongoing struggles to advance a transformative agenda and the importance of building and sustaining women's movements, feminists saw some hope of re-politicising development through the turn to rights (Win 2010, Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2008). Drawing on rights as a political tool could build voice and organisation, empowering women to address unequal relations of power and to hold governments accountable to the needs and interests of women, and in particular those most marginalised and impoverished. It could also focus on women as entitled to rights rather than women as a means or instrument. However, at the same time, feminists were aware of the difficulties in advancing rights claims in an era of neoliberal globalisation and economic recession.

*Drawing on rights as a political tool could build voice and organisation, empowering women to address unequal relations of power.*

Feminist understandings of women's position and condition advanced through their ongoing practice and the challenges they faced. There was acknowledgement of the need to change both the economic structure and the status order of society – that there was a need for both recognition of women and their claims, and for redistribution of resources (Fraser, 2000). Women's access to resources (such as land) should not depend on their relationship with men.

### The need for activism and movement-building

There is a need for activism and movement-building to achieve individual behaviour change, to mobilise for broader social change, and to hold governments accountable to gender equality and social justice commitments. However the confusion over who leads gender equality struggles needs to be cleared up. Donor preference for men's organisations has led to confusion, and has transferred resources away from women (Win, 2001).

Since women are the subordinated group, the struggle for gender equality needs to be led by women. Men can support struggles for gender equality and explore constructions of masculinity as part of this agenda, but they cannot replace women's organisations.

It is clear that advancing gender equality in Southern Africa needs to go beyond consciousness-raising and awareness-raising of individuals, and transform the institutions which produce and reproduce unequal relations of power (and the extreme marginalisation of poor black women who have borne the brunt of colonialism, and now bear the brunt of neoliberal economic policies). Struggles for gender equality should address women's status so that women are seen as autonomous human beings and not the property of men, and struggles need to focus at the same time on redistribution of both power and resources within all institutional sites –including the household, the community, the market and the state.

Clearly women, as the most affected, need to take up these struggles, and clearly the self-organisation of women is crucial, not only because the affected group understand their situation like nobody else can and are best placed to formulate claims, but also (and this is important to bear in mind) because this advances their status as autonomous human beings. A large part of women's subordination is to do with lack of status, or their 'despised identities' (Ashe, 2007).

Men can support and be part of struggles for gender equality. However as Messner (2000) notes, the idea of a men's movement is shot through with danger, contradictions, and paradox. Social justice in gender relations is against men's shared interests, and rather than a source of solidarity among men this will be a source of disunity among them. Messner (2000) argues that pro-feminist men's activism should not take place through a men's movement, but rather in schools, political parties, labour unions, and professional organisations, workplaces, and families, in alliance with feminist and other progressive organisations.

Messner (2000) makes the compelling argument that white people who want to oppose racism do not form a 'white people's' movement; heterosexuals opposing heterosexism and homophobia do not form a 'straight people's' movement, although whites and heterosexuals can speak out and take action to oppose oppression and to support change to end racism and homophobia. So too with men; rather than forming a men's movement, men concerned with working for gender equality should work within other organisations to transform their ideologies and their practice.

Men's organisations may in fact endanger gender equality goals, since men's organisations can so easily slide into safeguarding male privilege, and reinforcing the patriarchal family. It is not in men's immediate gender interests to dismantle their privilege, and the dismantling of privilege is never a rousing call to action for any privileged group.

In the next section I look at two organisations, Padare Men's Forum in Zimbabwe and Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa. Both these organisations were set up as men's organisations, but they work with women and men. I argue that they can more meaningfully contribute to the goal of gender equality through re-conceptualisation as community organisations with a gender equality agenda.

# 6.

## Padare Men's Forum and Sonke Gender Justice

**P**ADARE MEN'S FORUM AND SONKE GENDER JUSTICE ARE examples of two men's organisations in Southern Africa working for gender equality. Key features of these two organisations are that they focus on violence against women and on HIV and AIDS. They adopt a community-based approach and attempt to make inroads into national policy and programmes through community-based advocacy.

### The focus on violence against women, HIV and AIDS, and problematic masculinities

Padare Men's Forum on Gender and Sonke Gender Justice Network both focus on violence against women, HIV/ AIDS, and on gender equality more broadly. Both organisations are driven by ideas about transforming what they see as problematic masculinities which lead to violence against women and fuel the HIV epidemic.

Padare was set up in 1995 in Zimbabwe by a small group of men concerned about violence against women, women's access to education, and women's participation in political decision-making. Padare founders were in particular concerned about the backlash amongst men in Zimbabwe against the demands made by women following the UN Women's Conference in Beijing. (Interview with Kelvin Hazangwi July 2011). Padare's goal is to provide a platform for men to confront and challenge gender stereotypes that negatively affect men, women, families, and communities. Padare seeks to alter deeply rooted ideas about masculinity, sexuality and gender through creating a forum for men to question and reject gender stereotypes, roles and practices that privilege men and oppress women. In particular, they are concerned to address practices which fuel the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe, such as multiple and concurrent sexual relations, cross-gener-

ational sex, polygamy, inheritance of widows by family members of deceased husbands, and early marriage of girls.

Sonke Gender Justice was established in 2006 in South Africa by individuals with longstanding experience in pro-feminist men's organising, and with experience in the Men as Partners Programme.

Inspired by the Treatment Action Campaign, the vision was for an approach that would link grassroots activism to holding government accountable for policy implementation. The original conception was not to work only with men. Sonke's goal is to contribute to societies where men, women, youth and children can enjoy equitable, healthy, happy relationships that contribute to just and democratic societies. A focus on masculinity was thus conceptualised within an overall community approach, to support men and boys to take action to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV. South Africa's longstanding tradition of community organising, grown out of the struggle against apartheid, is at the heart of Sonke's approach and understanding of the broader power relations in society that result in the lack of real rights experienced by poor people.

### Community-based and community-driven approaches

Both organisations adopt a community-based and community-driven approach to advance gender equality at the local level, and to hold government accountable to gender equality commitments.

Padare implements its interventions through community structures known as chapters. By 2009, there were 37 chapters, of at least 100 men each. A community executive oversees the chapters and includes representatives from key institutions and constituencies (for example

faith-based organisations, farmers, traditional healers, the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, the Ministry of Education, business people, the police, and commercial sex workers). These individuals and institutions work with the Padare chapter, and chiefs and headmen are engaged in efforts to make them aware of harmful traditional practices. Community education and information on gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS takes place through sports events and community drama (Hazangwi and Pascoe, 2009).

Padare attempts to link its work at the local community level to the national policy, engaging nationally through position statements and advocacy. Padare was part of the process to lobby for the Domestic Violence Act in Zimbabwe, and supported the efforts of the women's movement of Zimbabwe to engender the Zimbabwean constitution and advance women in decision-making and reproductive health. (Hazangwi interview, 2011).

Sonke's approach is inspired by the activism of the South African liberation struggle. Key to their approach is the building of grassroots activism to challenge government (interview with Peacock, 2011). Sonke's One Man Can Campaign is conducted through local branches, which adapt the campaign to local contexts. The main task of branches is to involve community members in advocacy and activism, so as to leverage local human, material and financial resources to increase the impact of advocacy campaigns and make them sustainable. Local ownership ensures that campaigns are targeted towards community needs. Branch members are men and boys, but also women and girls, who live in the same community. Branch members are encouraged to engage local government and make sure that elected officials and community members sustain their commitment to gender transformation. Branches conduct community-based research, education, advocacy and workshops. They implement campaigns and build local partnerships with a wide variety of

community and faith-based organisations, clinics, traditional and political leadership, and schools. Branches organise community forums, protest marches, door-to-door campaigns, distribute pamphlets and condoms, and encourage people to be tested for HIV.

**women's  
experience in  
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are the majority,  
it is men who  
lead and men's  
interests that  
shape the agenda.**

### Community work with women and men

While they frame their organisations as men's organisations, both Padare and Sonke increasingly work with women. This is illustrated in the Padare's Odzi branch in Zimbabwe and in Sonke's One Man Can Branch in Kayelitsha. In both cases it would seem that community dynamics did not allow for working with men only, even if this was what the organisations desired.

Padare created a support group for men committed to change, and enabled men to identify and challenge structures and institutions perpetuating gender inequality in society. Building a men's movement to advocate and campaign for gender justice and the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination is a key part of their strategy. At the same time they work to increase female empowerment (Hazangwi and Pascoe, 2009).

Initial discussions on gender, culture and HIV with men in Odzi (a farming settlement west of Mutare) resulted in negative reactions from women in the community, who felt marginalised by the project. This led to women and youth being drawn into the project, and three working groups were set up – a male working group, a female working group, and a youth committee made up of girls and boys. Community education and information is designed to reach women and men.

Sonke's first One Man Can branch was set up in Kuyasa, Khayelitsha, in December 2009. Many of the members are previous participants of Sonke workshops or its advocacy campaign around termination of pregnancy. Sonke faces challenges attracting equal numbers of men and women. Currently the majority of members of the Kuyasa branch are women, with few men supporting the group. Men were reluctant to join the branch. Shortly after launching the branch, Sonke staff members were confronted with a challenge.

They were made aware that a young man (who had a previous rape charge, and was a member of the branch) had raped a woman member of the branch. No charges were laid, and the two families seemed to want to deal with this privately. Sonke staff engaged the community in discussion on the importance of holding perpetrators legally accountable, the survivor laid charges at the local police station, and Sonke arranged counselling for her through a local NGO. The survivor and her family have received support from other branch members and Sonke staff, particularly during the court hearings where they publically opposed bail and advocated for the case to be thoroughly investigated. More than 350 community members signed a petition to deny the alleged perpetrator bail.

In addition to working with women in its programmes, half of Sonke managers are women, and forty percent of Sonke staff are women.

### Challenges for Padare and Sonke

A challenge for both Padare and Sonke is how to bring feminist political understandings of gender-based and sexual violence to their work with women and men in communities. As highlighted earlier in this paper, different approaches to sexual violence emanate from feminist approaches (which acknowledge power relations) and male-defined approaches (which focus on the individual). Feminist understandings of violence against women as a political issue lead to strategies to support to the survivor and to transform the institutions that produce women's subordination, and violence against women. Men's organisations have tended, however, to adopt a more limited approach focused on the individual, without considering masculine privilege and broader systems of inequality. This depoliticised approach is cultivated by development institutions and states whose agendas do

not easily admit the political, and needs to be resisted by feminists and pro-feminists.

A second challenge for both organisations is how to ensure that their understanding and practice does not relegate women to subordinates within community struggles. This is a danger since both organisations tend to give men a central role in struggles for gender equality, but (more importantly) because prevailing gender relations continue to cast women as subordinates within mixed-gender organisations. Trade unions in South Africa, for example, even when women are the majority members, continue to be male-led, with the few men in attendance at meetings dominating discussion and with women's concerns remaining unaddressed. Likewise women's experience in community organisations in South Africa has been that, even when women are the majority, it is men who lead and men's interests that shape the agenda. Women's interests have tended to be hidden behind male-defined notions of community. An ongoing challenge for Padare and Sonke as they work with both women and men will be how to ensure equality within their practice, so that women do not once more become the tea-makers.

Both Padare and Sonke engage in advocacy at the national level, at times making links with community struggles, at times through legal challenges and the media. Unless such advocacy efforts are undertaken in partnership with women's organisations, there will be the danger of men yet again taking control, this time of gender equality activism. In the longer term, men becoming the conscience and voice of gender equality will go against the very goals of gender equality, as they will reinforce women's passivity and subordination.



# 7.

## Conclusions

**W**E LIVE IN A WORLD AND A REGION WHERE INSTITUTIONALISED male power and privilege are facts of life. This is so even among the most marginalised groupings, so that women are generally subordinate to the men of their race and class. Feminist activism stresses the need for far-reaching change that includes struggles over meanings as well as practice, so that women are recognised as autonomous human beings, and so that there is a more equitable redistribution of resources.

Over the decades feminists have made gains, but they have also had to contend with backlash and the co-option and de-politicisation of their claims by development organisations and government bureaucracies.

Gender stripped of notions of power and taken to mean 'women and men' has resulted in greater attention to men as key actors working for gender equality. This in turn has resulted in an increasing shift in donor funding to men and boys, most notably in HIV and AIDS and health programmes, further threatening women's movements, and seeming to represent the handing over of the reins of gender equality struggles to men.

Feminists need to take back control of their struggle. As with any system of oppression and exploitation, it is the oppressed who are best-placed to lead the struggle for justice and equality. This is so with class struggle (led by workers), with struggles against racism (led by black people), and with gender equality struggles (led by women). Firstly, the oppressed can best articulate their interests and formulate their demands, and secondly the act of leading their struggle challenges notions that women (or workers, or black people) are not capable of leading.

Group interests cannot be effectively articulated by groups other than those affected. A white, heterosexual women's liberation movement in the

1970s was, for example, not able to articulate the interests of black or lesbian women. Even among women, it is important that issues of difference are understood and taken into account at the level of strategy, so as to ensure that the interests of the most marginalised continue to shape struggles for greater equality. Unless this happens, feminist demands could be limited by the interests of women privileged by their class or race, leaving out the vast majority of women in our region (and across the world).

Men should support struggles for gender equality, just as white people should support struggles for racial equality, or middle-class intellectuals should support workers' struggles. Such support should be based on the desire to contribute to social justice and equality. However the role of men, white people and middle-class intellectuals in these respective struggles is as supporters rather than as main actors.

With regard to gender equality struggles, even though men are implicated in gender relations, even though their masculinity is a social construction, no matter what their race or class men are privileged by the gender order. The very term pro-feminist was coined precisely to make clear that while men could support feminism, only women themselves could be feminists. Men who support

feminist demands need to ensure that their institutional privilege (and their taking for granted of this privilege) does not get in the way of a true partnership with women in struggles for gender equality. Difficult as it may be they need to accept women's leadership of gender equality struggles. Even the best of men need to guard against their institutional privilege acting out in ways that unwittingly reproduce unequal gender relations, and this is much more of a possibility for men not convinced of the need for gender equality.

Feminist women need to continue struggles both at the level of meaning and at the level of practice. Feminists need to regroup and rethink. They need to decide how to organise effectively in the current national and global contexts. Separate women's organisation is a necessity, as are continued efforts to transform organisations and institutions that reproduce gender and other inequalities – from community-based organisations, social movements, and trade unions, to government bureaucracies and parliaments. Pro-feminist men should support feminist efforts within such organisations and institutions.

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## Footnotes

1. *First wave feminism refers to the nineteenth and early twentieth century movement in Britain, the US and Canada for the reform of women's social and legal inequalities and for the right to vote.*



*The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) is a growing African institution committed to deepening democracy, protecting human rights and enhancing good governance in southern Africa. OSISA's vision is to promote and sustain the ideals, values, institutions and practice of open society, with the aim of establishing a vibrant southern African society in which people, free from material and other deprivation, understand their rights and responsibilities and participate democratically in all spheres of life.*

*Open Debate is funded by OSISA and is intended to spark debate on critical issues. Feel free to join in the discussion, send your thoughts to [opendebate@osisa.org](mailto:opendebate@osisa.org) or [alicek@osisa.org](mailto:alicek@osisa.org) or comment on the website: [www.osisa.org](http://www.osisa.org)*

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# OSISA

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