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Women's Organisations in the Western Cape: Vehicles for Gender Struggle or Instruments of Subordination?

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Source: *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 1997, No. 34, Celebrating 10 Years (1997), pp. 45-61

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Agenda Feminist Media

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4066242>

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Women's organisations in the Western Cape: *vehicles for gender struggle or instruments of subordination?*



GERTRUDE FESTER argues that black women's participation in liberation politics challenges women's subordination. Her involvement in anti-apartheid women's organisations in the Western Cape in the 80s and early 90s shaped her consciousness of South African feminisms

It does not follow that involvement in women's organisations develops a critical understanding of gender relations among women nor that the organisations will be a vehicle for gender struggle in society. On the contrary, women's organisations are important institutions in the conservation of women's subordination' (Charman et al 1991:59).

In this article I wish to question Charman et al's assertion. I will do so by focussing on the experiences of the women's organisations in the Western Cape, such as the United Women's Organisation (UWO) which amalgamated with the Women's Front (WF) to become the United Women's Congress (UWCO) in 1986, the Federation of South African Women – Western Cape (FSAW), the Women's Alliance (WA) and the Women's National Coalition-Western Cape (WNC). In relating aspects of the history of these organisations, I wish to assert that contrary to Charman et al's statement that 'women's organisations are important institutions in the conservation of women's subordination', these women's organisations have contributed greatly to the politicisation and empowerment of the women who participated in them'. Women

challenged not only their oppression within the South African status quo, but also the sexism of progressive organisations and of some men within them.

It is impossible to do justice to the rich history of women's activism within the confines of this article. I focus on the following three intersecting areas: the articulation between women's liberation and national liberation; the race and class implications; the contribution of women to the end of apartheid. While not wishing to negate the contributions of other organisations, this article reflects a personal exploration of how my own feminist consciousness has been shaped.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND NATIONAL LIBERATION

...(M)ovements for women's liberation and feminism flourished in several non-European countries well before western feminism emerged... Feminism was not imposed on the third world by the west, but rather historical circumstances produced important material and ideological changes that affected women (Jayawardena 1986:2).

Debates about the tension between

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Just as there
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and
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forms of
feminisms

women's liberation and national liberation are not new. Some argued that women's liberation and separate women's organisations divided the struggle against apartheid – men in progressive organisations, for eg Cape Action League, within the African National Congress (ANC) supporting structures and some women in Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) were against women's organisations. Horn (1991:25) was concerned that there had not been adequate preparation for women's emancipation:

...due to the absence of strong grass-roots feminist organisation in South Africa, the ANC (prepares for a post-apartheid South Africa)... with very little strongly-directed guidance from militant democratic women's organisations.

It is not clear what meaning Horn attaches to feminist, although she does plead that women should

...work out what progressive feminism means in practice in the present-day South African context (1991:27).

Feminism and motherism

The term 'feminism' conjures up mixed responses: from Benjamin's (1995:113) appeal 'Don't call me a feminist' to Kadalie's (1995:120) assertion of the immense contributions feminists have made. It is possible that this ambivalence towards feminism is a result of the hegemony of western imperialist feminism. Most members of our organisations did not identify with the various western feminisms which some South African, especially middle-class, women, both black and white, ascribed to. Even though some of us saw ourselves as feminists we would not raise it when representing the organisation except in our personal capacities. Some dismissed feminism as western and therefore irrelevant. Others again distinguished between UWO women who were 'proletarian women', and:

feminists (who) want to fight for their positions under the capitalist framework

– with no idea of eradicating the system. They see men as enemies... But proletarian women think of men as comrades (UWO, undated:68).

Jayawardena (1986) and McClintock (1995) argue convincingly that just as there are many different forms of patriarchy and nationalisms, so too are there various forms of feminisms².

Much attention has been given to the fact that South African women organise on the basis of motherhood³. Wells (1991) refers to this as **motherism** which she states is definitely not feminism nor should it be mistaken for political maturity. Motherist movements which defy oppression of all kinds, including patriarchal oppression, are more likely to inspire a feminism which will be effective in South Africa than would be the liberal feminism espoused by first world feminists (Fouche, 1994:56). I agree with Drew's (1995:19) statement that female consciousness becomes politically activated into feminist consciousness under certain conditions. I emphasise that women's resistance arises out of their particular historical contexts and that motherism and working 'shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk' can be seen as a form of South African feminism. It could be argued that the feminism Horn (1991, 1994) and Charman et al (1991) were promoting and not finding in any South African women's organisations was western-inspired. They hence assessed local organisations with western criteria.

Women's inequality

When women respond to the historical and material conditions of their lives, does it follow that there is a focus on women's and national liberation? For us, in the women's organisations, women's liberation was part and parcel of national liberation. The UWO was initiated by eight women who had been involved in the Women's Federation in the 50s and 60s. UWO functioned informally in 1979 and was launched in April 1981. Because of its activities, many women, both

politicised and unpoliticised, were excited to join it.

An analysis of the invitation to the first conference could be read as countering the assertion that women's liberation was not an issue. The first aim on the pamphlet (UWO, 1981a) states unequivocally:

The United Women's Organisation was formed to unite all women to work for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities.

Does the aim of removing women's disabilities equate to women's liberation? What was quite clear for us in UWO was that women's lives would not improve without national liberation. Yet, four out of eight listed issues by UWO (1981a) to be 'strived for' dealt directly with women's inequality.

We strive for all women to obtain:

- *the right for women to vote;*
- *the right for full opportunities for work, with equal pay for equal work;*
- *equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children;*
- *the removal of all laws that discriminate against women⁴.*

In focussing on our aims, it was clear to us that black men did not have those rights either. It was therefore imperative for UWO to work for national liberation. All UWO documents emphasise that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation; the entire exploitative, racist and sexist relations need to be radically transformed.

After the organisational debate at the UWO launch, women were encouraged to speak. Initially only men spoke⁵. It was at that moment that Dora Tamana's now famous words encouraging women to speak, were uttered.

Dora Tamana spoke with fire in her heart. Aunt Dora Tamana called upon everyone present to speak out:

*You who have no work, Speak.
You who have no homes, Speak.
You who have no schools, Speak.*

You who have to run like chickens from the vulture, Speak.

Let us share our problems so that we can solve them together.

We must free ourselves.

Men and Women must share housework.

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

There are no creches and nursery schools for our children.

There are no homes for the Aged.

There is no one to care for the sick.

Women must unite to fight for these rights.

I opened the road for you,

You must go forward.

(UWO, 1981b:3)

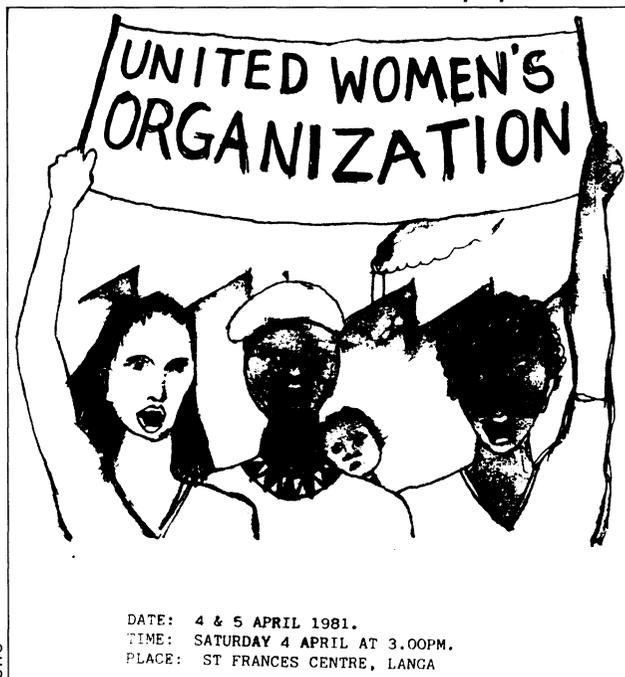
The entire exploitative, racist and sexist relations need to be radically transformed

Women's issues

Tamana's words captured the major concerns of women in UWO.

These words have been quoted often. Still, one must ask what precisely the words 'men and women must share housework' meant to members. Although it was never a central organisational focus, for some branches the sexual division of labour in the home definitely was an issue. Men worked with women in

UWO, 1981 First Conference pamphlet



Increased
militarisation
meant more
repression
for us and an
increase in
the defence
budget

UWO and were willing to take on the tasks so women could continue with deliberations. At our first conferences, men took responsibility for the catering and childcare.

Much of the literature (Hassim, 1991:68; Charman et al, 1991:59) reiterates the argument that the belief held in women's organisations was 'when apartheid has been abolished, women will be liberated'. I joined the UWO in 1982 and one of the first education forums I attended was on 'Women in Mocambique'. The slide and tape presentation reflected in no uncertain terms that women were sent back to the kitchens after liberation. An enthusiastic debate followed. We heard how vigilant we should be in order to avoid a similar situation. Workshops on women in the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), Vietnam, Nicaragua and Cuba followed. Women in these nationalist struggles and their ability to balance women's and national issues were always an inspiration to us.

At the annual conference in 1984, one branch (in a white area) raised the concern that our programme of action should include more women's issues. A lengthy debate followed on what precisely we understood by 'women's issues'. The conference agreed (UWO, 1984a) that:

These problems of women – childcare, contraception and so on are part of a bigger system. The passes lit women first.

The majority agreed that women's issues were numerous and included apartheid, housing, poverty, violence in general and against women, etc. The distinction between what are women's issues and what are national issues was a question which was raised intermittently in middle-class branches and at public meetings in middle-class areas. This reflected the tension between women's liberation and national liberation and women's liberation as part of national liberation. The tension within the women's and national liberation position is sometimes equated with race and gender

loyalty. There were times when some African and coloured members prioritised national liberation as 'people's needs'.

It is interesting to note that in the funeral brochure⁶ of Dora Tamana in 1984, reference was made to the violence she endured during her short marriage. The following year, as part of branch education, Rape Crisis offered UWO a slide and tape presentation on violence against women. Yet, in the UWO documents violence against women is contextualised by the unemployment and frustration that people experience. This could be interpreted as an unwillingness by the UWO to confront patriarchy directly. It should be added that the formulation of statements and thus positions on feminist issues also depended on who wrote them⁷. The concern with violence against women was sustained into 1986 when one of the more successful UWO joint projects was CASA (Campaign Against Sexual Abuse) which encouraged women not to accept sexual abuse. Booklets in three languages were widely distributed and discussions based on the content followed.

A common struggle

As an anti-apartheid women's organisation, UWO procured leadership positions for women in the political struggle. UWO pamphlets and motions in 1984 demanded that the apartheid government resign (UWO, 1984f). When the prices of bus fares (1984) and bread (1985) increased, UWO initiated boycotts. Important political education accompanied this. With the bread boycott, analyses were made of how Government allocates our money. The bread subsidy was decreased but at the same time white farmers were heavily subsidised. Increased militarisation meant more repression for us and an increase in the defence budget. The slogan 'Bread for people and not for profits' linked our struggle to labour issues. The increase in bread prices was also an attack (UWO, 1985a) on children's health:

We must make our voices heard in defence of our children's health and future.

It was characteristic of the organisation that we worked alongside men in the broader struggle. The UWO accepted the Freedom Charter and the Women's Charter (1954) as policy documents (UWO, 1984d). The words:

we stand shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk in a common struggle against poverty, race and class discrimination...

from the Women's Charter were popularised in the poster to commemorate the 30th anniversary of FSAW, in April 1984. Similarly, it was agreed (UWO, 1984e) that 'the success of the UDF is the success of the UWO'. UWO members were instrumental in forming organisations like Parent, Teacher Associations (PTA) in 1981, the Western Cape Civic Association (1982) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. The relationships with these organisations revealed the contradictions women experienced. Theoretically, women's liberation and national liberation are complementary. However there were tensions around which issues were to be prioritised, and a demand for women to work in all of these structures. In many areas it was women who initiated civics but the men who were the leaders. Women were the ones who carried the burden of domestic labour. Some UWO branches ceased to function as their members became leaders in the civics while others prioritised UDF activities⁸. Other members took up leadership positions in the trade unions. In council it was stated that we had not lost members, rather we had broadened 'the struggle'. The reality was that the UWO was weakened as an organisation.

As a result of its existing infrastructure UWO members were central to the formation of UDF area committees. The three women on the UDF executive, Cheryl Carolus, Zou Kota and Mildred Leisa were all UWO members. Without any external funding UWO had an office and one paid-staff and for the first few months of its existence the UDF

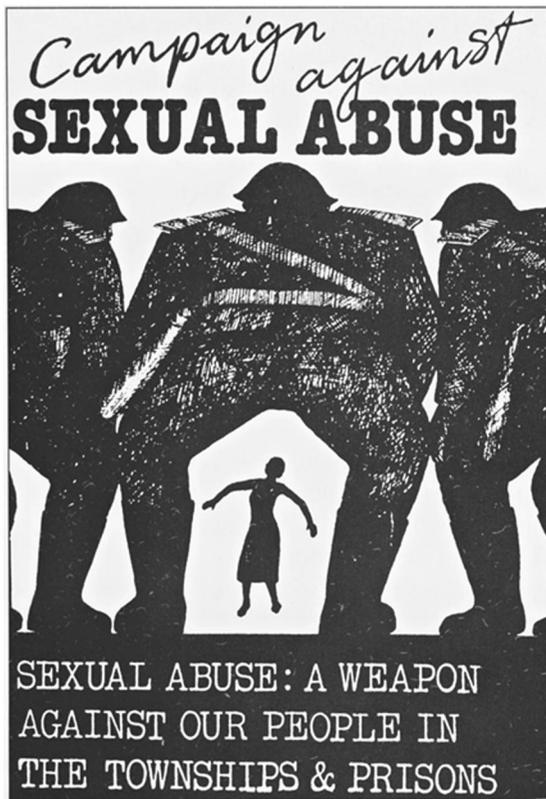
shared our office. Generally the effect of the UDF on the UWO was positive. The difference that confronted the UWO was working with a fast-paced male-dominated organisation. In the UWO general council, the UDF representative stated: 'UDF must be led by its affiliates, not the other way around' (UWO, 1984b). The UDF advised the UWO to amalgamate with the township-based Women's Front (WF) as we had similar constitutions. This amalgamation took place on March 22nd 1986, and the United Women's Congress (UWCO) was formed.

Building non-sexism

A UDF assessment workshop in the Cape Town region illustrated to us that building non-sexism was not that important. A key question in this region was: to what extent do we promote non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy? This was discussed in groups. When a male comrade stated that it was women's own fault that they were oppressed, women, strategically, kept quiet. Another male comrade responded by explaining the complexities of patriarchy. During the plenary discussion the chairperson cut the discussion on non-sexism as 'there were time constraints'. However, immediately after that when democracy was discussed the chair had no time problems.

In our UDF area committee discussions around sexism and the contradictions between what male leaders said in public and their private lives were often held. Both men and women felt it was important to raise these problems but because of the sheer pressure of work, there was never time to strategise how to go about raising these issues. Women within the UDF were not complacent. The UDF Women's Congress was launched in Cape Town on April 25th 1987, in Cape Town because of the need for UDF women to assert themselves. Although it was not very active, the resolutions it took are important statements which indicate the problems women have within progressive structures⁹.

Theoretically, women's liberation and national liberation are complementary



**UWO pamphlet,
How to take an
affidavit**

**Despite
diversity,
unity was
paramount in
establishing
an anti-
apartheid
women's
organisation**

In UWO/UWCO there were attempts to balance women's and national needs. This has to be seen against the tensions which resulted from the demands and pressures of repression and the hectic UDF programme. UWCO dissolved in June 1991 to form the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL).

RACE AND CLASS

Building non-racialism is not an easy task. But for UWO it is a priority because we believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it (Barrett et al 1985:242)¹⁰

Theoretical and activist debates around race, gender and class positions increased dramatically in 1991¹¹. At the same time preparations were being made to strengthen the women's voice and to form the WNC.

However, in 1981, the invitation to the UWO launch had been extended to all

women. It was called by 'women', to unite, and invited 'all women' to join. During the open session of the first conference all women were invited to speak. The majority of the women spoke about poverty, housing, pass laws, unemployment, etc. Of course, not all women present were affected by these issues. However, the need for unity prevailed. The eleventh speaker's words 'Here we are all of one colour' captured this spirit (UWO, 1981b). How does one interpret these words? It could be the need to foster unity; the women were all 'one colour' or of 'one mind' to fight apartheid. It could also mean that despite diversity, unity was paramount in establishing an anti-apartheid women's organisation.

Most of the UWO rhetoric refers to the 'triple oppression' of women¹². According to our analysis, women were oppressed as workers, as women and as blacks; race, class and gender oppression intersect¹³. The 'triple oppression' analysis meant that the African working class and/or rural women were the most oppressed. On the one hand it allowed a consciousness of the different race and class positions women had, while on the other hand it allowed us to build unity and 'non-racism'. The use of 'white' and 'black' further blurred the issue. Black was a legacy of the Black Consciousness Movement and was used for African, coloured and Indian, even though it obscures the differential oppression and identities of women¹⁴. Even though these concepts are theoretically slippery, they were politically pragmatic. In the new South Africa there is still an urgent need to deal with racism and the diversity of women.

The concept 'triple oppression' also informed the way we worked. It emphasised that all women are not oppressed equally. It was common practice that a lift scheme would operate after each meeting of UWO/UWCO. Typically these arrangements would be preceded by a direct comment and later discussions on class. Another discussion

that took place was on the ethics of middle-class members (or white and coloured members) of the organisations employing unemployed African working-class members. Many women who were unemployed agreed that employment should take place. The 'triple oppression' of women meant taking cognisance of differences and UWO/UWCO policy reflected this. An example is the statement:

Each branch will work on a programme of action to suit the needs, demands and interests of the women in that particular area (UWO 1985b:2).

The racial boundaries created by the Group Areas Act meant that each branch had a particular 'racial and or class identity' but there were attempts to link activities. 'Partnered' branches like Wynberg (coloured middle-class) and KTC (informal settlement) started a creche. At any one time the various branches had particular and diverse programmes of action, eg KTC branch campaigned around acquiring taps for their area. The Claremont branch (middle-class white area) was working with the residents of Harfield, a coloured area adjacent to Claremont, in writing their history of forced removals. The New Cross Roads branch (mostly working-class Africans and some unemployed) campaigned against their rent increases and embarked on a rent boycott. While Kensington branch (middle-class coloured area), apart from having a children's play group, went away for study weekends to discuss, for example, the different types of feminism. Given the vicissitudes of race and class, branch dynamics and character varied immensely. Salo (Kemp et al, 1995:248), refers to the tension in her branch between gender issues and the needs of national struggles.

Breaking down barriers

The priorities of branches in the rural areas were different to those in the metropolitan areas. They were encouraged to form regional

caucuses. Branches also varied radically in size: an African township may have had 600 members, whereas a middle-class coloured branch like Kensington had 10.

In order to break down the apartheid barriers UWO/UWCO had central themes which all members participated in. So, on the one hand, there was a realisation of different interests and needs, and on the other, a joint organisational programme of action 'to build unity'. What is important, however, is that although there was an awareness of the different positions of the members, the organisational theme concentrated on the problems that affected the most oppressed and marginalised women. Hence, Hassim's (1991:68) comment on organisations at the time, that 'there is a prioritisation of African women's racial oppression'. Hassim and Walker (1993) maintain that the white members of non-racial organisations did not make use of the opportunity to articulate their positions in the organisation¹⁵. My recollections are that in UWO/UWCO white branches often played very dynamic roles and asserted their roles in terms of their race/class/gender interests in their branches. But they also participated meaningfully in the central organisation. There were always white women in the central executive. The fact that they made themselves available for the central executive could be interpreted that they saw a role for themselves in the organisation. They structured their branch activities around their interests, relating them to the national aims that UWO/UWCO stood for. Observatory (Obs) branch often presented plays with social commentary at rallies and protest meetings. As part of UWO, Gardens branch worked with the Domestic Workers Association (DWA) and later as UWCO, with the South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU). However, they raised their difficulties:

We have not found it easy to engage the white constituency that we live in.

The organisational theme concentrated on the problems that affected the most oppressed and marginalised women

However, that has not deterred us. Last year we prepared a pamphlet explaining our scepticism about the October elections which was aimed at the white constituency... distributed (them) in our area with the help of Gardens Youth Congress (UWCO, 1989:18).

'Claremont organised a very successful International Women's Day meeting for the women of the southern suburbs region', (UWO, 1985d:8) which was historically a white area.

I feel that these branches managed to balance their activities around their interests/constituencies in their branches and also brought to the organisation as a whole their contribution as white women. There were, however, occasions which I will elaborate on later when some whites were frustrated at the pace of the organisation.

Building non-racialism

In UWO/UWCO the decision to concentrate on the problems encountered by working-class African women was a strategically-political one. One consequence was that women outside the working-class were politicised by the realisation of their own class positions and where and how they fitted into the apartheid/capitalist hierarchy.

Violence against women was also explained through triple oppression (Western Cape Delegation, 1990:3):

As women, all women, no matter what race or class you are, cannot go out at night without fear of being attacked

Even in the sanctity of the home, women and children are not safe as the very perpetrators of violence against women and children are not strangers but fathers, uncles, grandfathers 'in the very haven of the family home' (Western Cape Delegation, 1990:3). From 1985, issues like the environment, disabled women, sexuality, and control over women's reproduction, were focussed on by some branches.

There were occasions when tensions or

differences around race and class arose. On one occasion it was stated in general council by a senior member that the organisation will not be dominated by intellectuals. I think that 'intellectuals' was a euphemism for white middle-class women. There was no allusion to the problem of 'white' members, because of the sensitivity to being 'racist' as we were building a non-racial movement.

Other examples of how race and class interests were manifested are:

- the education and training sub-committee appealed for greater representation (UWO, 1985c);
- women fasting for specific demands, eg 'Troops out of the township', 'End to state of emergency'. This entailed being based in churches for the entire duration of five to seven days. Few of the 'non-township' members participated for the entire period 'ostensibly' because most of them had jobs;
- the UWO/UWCO choir was 'mostly township-based';
- during the 'unity talks' between UWO and WF (March 1984-March 1985), some non-township branches 'could not see what the problems were'. The main tension was around a name for the new organisation. Some UWO members felt that UWO should be retained as it was the bigger organisation that was 'internationally known'. Sometimes members did not come to 'unity talks' meetings and mandates would be problematic.

Despite the very real class and race differences amongst us, UWO/UWCO succeeded in building a comradeship amongst us as women and mothers. As far as I know the word 'sisters' was never used.

A gender consciousness developed in so far as a commitment emerged to fight for a national liberation that secured our rights as women.

There were occasions when tensions or differences around race and class arose



ERIC MILLER, L-AFRIKA

FSAW Women's Day Meeting, 1989

Different autonomous organisations participated in the Federation, the Alliance and WNC and merit separate discussion.

FEDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN (Western Cape Region):

In accordance with the national mandate¹⁶ to re-launch FSAW, UWCO initiated discussion and consultation with other women's organisations. In August 1987, the FSAW was relaunched. It succeeded in 'broadening out the struggle' as some of the affiliates were Rape Crisis, Bellville Gemeenskap-organisatie (a coloured, mainly religious community group) and coloured working-class organisations like Atlantis Women's Group. Other affiliates came from religious groups. We also developed a close working relationship with Black Sash (Women's Issues Group). Black Sash was not able to affiliate as their constitution prevented them from affiliating.

Because we were from different organisations with often different political perspectives, we focussed on campaigns that we could work on as women. An

example is the 1988 night 'candle march' to protest violence against women.

FSAW filled the gap when UWCO functioned underground. The state of emergency was declared in October 1985 in Cape Town. Later UWCO and many other organisations were not allowed to meet. Most of the executive of UWCO were either in detention or 'on the run'. It was also during this time of extreme repression that the Langa branch relaunched at St Francis with 300 members. Tension mounted as repression increased, not only because of the political situation. Members whose boyfriends or partners were in the police were not trusted. There was anxiety when a venue intended for a meeting was surrounded by cops as only a handful of people knew about the venue. The increased militancy in the Western Cape brought more demands. Women who had just been released from detention were expected to address meetings.

FSAW took up the campaign to demand the release of women political prisoners. One of the activities was a women's religious service. For most women present this was a very revolutionary experience.

FSAW took up the campaign to demand the release of women political prisoners

Despite the contradictions, there was an air of celebration that we had succeeded in coming together

All the liturgy was especially composed from a woman's perspective.

The most successful activities were the annual women's cultural festivals celebrating women's culture and creativity. From 1988-1990 FSAW held two-day festivals with fêtes, women's poetry, plays, songs and dance, speeches and *gumbas*¹⁷. The Black Sash play on the 'Special Branch' and SADWU's play highlighting the lives of domestic workers are still vibrant in my memory. The Festival was a way of bringing affiliates closer as well as encouraging women's organisations to participate.

At a festival planning meeting in November 1987 OLGA applied to have a stall. Members enquired what was OLGA? After it was explained that it stood for the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists, the next question was: 'What are gays and lesbians?' The explanation was followed by silence. I think the lesbian women present deliberately waited for a response from the majority, heterosexual women. One of the township women nonchalantly stated that there was no reason why OLGA should not have a stall. No animosity or homophobia was expressed.

A strength of the Federation was the amount of rural work done. Women from very remote areas attended. An innovation was conducting a council meeting in Atlantis in Afrikaans with English and Xhosa summaries. It was interesting to note the different dynamics of the meeting. Affiliates brought along new skills and creativity. Some of the much publicised protests were when women chained themselves to the ferry that took prisoners to Robben Island to demand the release of political prisoners and when they nailed a copy of the Freedom Charter onto the door of Parliament. FSAW dissolved in 1991 as the national mandate called for a broader alliance.

THE WOMEN'S ALLIANCE (WA):

As the other regions had not yet relaunched FSAW and as the repressive conditions in the country were worsening, the national

decision to revive FSAW was altered. An even broader front was required based on the principles of non-racism, non-sexism, democracy and a unitary South Africa. The WA was launched on November 24th 1991. An even broader range of organisations affiliated including the Democratic Party. They brought along different skills and resources. To the majority of us, accustomed to extra-parliamentary protest and politics, this was a new experience. The launch was celebrated with cultural items. Women sang, danced and recited their own poetry. One moment captures for me, the contradictions of the Alliance. Three continuity announcers rotated. At one stage the announcer was a prominent white politician. She announced the names of the poets. One of the women poets was a member of SADWU. She added by way of introduction that 'we are old acquaintances'. The poet did not acknowledge her comments but went straight into performing her poetry. On one side of the stage was the white, middle-class professional woman politician and on the other side was the domestic worker, African, working-class poet: both 'sisters' in the Alliance. What was known to some of us was the fact that this domestic worker poet had previously worked for this woman politician but had left because of poor working conditions and salary.

Despite the contradictions, there was an air of celebration that we had succeeded in overcoming the obstacles in coming together. New friendships and relationships developed. We were aware of our different political positions but there was an understanding that on certain issues we would agree to disagree.

Yet, race and class contradictions inevitably emerged. Middle-class women had time and computers and so volunteered to do tasks. Some members did not see this as a problem as it was easier for the volunteers to just go ahead. On one occasion, at the beginning of a meeting, one woman hurriedly stated that she had typed the

minutes and just, for convenience, worked out an agenda, and as she had worked out the agenda she would just chair the meeting. All this happened so fast that no-one countered her.

Positions around reproductive rights, sexuality and violence against women were consolidated. However, planning of venues presented problems. Two major events, the launch and the International Women's Day celebrations were held far from the townships. It was during the taxi violence. Buses were hired but they failed to fetch the members. Small groups of African women managed through their own ingenuity to arrive. It meant that these two events were unevenly represented. Arranging suitable meeting times was also problematic. Despite their enthusiasm, SADWU members often found it difficult to attend.

Although power relations were always an issue, many members started to learn the meaning of democracy. Many new affiliates never thought political change was necessary. Through the WA they were politicised and exposed to the lives of oppressed and exploited black women. Many whites and some coloureds visited African townships for the first time.

WOMEN'S NATIONAL COALITION:

If all is going well in your coalition, it is not broad enough! (Bernice Reagon Johnson)¹⁸.

When the ANC, the Pan African Congress (PAC), and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were unbanned in February 1990 there was an atmosphere of jubilation in the country. There was also tremendous apprehension for the mammoth tasks that lay ahead. With the advent of negotiations and the possibility of transformation, the ANCWL proposed a very broad front. Despite some of the misgivings of an even broader coalition, what with the 'killing fields of Natal' and our ambiguity towards the

National Party, the majority felt that if women's demands were to be taken seriously, we had to have maximum intervention.

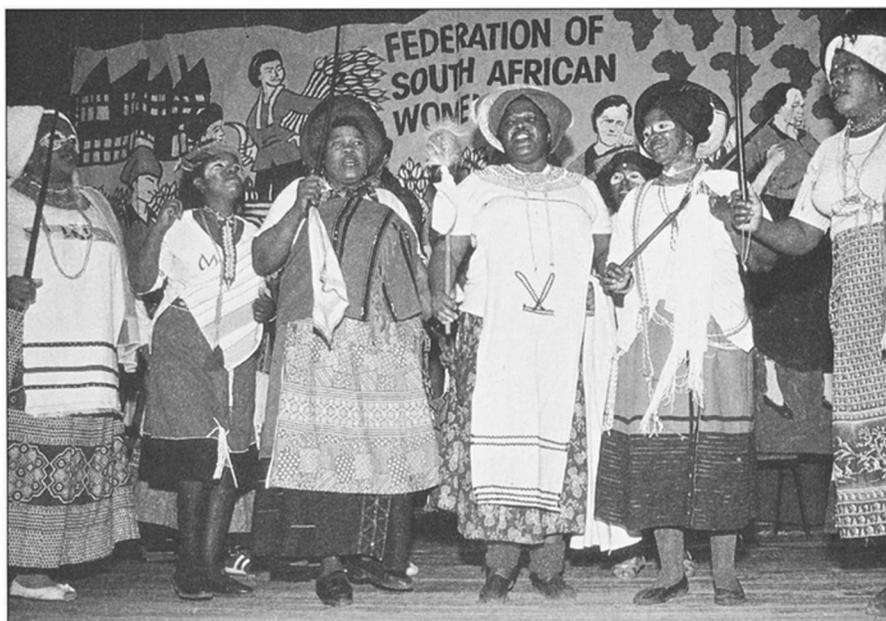
For me, the WNC was an ambivalent experience. I am filled with great pride in our achievements as well as frustration with the history of inequality foisted upon us. Within the WNC we did not have mechanisms to counter this. The WNC was launched in 1992. The WA decided to continue as a 'progressive' alliance but it ceased to meet after objections were raised by some Coalition affiliates. Similar race and class problems to those experienced in the Alliance were felt in the Coalition. Sometimes tensions emanated from our very diverse political positions. Initially there was a definite distrust but as we worked together, commonality was emphasised more than differences. The Coalition's definite mandate – to consult with women and draw up a charter of rights for women – and fixed time-span facilitated the programme. Workshops were held, on various topics like culture and religion, women's reproductive rights, women and the constitution and violence against women, as part of the process of consultation.

Language was problematic as meetings were conducted in English. For some members, especially professionals, 'time' was always a problem. Many did not want to spend more than two hours at a meeting, irrespective of the urgency. There was therefore no time for translations. This was a very disempowering process and excluded women who were not fluent in English.

Because of the white and middle-class nature of the new Coalition, many more academics were part of the structures. This enhanced the quality of the debates but increased tensions about domination and insensitivity. New ways of working were introduced which some of us found difficult. In building new alliances and new organisations, a new culture emerged. There was an air of 'professionalism' and a very fast

If women's demands were to be taken seriously, we had to have maximum intervention

*FSAW Cultural
Festival in Langa,
1989*



ERIC MILLER, I-AFRIKA

**I feel that
many
women
were not
empowered**

pace. When delegates had to be elected, confident white women (not with the UWO or FSAW history) would quickly nominate their colleagues. There was no awareness of the strategic importance of electing delegates, eg having specific and/or representative delegations for specific tasks. What I personally found frustrating was the fact that there was no awareness of race; only blacks ever raised issues of racism. On one occasion when three delegates had to be chosen, a white women quickly nominated three white women simultaneously. When objections were raised by a black woman, the majority of the members present (white) did not recognise the problem.

A strategic agenda

In the spirit of compromise and in order to promote our strategic agenda, the WNC employed two women part-time instead of the one full-time worker that our budget dictated; one isiXhosa-speaking and the other white Afrikaans-speaking. Their different skills and perspectives neatly complemented each other. I also need to commend the very many hours of volunteer work done by women committed to making the aims of the

Coalition a reality.

The WNC succeeded in drawing up the Women's Charter for Effective Equality. Because of the goal-directedness, pace and time limits I feel that many women were not empowered. The final drafting committee consisted entirely of white academics. However, the rural consultation and the incorporation of a broad mass of women was impressive. On August 9th 1994, a copy of the Charter was presented to the premier of the Western Cape.

Some of the post 1994 activities of the WNC were co-ordinating pre- and post-Beijing work, workshops on the Commission on Gender Equality, Reproductive Rights, social and economic rights of women. Submissions were then forwarded to the Constitutional Assembly. During this period WNC developed working relationships with World University Services (WUS), South African Development Education Project (SADEP) and the Community Law Centre (CLC). The WNC continued in the Western Cape until 1996 when it initiated, in consultation with women leaders, the New Women's Movement which has a broad membership.

THE END OF APARTHEID

UWO/UWCO's position as the first political mass-based women's organisation with high-profile political activities, contributed to the atmosphere of defiance in the Western Cape. The combination of women's and national liberation was strategic and successful in most cases. Programmes focussing on lessons from other countries convinced us that national liberation did not mean that women would automatically be liberated.

Women who were insecure about going to political meetings felt confident to come to a women's only meeting. In relationships and political organisations women experienced contradictions. Some women had to ask permission from men to meet. Mostly there was a sensitivity about times and lengths of meetings in order to facilitate women's participation. The detailed explanation of issues accommodated general understanding. Some middle class women complained that the 'pace was too slow'.

On the one hand, women joined because it was a 'women's organisation' and were then politicised in the process. Many women who were not convinced of either women's or national liberation were radicalised by the programmes.

The strategy to organise women around issues that 'affected them most' was successful. This organised mass of women responded to the Koornhof Bills and the tricameral proposals and contributed immensely to the atmosphere of 'ungovernability'. There was, however, an unevenness of activity with the urban area central to the success.

The women's organisations were responsible for informing and politicising women about international issues. Since UWO's first conference letters of support have been received from diverse countries such as Ethiopia, Guyana, as well as countries in the north. Some of us also represented our organisations abroad. This interaction stimulated activities and

strengthened resolve to end apartheid. Activities also revolved around the Freedom Charter, which was not widely known. It was the UWO that first celebrated International Children's Day and popularised the Children's Charter. The commitment of many of the leaders was inspiring. A Code of Conduct was drawn up to respond to problems of raising issues outside of organisational structures or 'gossiping'. This contributed to political discipline. A campaign around the United Nations 'Decade for Women' mobilised church, cultural and trade union groups. It was in FSAW meetings where discussions were first raised on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). One of the demands was that the new South Africa ratifies it.

That women's liberation and national liberation were seen as complementary meant that we 'worked shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk'. This did not blind us to patriarchy. There were conflicts, challenges and contradictions in our personal lives. These contradictions continue and the struggle against patriarchy is an ongoing one. The extreme state repression meant that certain issues were not always pursued.

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to argue that women's organisations did not 'conserve' women's subordination, nor were they used by the national liberation struggle. Saying women were used by the liberation movement robs them of agency. Women have challenged the status quo and progressive political organisations. Much of the literature on women's organisations in the 1980 to early 1990 period sees them as static. However I assert that women's organisations developed and grew immensely over those 10 years. New and different issues were taken up as new structures and alliances were formed.

I also argue for uniquely **South African forms of feminisms** which include national liberation and organising on a basis of

There were conflicts, challenges and contradictions in our personal lives

... 'Women of colour are calling for the right to fashion feminism to suit their own worlds'

motherhood. Women's historical and material circumstances shape their ideological and political changes. As McClintock (1995:385) eloquently states:

...Women of colour are calling for the right to fashion feminism to suit their own worlds, while also learning from the strategies of other nationalist women and women of colour... The singular contribution of nationalist feminism has been its insistence on relating the feminist struggle to other liberation movements.

On examining aspects of the above women's organisations, five distinct aspects arise:

- women stood 'shoulder to shoulder with their men';
- there was a strong motherist appeal;
- campaigns focussed on what affected the most oppressed women, ie African working class women;

- national liberation was an integral if not determining issue;
- cross-race/class alliances were made at particular historic junctures.

McClintock (1985:387) further states:

Women resist not because feminism has been surreptitiously ferried from abroad, but because the contradictions in their historical circumstances compels them to do so.

The march by hundreds of African women in 1913 in Bloemfontein and then by 20 000 women to Pretoria, in 1956, to protest against passes being extended to African women; the FSAW march to Parliament to demand an end to the state of emergency during the 80s; and since 1992, marches by Ilitha La Bantu against lenient sentences for rapists and violence against women, did not require anyone, let alone western women, to spur them into challenging the status quo.

Ongoing interaction with women's movements globally have however, enhanced our work. In campaigns around International Women's Day, we would link labour issues with women's issues. So, as much as I argue for specific South African feminisms, I acknowledge the comaraderie and international support from women's organisations/ feminists worldwide. We also learnt to use the language of international feminist discourse, such as reproductive rights.

National Women's Day celebrations would incorporate the major issues of that year – boycott the tricameral elections, women's working conditions, gender relations in the home, no to forced removals. These words from a Women's Day pamphlet illustrate women's fight for rights on several fronts:

*Women workers, we are the most oppressed and exploited.
From us the bosses make super profits.
They fire us when we are pregnant.
They force us to use dangerous birth control. But we say: 'Motherhood is our right!'
Work does not end in the factories.*

UWO
Women's
Day
Pamphlet



We wash, feed and care for our children alone.

We say to our menfolk: let us share the housework. And work shoulder to shoulder in the struggle for freedom.

We want jobs of our choice, not forced into kitchens or on buses to the homelands. (UWO, 1984c)

Non-racialism and the triple oppressions of women, however problematic and contradictory, were the cornerstones on which we organised. Non-racialism on the one hand ensured the broad range of women in our structures, whereas the triple oppressions, which later became 'multiple and contradictory oppressions or identities', always ensured awareness of our diversities. Despite these diversities we formed political and strategic unities which ensured women's interventions at the various levels, including the Constitution.

Women's issues were housing, the passes, violence in general and violence against women. A member from the informal settlement, KTC stated how grateful she was to UWO:

I am proud of UWO... I have a place to live now. Through taking up issues we build ourselves. Through workshops we will educate ourselves (UWO, 1984a).

Participation in these women's organisations was empowering for women. Women who were domestic workers with minimal formal education were the chairpersons and presidents of our structures and developed into articulate speakers and astute politicians. Today these same women are part of Government: nationally, regionally and locally. I see this as the result of building grassroots leadership.

Other members who are not, or who chose not to go into Government, are committed to building the voice of civil society. They stress the importance of an independent women's voice. The WNC (WP) has become part of the New Women's Movement, which it initiated in 1996. Having

a progressive Constitution which ensures women's rights is only a start.

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FOOTNOTES

- In the book, *Thirty Years of the Freedom Charter*, by Raymond Suttner and Jeremy Cronin (1986), woman activist and leader Cheryl Carolus emphasises how important her experience in the women's organisations was and to what extent it enabled her to take a leading position in mixed organisations. The author shares this view.
- For arguments on nationalist or third world feminisms see Fouche (1994:56); Jayawardena (1986:48); Kemp *et al* (1995:248); McClintock (1995:182); Drew (1995:142).
- See Charman *et al* (1991:163); Hansson (1991:141); Hassim (1991:80); Hassim and Walker (1993:181); Horn (1991:81); Horn (1994:144); Walker (1990:85); Wells (1991:192)
- The rest of the aims focussed on the children's rights and the social welfare of the aged and infirm. It may be argued that UWO reinforced women's stereotypical tasks as carers.
- Personal discussion with Lynne Brown who was present at the conference.
- December 15th & 16th 1984.
- See Budlender *et al* (1983:91). They refer to members sometimes disagreeing with content of organisational documents.
- Athlone, Mitchell's Plain, Macassar and Kensington Branches became defunct as most members worked in the UDF Area Committees. The number of core activists in some branches decreased as well. However, it has to be stressed that there were a number of different reasons why branches ceased.
- Some clauses (UDF Women's Congress, 1987) are: Noting that: Sexual harassment of women comrades by male comrades is not unheard of; Believing that: the national struggle against racism and exploitation will not be a victory unless it is also a victory against sexism; We therefore resolve: to eradicate sexism from our ranks and to promote a vision of a non-sexist future South Africa

- amongst progressive organisations.
- We believe that the future emancipation of women is dependent on the level of participation of women in the struggle as a whole.
10. Despite being interviewed many times, Barrett *et al* were the only persons who ever returned the manuscript as we requested.
 11. At the conference on 'Women and Gender in Southern Africa' held at the University of Natal in 1991, there was tension between black and white academics. One accusation was that white women 'were objectifying' black women in their papers. A similar situation arose at the Women in Africa and the African Diaspora Conference held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1992, when a group of women did not want white South Africans to present their papers. Many of these debates were published in *Agenda*. See Funani (1992); Fouche (1993) Hansson (1992); Serote (1992).
 12. Walker (1990:2) comments that the 'triple oppression' of women has become a 'rhetorical commonplace'; Wells (1991) states that the term is 'theoretically vacuous'. According to De La Rey (1997:7):
In academic circles, the triple oppression model came to be seen as limited – it is now seen by many to be a positivist view of human experience in a sense that it objectifies dimensions of social experience by seeing categories in isolation from one another and apart from the total context.
 13. The term 'gender oppression' was only used much later. It is more comprehensive implying the social construction thereof as well as hierarchical power relations.
 14. For example, because of the Coloured Labour Preference Act, coloured people were privileged. One undated UWO pamphlet states: 'Bosses and government say 'Jobs for Coloureds only! We say: JOBS FOR ALL!'
 15. Many writers do not interview women involved in the organisations they write about, for eg, Hansson (1991:141); Hassim (1991:80); Horn (1991:81). I find there are therefore many assumptions. 'Women's movement' and 'women's organisations' are used throughout. No cognisance is taken of the very different liberation movements and women's organisations there were. Which women's movement is referred to is also not clear. There were and still are vast regional as well as organisational differences in South Africa.
 16. There were regular meetings between Federation of Transvaal women (FEDTRAW), NOW, Port Elizabeth Organisation of Women (PEWO) and UWO/UWCO. At these meetings national programmes and strategies were discussed, eg FEDTRAW and NOW had to assist Orange Free State and UWO, assist the Cape province to build women's organisations.
 17. A celebratory disco/dance with mostly African and local music that has political relevance. There may be political speeches. Many new members were recruited at *gumbas*.
 18. This was said by Bernice Reagon Johnson of *Sweet Honey in the Rock* and director of Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC in discussion with some of us from Gender Advocacy Project (September 1992).

Gertrude Fester was, since 1982, a member of the women's organisations and coalitions in the Western Cape that she discusses. She is currently doing her PhD at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics, where she is researching the race and class implications of some women's organisations in the Western Cape