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'Parliament is another terrain of struggle': women, men and politics in South Africa

Gisela Geisler*

ABSTRACT

South African women's success in moving from active participation in the liberation struggle to active participation in government has been exceptional on a world scale. Their achievement is based in the long history of women's struggles against apartheid and for gender equality in the African National Congress. The result has been a political representation that is grounded in the experience of a united women's movement in the transition to majority rule and a firm policy consensus towards gender equality within the ANC. This has enabled women politicians to entrench gender equality goals within government discourse. Yet, the success has come with the price of a women's movement that has lost its strong leaders to government, and women politicians who lack the support of a strong women's movement. Thus, in the moment of greatest victory South African women lack the mass movement that propelled them to success, suggesting that the struggle is not done with yet.

INTRODUCTION

In a contribution to the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen in 1980, the Women's Section of the African National Congress (ANC) affirmed that 'the common exploitation and oppression of men and women on the basis of colour has led to a combined fight against the system instead of a battle against men for "women's rights"' (ANC 1980). National liberation had taken precedence over women's emancipation in most of the world, and the ANC was no exception. In an interview in Copenhagen at the time, Ruth Mompati asked how South African women could talk about equality when 'we are not yet recognised as human beings?', and expressed disappointment with Western feminists who insisted on the primacy of the struggle against patriarchy (Internationalist Feminist Collective 1981: 123). Within the ANC women's emancipation was considered divisive (Pillay 1992: 19) and feminism was rejected as a

* Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen. The Norwegian Research Council funded much of the research on which this paper is based.

Western bourgeois concept. Yet, ten years later, the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) issued a statement in which its members acknowledged that 'the experience of other societies has shown that the emancipation of women is not a by-product of national liberation or socialism. It needs to be addressed in its own right within our organisation, the mass democratic movement and in society as a whole' (ANC 1990).

This statement, which opened a significant political space for women in the transition period towards majority rule, was exceptional in the southern African context, and it gave rise to exceptional outcomes. Most striking among them were the 111 women¹ who entered parliament after the 1994 elections, due largely to the ANC's internal quota system. It pushed South Africa from almost the bottom of the world classification of women in national parliaments to close to the top, creating a tremendous change from the previous history of parliaments in South Africa, where the total number of women never exceeded eight and often was lower (Republic of South Africa 1994). It changed a situation where the few women tolerated in parliament were to their male colleagues 'our little roses', who were 'charming' to have around and who dressed in 'smart blue suits with a double row of pearls' (NP MP, Cape Town 19.3.1996),² to a situation where women parliamentarians hailed from diverse social backgrounds, occupied key positions in parliament and cabinet, and have been able to substantially influence both political cultures and policy outcomes.

The South African experience with integrating women into decision-making bodies has been exceptional also because in Africa politics is by and large still seen as a prerogative of men. Even though South Africa shares high per centages of female representation in parliament with Mozambique and the Seychelles,³ this does not diminish the success in anchoring gender as a concern into the structures of government and the policies of the party from the very outset. It compares favourably with neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe and Namibia, which share with South Africa a history of women's active involvement in the political struggle for independence or majority rule. In all three countries the leadership of the national liberation movements promised women, albeit vaguely, gender equality, but the reality looked different for Zimbabwean and Namibian women. A Zimbabwean women deputy minister (Harare, 21.7.1995) explained that after independence in 1980

we did not get our act together, we should have really tried hard, because it is much better to push what you want during the transitional period, before

you are starting, before people get used to certain ways, when you still have the fever of victory... We thought that we fought, that we won, and that is it.

Nora Chase, a gender activist in Namibia, explained after independence in 1990 that women 'are really nowhere' despite their involvement in the struggle (National Radio Australia 1990).

South African women learned enough from the frustrations of their sisters to push hard to have their concerns included already during the struggle and in the transition period. Thus the policy outcome and the situation in parliament since 1994, the speaker of parliament, Frene Ginwala (Cape Town, 18.3.1996), asserted in 1996, did 'not happen out of nothing... it is a process' of which the MPs have been a part. The key to the success of South African women is often interpreted as being based in the unique history of the ANC's and United Democratic Front's (UDF) mass women's movement and the 'real hard struggle' there: 'You cannot point your head and say that women are second rate.'

This article is concerned with the process that constituted and enabled South Africa's exceptional development. It lies in a number of connected factors, such as the fact that the majority of women who entered parliament on an ANC ticket came from a long history of political struggle against the apartheid system. They came as part and with the backing of the majority party that, in the climate of the end of the UN Decade of Women in 1985, had adopted a gender policy and had set out to transform parliament. It will look at what might be called the 'gender project' in South Africa's parliament, and the women, who realised early enough that 'if we continue to shy away from [women's emancipation] we will not be able to solve it after independence' (Russell 1989: 116). It also looks at the problems that have accompanied the successes, such as the difficulties of women activists in parliament, the divergent aspirations and aims of women parliamentarians and the status of the women's movement.

THE BASIS: POLITICAL TRADITIONS OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Up until the 1980s national liberation movements in South Africa did not differ substantially from those in neighbouring countries in their views on women's emancipation. In South Africa women have participated in the struggle against the apartheid state since the turn of

the century, but they were allowed into the ANC as full members only from 1943 onward, a date that coincided with the formation of the ANC Women's League (ANCWL). In Francis Baard's (1986: 33) recollection, 'it was a big thing for us to organise the women like that', but since they were part of the ANC they lacked the autonomy to pursue independent actions.

This did not change through the massive civil disobedience campaigns of the 1950s which were at times carried by women activists, surprising even men with their strength. In South Africa, as elsewhere, women forced their way into political activism against male resistance on the basis of practical gender needs, namely as mothers who were to secure a better future for their children (Joseph 1993: 45). Motherhood served as a unifying factor across rural-urban, class and race boundaries (Gaitskell & Unterhalter 1989: 69), but also allowed for women's 'continued subordination to the broader nationalist project. Recognising and revering mothers was to deny them autonomy and authority beyond the domestic realm' (Meintjes 1998: 69).

'Motherism' also carried into the multiracial Federation of South African Women (FSAW) between 1954 and 1963. Its formation had been premised on the observation that the existing male dominated political organisations were unlikely to meet women's specific needs (Wells 1993: 133) and although the organisation claimed full gender equality (FSAW 1954) its membership 'wanted to expand the scope of women's work within nationalist liberation' (Walker 1991: 159). Despite these limitations FSAW's greatest achievement was that it represented a broad-based women's organisation that was not conceived of as an auxiliary to a male-dominated body, such as other women's organisations were at the time, and that it was thus 'a real and serious attempt to incorporate women into the political programme of the national liberation movement on an equal footing with men' (Walker 1991: 275). This experience constituted the model for the UDF-aligned women's organisations in the 1980s and the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in the 1990s.

The political repression of the 1960s, which sent liberation movements underground or into exile, left a hole in political activism until the radical Black Consciousness (BC) movement, composed initially mainly of students, gathered momentum in the 1970s. With an approach that saw race and class as the main dividing line in South African society, 'gender as a political issue was not raised at all'. Instead, women entered the movement as black people (Ramphela 1992: 215) and under a 'womanist' banner which advocated that

motherhood be directed towards the fulfilment of black peoples' aspirations (Lewis 1992: 44). The Black Women's Federation, a national umbrella body launched in 1975 under the auspices of BC and banned two years later, was mainly concerned with mobilising women against racial discrimination (Ramphela 1992: 216) and addressing practical gender needs. Cheryl Carolus, now South African high commissioner in London, recalls that 'black men felt that asserting their blackness meant asserting their maleness' against women (McGregor 1998: 17). Yet she and other former women members who grew into strong feminists maintain that the movement gave them new confidence in themselves. Forced to become 'one of the boys', many young women learned to be assertive and tough (Ramphela 1992: 219), virtues that stood them in good stead in later gender activism.

In exile the ANC instituted a women's section which was even more closely tied to the ANC proper than the ANCWL had been. Women were also drawn into Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, after 1976, and by 1989 they constituted 20 per cent of the MK cadres. MK had the question of women's emancipation on the agenda (Cock 1991: 162, 168), but with one notable exception women never featured in the higher commanding structures of the army, and military command structures never included more than a handful. Even though men and women underwent the same training, female MK soldiers remained 'women' while men were 'soldiers' (Lakha 1997: 141). Typically, women were deployed in communications, security and clerical jobs, where they affirmed the 'whole notion of the invisibility of women' (former MK commander-in-chief, Cape Town, 19.5.1995) as 'knitting needle guerrillas' (Cock 1991: 151).

During the 1980s women's emancipation came, however, to be increasingly addressed both in the ANC in exile and within the liberation movements inside South Africa. The ANC leadership acknowledged gender oppression in its own ranks, and called on its Women's Section to 'liberate us men from antique concepts and attitudes about the place and the role of women in society' (Tambo 1981).

Inside South Africa, the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 brought together close to 400 anti-apartheid organisations functioning as an internal wing of the ANC. Albertina Sisulu, a founding member of FSAW, became its co-president, and even though she was one of the very few women on the executive, the UDF had, according to Sisulu, many women leaders in its affiliated groups (Russell 1989: 145). These included a range of women's

organisations which represented, according to a former member (Cape Town, 18.3.1996), 'a real working-class mass based movement', whose members subscribed to an organisational culture of democracy and accountability which proved to be another important basis for the success of the WNC .

Even though the women's organisations affiliated to the UDF, such as the United Women's Organisation (UWO) in the Western Cape, the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) and the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), still maintained the discourse on the primacy of national liberation, and demands for women's liberation were articulated cautiously, its members persuaded the UDF leadership to adopt 'non-sexism' as one of its principles (Meintjes 1998: 75; Kemp *et al.* 1995: 139; Russell 1989: 251). This created a 'constant tension between spending time on gender consciousness raising... and meeting the needs of national liberation struggles' (Kemp *et al.* 1995: 140). Moreover, raising political gender concerns too vehemently meant losing out on membership to conventional conservative women's organisations such as the Women's Brigade of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in KwaZulu/Natal, which sought to reconfirm and entrench patriarchal notions of women's subordinate status (Hassim 1991: 81).

Despite these limitations the UDF based women's organisations tried in 1987 to re-launch a new Federation of South African Women (Russell 1989: 253). Five years later, after the unbanning of the exiled liberation movements and the reestablishment of the ANCWL within South Africa, the launch of the Women's National Coalition realised this goal in an unprecedented show of women's solidarity, which proved an 'an inspirational example of women's unity' (Cock 1997: 310) beyond South Africa.

GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR: TRANSITION POLITICS

By the end of the 1980s the UN Decade of Women had had its influence on the women's movement world-wide and also on South African women, in exile and at home. The discussions and debates leading up to the Nairobi Conference in 1985, suggests Frene Ginwala (Cape Town, 22.5.1995; see also Daniels 1992: 21), were a watershed for South African women in that they clearly articulated that women's emancipation was not just a social issue but required political and

economic power, not only of their country but also in terms of their own political power.

Participation in decision-making was one of the buzz-words of Nairobi, and ANC women carried demands for greater representation in the executive bodies into their party. The Women's Section ensured that the ANC's constitutional guidelines of 1989 addressed, even though inadequately, gender equality (Driver 1992: 82-102) and the ANC leadership agreed 'in principle' on an internal gender quota of 30 per cent. Consultations between ANC women in exile and back home also increased in preparation for the end of apartheid.

The Malibongwe Conference, organised in Amsterdam in the beginning of 1990 by the ANC Women's Section and the Dutch Anti-Apartheid movement, was the largest of a number of meetings that brought women from organisations within South Africa and exile together. It legitimised gender as an autonomous political aspect of national liberation. In her conference contribution, Ginwala (1990) expostulated that the 'ANC would not be true to its principles and values if it did not now seriously address the question of the emancipation of women'. The right of women to participate equally in all decision making was deemed of paramount importance in this process. The conference also called for the formation of a national women's movement within South Africa (Albertyn 1994: 48), and the need for women to participate in the constitution making process to ensure a gender sensitive constitution. Provisions for affirmative action and a national machinery for the advancement of gender equality were aspects of this (Ginwala 1991: 69).

In May 1990, four months after the ANC was unbanned, another meeting in Lusaka planned the re-launch of the Women's League within South Africa later that year. It carried the Malibongwe resolutions into the ANC executive, resulting in the already mentioned policy statement (allegedly drafted by Frene Ginwala, Meintjes 1998: 77), which confirmed the autonomy of women's emancipation, and promised to include women's interests in a future constitution (Cape Town, 18.3.1996). As a first step, the ANC Women's Section was to initiate a national movement to formulate a Charter of Women's Rights so that 'in their own voice women define issues of greatest concern to them' (Albertyn 1994: 50).

The ANC Women's League was officially re-launched in Durban in August 1990. Even though League members at the time believed that male comrades were still inclined to subsume women's interests under the broader national agenda (Jaffer 1991: 64), the exiled ANC women

returned with a recognition of duty to the former leaders (Cape Town, 18.3.1996). This included the desire not to repeat the mistakes of their African sisters elsewhere.

The media alluded to the future of the Women's League with some doubt, however. Headlines such as 'Women's place is in the struggle. But the struggle ignores them' (Moodley 1990), 'Women do have a place in the struggle – it's behind typewriters' (Gilbey 1990), 'Standing up and not being counted' (Jaffer 1991), or 'Women's League: Giving a voice to the powerless, mute and exploited or ... the *koeksuster tannies* of the ANC?' (Gevisser 1991) all anticipated that the League would end up as an auxiliary to the male party as had happened elsewhere. Some believed that the league was paralysed by a split between older 'motherists' and younger 'feminists' (Gevisser 1991).

The direction the League would take was thus to be determined by the leadership elected during the first National Conference in 1991. The conference voted against Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and for Gertrude Shope and Albertina Sisulu as leaders, who despite their 'motherist' background were supportive of the younger women's agenda. A former member of the League explained that the election result was based on a political decision, which went against Madikizela-Mandela, then the wife of Nelson Mandela, not so much because she was at the time linked to the murder and abduction of youths in Soweto (Gilbey 1993), but the 'main motivation for people not to vote for her was because they did not want the Women's League to be like in Zimbabwe, where it was being led by the wife of the president ... so it was a deliberate strategy ... to specifically avoid the kind of Women's League in other countries' (former executive member, ANC Women's League in Natal, Durban, 23.3.1995; see also Daniels 1991: 36).

The collective positions of the conference also reconfirmed the demand for a 30 per cent quota for women in elected positions in the ANC. The League was, however, initially unsuccessful when it brought the resolution to the National ANC conference two months later. Participants suggest that one reason for the heated debate, which led to the withdrawal of the motion before it was put to the vote, was that the majority of the conference participants were men who had not been part of the earlier 'agreement in principle' (Pillay 1992b: 5). And rather than lobby for the quota, the League had been side-tracked into campaigns against politically motivated violence in Natal. For Ginwala (1991: 69), herself not a member of the League, the outcome signified that 'by allowing the broader national issue to overwhelm it, the League lent substance to those critics who had long argued that a

woman's organisation attached to the ANC would inevitably subordinate women's interests'.

The ANC, however, did not back-pedal on its commitment, and the quota system was pushed through later by the NEC in preparation for the national elections in 1994. And despite the early disappointment, the League did important national policy work until its second national conference in 1993, when Madikizela-Mandela replaced Shope as president, and it became, in the words of one former member 'very much a past thing like all the other women leagues'. Until then, and unlike other women's sections, almost all of the important ANC women were members, 'because it tended to be a useful place to be' (Durban, 23.3.1995).

One of the most credited initiatives of the Women's League was the work towards the formation of the Women's National Coalition (WNC), a process which had already been prepared by UDF-affiliated women's groups. The WNC was launched in April 1992, with a membership of ultimately 92 national organisations and 13 regional coalitions, covering most political parties, rural women's organisations, and religious and professional organisations. The Coalition represented both a political campaign to mobilise and educate women at grassroots level, and an attempt to influence the political process of writing the constitution (Albertyn 1994: 51). The approach was participatory, engaging South African women in defining their concerns and experiences to be distilled into a *Women's Charter For Effective Equality*, which in turn was to inform the Bill of Rights. The focus on women's rights was an 'important political resource, which allowed women to mobilise without necessarily confronting the differences between them', and was part of a 'feminist project to develop a substantive understanding of equality in the constitution and the law' (Albertyn 1994: 51-2). The WNC concept has since inspired women's movements in Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Kenya, even though none of these initiatives seems to have quite matched the broadness of the WNC alliance (Geisler 1995).

Initially the influence the WNC and women in political parties had on the transition period was curtailed by the fact that the multiparty negotiation structures were solidly male dominated. The 1992 Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) was an 'all male choir' (*Speak* 38, 1992: 18), where only 23 women among 400 delegates had speaking and voting rights. A belatedly established Gender Advisory Committee (GAC) with merely advisory powers looked at the mechanisms of ensuring women's inclusion in the

transition to democracy. GAC had, however, only a few weeks to complete its task, and had to fight with ignorance on gender issues among both male CODESA delegates and non-ANC women members of GAC. The committee was never able to present its recommendations before CODESA collapsed on account of renewed political violence (Friedman 1993: 129).

In the Multiparty Negotiation Process (MPNP), started in 1993, women participants were again minimal. Again under pressure, mostly of the WNC and women via their parties, consensus was reached allowing one woman delegate on each political delegation and technical committee. In addition a WNC monitoring group was established. Elsabé Wessels (1993), a journalist and a member of the group, suggested in a newspaper article with the cynical title 'Lost laundry in the boys' locker room' that even though women managed to force their way into the negotiations, they had little influence, making not enough informed interventions on behalf of women and maintaining party over gender loyalty. Delegates rejected this negative media image, however, and reported a positive evaluation of women's contribution particularly from male delegates (Finnemore 1994: 16-21). The effectiveness of women delegates was, perhaps, hampered by the overall marginalisation of gender issues not only in MPNP processes, but also in the liberation struggle before then (Albertyn 1994: 56).

The women did, however, manage to intervene successfully on the status of customary law in the constitution, which the traditional leaders wanted to have excluded from the gender equality clause. Women delegates worked through the WNC from the outside in order to put more pressure on the political parties to respond to a women's constituency. But even though concerted lobbying effected a compromise (Albertyn 1994), the final constitution is still far from clear on the status of customary law (Nhlapo 1995: 158).

The *Women's Charter* which gathered the demands of some 2 million women across South Africa (Meintjes 1998: 81) included the call for 'society to be reorganised and its institutions to be restructured to take cognisance of all women' and, reflecting its broad constituency, listed the demand for clean water under women's interests. It was presented to the Constitutional Assembly in 1994, too late to influence the constitution writing process. The final Constitution which was adopted in May 1996 did not, as was hoped, make the Charter part of the Bill of Rights, but enshrined gender equality and the possibility of affirmative action, making it one of the most gender sensitive constitutions in the world. For Rhoda Kadalie (1995: 66), the

specificities pertaining to gender rights were ultimately collapsed into a broad equality clause which 'is likely to become a terrain of struggle for women who wish to challenge the status quo', for example in relationship to customary practices.

The constitution also provided for a Commission for Gender Equality. Even though discussion on a suitable 'national machinery' for gender equality had been discussed in the women's movement since 1992, the provision was included at the last minute without consultation, apparently 'as an attempt to find a compromise' between the opposed positions of traditional leaders and women regarding the status of customary law (Albertyn 1995: 10, 21). But although women were divided over the Commission, it represented a step towards the goal of ensuring that responsibility for the enforcement of gender equality was placed with the state rather than with individual women (Ginwala 1991).

The WNC represented an impressive show of the strength of women's unity. A number of detailed accounts of the WNC have suggested that although the Coalition was riddled by conflicts, it was able to function precisely because it was a transitional alliance whose members shared a sense of exclusion from the future of South Africa. This goal 'to exercise a power greater than the sum of its individual affiliates' transcended existing divisions (Kemp *et al.* 1995: 151; Hassim & Gouws 1998). Yet, though the vast diversity of its member organisations was its strength, it was also its weakness, 'because the diversity was so great that the Coalition could never move or campaign on issues. Its wide appeal made it immobile' (Durban, 23.3.1995). The former convenor of the WNC, Ginwala (Cape Town, 22.5.1995), went further in suggesting that the coalition made a mistake by being expressly non-political, a position that stemmed from the fact that political parties initially wanted to pull out of the coalition because they considered it ANC-dominated. Others believed that a women's organisation which was more of a 'political mover' was needed. The WNC continued to exist after 1994, but as was predicted in its heyday, it lost its momentum, its future dependent on a theme able to unite all women again (Trenz 1993: 29).

Moreover, as much as the ANCWL was a 'political mover' in the early 1990s, this changed after the 1994 national elections, which left the organisation without a sense of direction. Many commentators also maintain that the election of Madikizela-Mandela as its president in December 1993 further paralysed its potential (Chothia 1993: 6). The election result was, in the mind of a former member (Durban,

23.3.1995), a political decision 'that it was a short-cut to getting many ANC votes to have Winnie in the League'. The decision might have helped gain votes for the ANC, but it effectively closed the League's short history as a progressive women's voice. In 1997 the organisation was further weakened when eleven prominent members resigned from the executive, following many other women who had already left. The reason for the resignations was Madikizela-Mandela's autocratic leadership style and concern with doubtful business ventures (*Sunday Times* 19.2.1995) rather than women's emancipation, so that it served its leader as 'a platform to launch attacks against the ANC' (*Weekly Mail and Guardian* 13-19.9.1996).

For some ANC members the split in the League was neither surprising nor bad, since even though the organisation managed to fill a gap for a time, it could not have continued to do so without separating from the ANC. After its much delayed National Conference in April 1997 which re-elected Madikizela-Mandela as president, Rhoda Kadalie (1997) charged that the disorganisation and lack of a programme of action indicated that the League had ceased to be a 'dominant conduit for women's voices'. Instead it had become 'as moribund and ineffectual as most post-independence women's party organisations have become elsewhere'.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM FROM THE INSIDE: PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

By the end of the April 1994 election 111 women had entered parliament. Many of the new women parliamentarians were drawn from the women's movement. In the election campaign the ANC was the only party that used women's rights as a campaign topic on posters and in advertising (Lodge 1994). On the occasion of International Women's Day, six weeks prior to the election, Nelson Mandela, for example, was reported to have suggested, to 'muted silence from men and cheers from thousands of women' in a village in rural Venda, that he had learned to cook and wash in prison and that he urged men to do the same (*The Star* 10.3.1994).

Some of the women parliamentarians were astonished to find themselves elected to parliament. One of the fifteen women elected to the Senate recalls (Cape Town, 21.3.1996): 'I never wanted to be a Senator, because I did not know what a Senator is in the first place.' Coming from 'her shack in the township' where she had taught in a

primary school to her new life in Cape Town was a sudden and sometimes painful change for her. An ANC veteran (Cape Town, 15.5.1995), 'very old, 64 or something', who had been at the forefront of leading women through disobedience campaigns and UDF years in Natal, was surprised when she was elected, because of her age and not being 'well educated'. She admitted that 'when I came to parliament I was afraid of it'. Yet, she was disappointed not to see more of the 'ladies with grey hair, who fought for this government' represented in parliament.

Most of the new MPs, men and women, had to struggle with what a journalist (Gevisser 1994b: 12) called the 'cabalistic culture of lawmaking', the lack of knowledge about parliamentary procedures, the 'excruciating legalese', problems with language, with reading and digesting reams of reports, a very heavy workload and the lack of immediacy in results and responses. MPs were, according to the ANC chief whip, Arnold Stoffie, disoriented and 'traumatised by the parliamentary process'. But despite this common ground between women and men, women members of parliament claimed special problems and needs, due to the gendered nature of parliament and society. Former ANC MP Jennifer Ferguson (Accone 1996) found parliament to be 'like being back at school' where its 'patriarchal nature is designed to kill what's feminine'. For Thenjiwe Mtintso, former commander-in-chief of MK and ANC MP (Cape Town, 19.5.1995; see also *The Star*, 3.3.1995), parliament presented a different and difficult terrain of struggle, even more patriarchal than she considered MK to have been. Even though the ANC entered parliament with an understanding of changing it, men had 'no understanding of parliament as a gender-friendly institution'. One of the problems was that men tended to draw an artificial line between public and private spheres, because they had wives who looked after the domestic side of life:

Because I cannot say that as a mother I lock myself up, and now I come here into parliament. But what was clear, what was being told, just like in MK, if you wanted to be a parliamentarian, get into the status quo, be a man. So you once again had to be an honorary man to make it.

It was for this reason that a conference of all women parliamentarians held shortly after the inauguration concluded that in order to manage both their demanding career as parliamentarians and their demanding families, they would 'need wives' to cope (Powers 1994). Amongst the many issues that women MPs immediately and successfully raised were

structural arrangements, like a lack of women's toilets, gyms and childcare facilities. These were issues that allowed for women's support across party lines. Ginwala (Cape Town, 22.5.1995) explained:

The minute we got the decision [in the ANC] on the quota, right, we want a crèche. And they said: 'are you not yet satisfied?' No, the two are linked. If the ANC supports the one it has to support the other. And so the ANC said there will be a large number of women and we want a crèche. And so the first MPs came here with their kids. Parliament did not know what had hit it.

Other aspects of male chauvinism in parliament were also challenged. One example was the persistence with which Ginwala had to remind men of her gender, as with a Democratic Party MP, who had addressed her as Mr Speaker thirty-four times in one speech in May 1995 (Seepe 1995). Another example was the fact that parliamentary debates were held in the afternoons, often reaching late into the night. These hours were criticised by women MPs because they restricted time with children, partners and political constituencies. Jenny Schreiner, a single parent, was particularly punctual about leaving parliament every day at five in the evening, meeting or not, to spend time with her small son (Davis 1995a). A year later parliamentary times were changed, finishing at six in the evening, a move again justified in 1998 by budgetary cuts.

Attitudes also changed. One year after entering parliament Brigitte Mabandla, now a deputy minister, could observe that the resentment men originally felt against women had abated and that their uncertainty as to how to treat them had been lessened. Men had started to value women's contributions in committees and in parliamentary debates. And former ANC MP Mavivi Manzini felt that men respected women for what they are: 'just our presence here means that you no longer find people expressing themselves in overtly sexist ways' (Davis 1995a). There were suggestions by prominent MPs that sexual harassment in parliament was hidden under a seal of silence (SAPA 1998), but women also affirmed that they could deal with sexist remarks when they occurred in public debate (Spratt 1996). This confirmed that 'whether you are a token or not does not depend on those who put you there, it depends on what you are doing' (Cape Town, 22.5.1995). However, despite changes of attitude, parliamentary discourse on women, was, according to a 1996 report, still carried by women only (*Parliamentary Whip* 4 April 1996), who were expected to raise gender issues by their male counterparts, because for them to was 'considered a bit off' (Cape Town, 17.5.1995).

But women's special needs go deeper. Even though Schreiner (Cape

Town, 18.3.1996) conceded that men also grappled with similar problems in parliament, they were better at adjusting to the situation than women, simply because they were much more used to getting others to do things for them, like using secretarial backup. Former ANC MP Ruth Mompoti agreed that men look for a secretary when women try to cope alone until they can hardly see their desk for paperwork (*Ebony South Africa* May 1996: 56).

Moreover, many female ANC activists had been geared towards the grassroots level with little attention paid to personal development, while the avenues for self-development were also more accessible to ANC men.⁴ Some believed that it was the lack of professional skills rather than sexism, which impeded women's self-expression (Spratt 1996). This may have been one of the reasons why a report on the gender performance of parliament concluded in 1996 that women's participation was on the decline, and that women were intimidated by the 'cut throat way in which proceedings are handled' (*Parliamentary Whip* 4 April 1996). Later reports, such as one commissioned by the Women's Empowerment Unit,⁵ came up with similar conclusions, all pointing to the need for women MPs to further their professional skills (Carter 1998).

Veteran activist Dorothy Nyembe, for example, was an excellent organiser, but lacked the skills to operate efficiently in parliament. In committee meetings she preferred to sit and listen to others, afraid of saying something wrong (Gevisser 1994b). She was in need of help 'to put the right words', but secretarial and research back-up was scant in the early years of parliament, with 12 committee clerks responsible for 60 committees and one secretary serving 37 MPs (Davis 1995b), and the few fellow MPs who were willing to help were over-stretched.⁶

Nyembe has been married to the struggle all her life. Many other women MPs identified the rigours of combining parliamentary work with family responsibilities as a major problem. Many found the lack of contact to their children unacceptable even if they were looked after by the father. Families were often divided between Cape Town and the home residence, which was more of a problem for women, whose husbands were more reluctant to move. Husbands often could not cope with their wives' unspecified working hours, developing jealous suspicions which women in turn found it hard to deal with. Other husbands were unable to cope with their wives' elevated public status. ANC MP Thandi Modise, a former MK cadre and deputy head of the ANCWL, publicly revealed in 1995 that her husband, also a prominent ANC figure, tormented her at home, not allowing her even to make

phone calls. Moreover, Modise discovered that 'people are ashamed on my behalf that I opened my mouth because I am a leader, and leaders are not supposed to acknowledge problems' (Brümmer 1995).

Divorce rates amongst women MPs were thus high, with some claims that thirty marriages were broken in parliament in the first year of the ANC government alone (Parker 1997; Lakha 1998). Yet one woman MP suggested that high divorce rates might also be a sign that parliament empowered women MPs to escape from oppressive marriages.

Former ANC MP Naledi Pandor (Cape Town, 22.3.1996) also complained that many journalists dwelled too much on the problems women MPs might have coping with multiple roles, as against acknowledging the substantive work they were doing: 'I really do so much work and such a range, somehow that is not recognised.' She would obviously have had problems with an article which appeared in *Ebony South Africa* in 1996, dealing almost exclusively with 'the surprising things women MPs do to work off stress', even though the article also quoted her as one example. Underlying this emphasis there lurked the suggestion that women did not belong in parliament, unless they turned into honorary men. Another media trend, criticised by the targets, portrayed women MPs by 'macho standards as movers and shakers', as in 'Dynamite Duarte' or 'Bossy Madam', or alternatively by their hairdos and nail polish (Duarte 1999).⁷ Both trends are considered misogynist since they distract from real achievements. Less subtle, and quite the opposite trend, was epitomised in an article featured by *Bona* (July 1996: 49-62), a more working-class black women's magazine sponsored by a margarine manufacturer, under the title 'Exclusive: Our women in Parliament cook for us. Special winter recipes from Parliament', which placed these women firmly back behind the stove, an easier concept to deal with for many South African men. Women MPs wished to break down both notions, and prove that they could be emotional, yet rational and effective (Maurice 1996). Contrary to the view of the media, most women MPs seem to have been able to manage multiple roles and misogynist attitudes: the 1999 parliament had a return-rate of approximately 64 per cent among ANC women MPs (Electoral Institute of South Africa, pers.com., 1.11.1999).

Women MPs also had considerable impact not only on how parliament worked, but also on substantive policy issues and legislation. One successful initiative was the Women's Budget, which is now an obligatory part of budgeting. It promises to widen the view economists

have on social issues, including gender, and thus to benefit women economically (Budlender 1996). The passing of abortion legislation, the Customary Marriages and Maintenance Acts, and legislation dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace and domestic violence are amongst other successes. Women MPs are also particularly credited for the substantive work they are doing in the sixty parliamentary committees, and they have managed to push for the former *ad hoc* Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women to become permanently established. It acts as a watchdog over government commitments towards gender equality, such as the follow-up of international conventions.

Early on, and in response to the fact that initially only two women were appointed as ministers, ANC women formed a women's caucus to discuss their specific needs and problems, and to lobby for issues of concern to them. But the caucus is not funded by the ANC and does not have the full attention of many women MPs. In the beginning, explained a former member, the caucus was dominated by young black professional women who alienated the older women before they 'moved to greener pastures'. Participation has been patchy and, some argue, marred by divisions along age, class and, less so, race lines. Even though many ANC women denied this, older women MPs confessed to feeling shunned by their younger professional sisters, and claimed that younger women did not even display unity amongst themselves (Cape Town, 15.5.1995; see also Dorothy Nyembe, quoted in *Tribute*, August 1996: 38).

Divisions exist between ANC women even though the liberation movement had submerged these in the interests of the struggle. For Schreiner (Cape Town, 18.5.1996) this meant that women she was very close to in the struggle now 'seem miles apart'. Not all ANC women represent the same women's constituency, and they might well choose not to represent women at all, giving their allegiance to the party over 'sisterhood' (Gevisser 1994b). Divisions also occurred between women MPs opting to be 'honorary men', and those who cut themselves a niche and work quietly there; and between 'an elite type of strata' of high profiled activist 'movers', and older women who 'have been working forever, and do not get anywhere'. As in every women's movement, there are also those who use gender as an entry point only, leaving it behind once they have achieved their immediate goal (Cape Town, 19.5.1995). It is perhaps not only due to age that most of the older, once prominent women activists did not return to parliament after the 1999 elections.

Dividing lines among ANC women appear negligible, however, compared to the divisions that keep women MPs from different parties at arm's length. The initiative to establish a Women's Parliamentary Group (WPG) which aimed at catering for women parliamentarians of all political parties, did not meet with the support of minority political parties. The leadership of the Nationalist Party (NP) had a problem with the notion altogether and NP women members of parliament have been cautious. They do not have their own NP women's caucus, and are largely left out of the proceedings of the NP general caucus, given that the NP is, according to one member, 'a fairly conservative party on women's issues'. Maybe not without reason, women from minority parties – or their leadership – felt 'the caucus to be high-jacked as an ANC front, and we were just used as pawns or decorations, so that they can say they are impartial' (NP MP, Cape Town, 19.3.1996).

Some ANC members agreed that it would be hard for the WPG to take off, because women from the other parties would have to represent positions mandated by their party, leaving little room for unity. Jenny Schreiner felt that 'class, race and ideological divisions run far deeper than the unity provided by us all being women' (Davis 1995b: 8). Some of these divisions were rather artificial: ANC women were vexed by the NP gender spokesperson Sheila Camerer's criticism of the add-on attitude to gender in a central ANC policy document, even though her criticism matched their own. One ANC MP (Cape Town, 17.5.1995) felt that this was clearly indicative of the fact that 'the anti-party thing is stronger than the pro-gender thing', and that the ANC was unable to argue issues on their merit. Pan African Congress MP Patricia de Lille (Cape Town, 20.3.1996) bemoaned the fact that the women's multiparty caucus was conceptualised as an add-on task, to happen in the lunch hour, rather than being recognised and acknowledged by parliament with allotted time slots and funds.

That women MPs have the ability to meet across party lines was nonetheless exemplified by the call for a crèche at parliament. In a peculiar way the passing of the controversial Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Bill in 1996 showed that women's interests across party lines might be as strong or stronger than those within parties. The ANC had expected its members to toe the party's pro-choice position, since 'a vote of conscience is unacceptable because ANC MPs were elected to Parliament through proportional representation on a party list, and thus must take a party line' (*Mail and Guardian*, 4–10.8.1995). This affected a large number of ANC MPs, men and women, who supported the ANC's commitment to gender equality but had nonetheless to vote

against their 'personal' conscience. ANC MP Jennifer Fergusson abstained from the vote, arousing public criticism from fellow ANC MP Pregs Govender, who publicly challenged Fergusson's qualities as an MP, because she had failed to defend the rights of her constituency (*Mail and Guardian*, 15-21.11.1996). By contrast, NP and IFP women in favour of abortion, who were expected to toe their party's anti-abortion line, saw their conscience represented not in their own vote, but that of the ANC MPs, whose block-vote ensured the passing of the bill. The ANC vote was thus not only in the interests of what Govender called the 'rights of women' who put the MPs into positions of power, but also those of privileged women MPs hailing from the opposition.

The ANC gender policy and the changes effected in parliament benefited the women from the minority parties in other ways. There was a recognition that parliament had greatly improved compared to its forerunners, including the tone in which women were addressed and respected. NP women realised that they had not asserted themselves in a way that the ANC women did, and learned from their example. The NP women's wing, Women's Action, attempted to become more 'political', and both the NP and the IFP started scouting for women candidates, because 'obviously the ANC set the tone by having one third women, so our party structures rushed around desperately to get women' (Cape Town, 17.5.1995). Unlike Afrikaner women with a crippling background in Calvinism, black women expected positions in government. Even the ultra conservative Afrikaner Volksfront suggested in 1994 that a third of their regional candidates should in future be women (Taljaard 1994). The IFP seems to have followed the lead of the ANC when it appointed women to the party structures in parliament. Yet, the 'snowball' effect did not result in any of the opposition parties applying a gender quota in the 1999 elections, with the result that the number of women opposition MPs increased by only one overall.

The tangible progress that women have made in the national parliament has not been so marked in some of the provincial parliaments, or in local government. Only 19 per cent of the councillors were women in the 1996 local government elections, where the ANC had a 50 per cent quota for proportional representation seats, but no policy on ward elections.⁸ A survey concluded that all political parties considered gender as a liability in first-past-the-post ward elections, and suggested that rural women were politically disorganised and lacking resources and moral support (Chan 1996).

PARLIAMENTARIANS, THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND
NATIONAL GENDER MACHINERY

Many of the women parliamentarians, who came from a life of activism, had problems with missing out on their contact with their constituency. Many activists, no matter what their age and education, felt isolated and weary dealing with the slow legal processes where land was 'not just land any more, it's words' (Dorothy Nyembe quoted in Gevisser 1994a), and where their actions showed no immediate results. Many felt as if they had abandoned their people, and that parliament alienated them from the working class and the women's movement. Many were aware that as parliamentarians they needed the support of a strong women's movement to get women's rights on the agenda. For Ginwala (Cape Town, 22.5.1995), who felt strongly about the matter, 'the biggest challenge facing the women's movement is its relationship with the democratic government and women's relationship with politics'. Lacking this connection at the moment, women MPs were, Schreiner believed, 'empowering each other instead of women at the grassroots. It's elitist' (*Mail and Guardian*, 5-11.5.1995).

Part of the problem was that women coming from exile had to rebuild a constituency inside the country, and it was suggested that many of the young professional women were no longer interested in the grassroots. Others believed that many prominent ANC MPs were too preoccupied to keep up contacts in addition to regular parliamentary work schedules: 'They will make good speeches but they are not actually dirtying their hands any more in the daily grind getting women off their backs' (ANC MP, Cape Town, 17.5.1995). Those who tried to keep a foot in civil society found that they not only had to spend extra time and energy, which was not recognised, but that they also had to foot the bill for extra phone-calls, photocopies and other support services.

Most important, perhaps, the 1994 election absorbed women leaders into parliament, and their departure from the grassroots created a vacuum. For Lydia Kompe, ANC MP and leader of the radical Rural Women's Movement, 'on the ground things are just as we left them when we came here'. Even though her constituency was dissatisfied, she had 'to mediate between the needs of my constituency and the realities of government' (Gevisser 1994b). She was one of the many whose voice was lost to rural women and to the WNC of which her organisation was a member.

A related problem was the collective decision in the WNC to deny

executive positions in the Coalition to women who were members of national and provincial parliaments. The result was that the entire executive resigned (Cape Town, 22.5.1995). The reasoning behind the decision was that other women had to be given the opportunity to lead. Instead, it weakened the WNC to the point of collapse. The hope that events around the Beijing UN Conference for Women in 1995 could serve as an entry point for 'the development of a set of basic issues which bring women together across political, religious and social divides' (Baleka Kgositsile, quoted in Speed 1995) did not materialise.

To make matters worse, the ANCWL, for better or worse the home of so many women 'on the ground', suffered both the effects of the national leadership crisis and the vacuum created by local leaders who departed to provincial parliaments and district councils. A 1997 study in rural Northern Province revealed that the ANCWL was conceptualised by many residents as a 'traditional dance group', rather than a political force furthering women's rights. The League branch in one community had not bothered to renew its term of office or formally elect a leader since 1994. Here too, allegations of corruption and mismanagement by self-appointed leaders kept women away. For these rural women, national gender politics was of no immediate relevance, with life instead revolving around the attainment of the most basic needs. Moreover, 'real' political involvement was seen as an inappropriate activity for women, which angered husbands into violence and was better avoided (Mokgope 1998).

The distance that rural women felt from national gender politics was perhaps not surprising. Even though Kompe felt that despite being in parliament she was 'still a rural woman', the Rural Women's Movement might think otherwise (Gevisser 1994b). It has long been calling for the abolition of polygamy and *lobola* or brideprice (*The Star*, 23.2.1994). But the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act, finally passed in 1998, while it granted customary marriage partners equal rights, did not specify the legal future of polygamy or *lobola*, even though these customs were believed to be a cornerstone of women's subordination, particularly but not only in rural areas.

The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), which was established in 1997 under the provisions of the constitution, is independent from but funded by the government. In recognition of the fact that the fruits of democracy had not yet reached the majority of South African women, it pledged to address the concerns of the most disadvantaged women in a spirit of transparency, efficiency and accountability (CGE 1998). The Commission had been established belatedly after wrangling over its

functions had centred on fears of marginalising gender concerns. Some voices in the women's movement rejected the idea of a gender commission entirely, arguing that the Human Rights Commission should be responsible (ANC woman MP, Cape Town 17.5.1995).

The Commission is now part of a 'package' of institutional mechanisms established to oversee gender equality, including the Parliamentary Committee on the Status of Women, the Office of the Status of Women, and the gender desks in ministries. In addition, provincial governments replicate these structures. The mandates and functions of these institutions are meant to cover particular entry points, resulting in complementarity rather than a duplication of functions (United Nations 1998).

The CGE was charged with creating a 'partnership with NGOs' and thus 'to endeavour to bring to the centre the voices and experiences of the marginalised, to become part of, and to inform, the nation-building and transformation agenda of South African society' (CGE 1998). For Mtintso, who headed the commission for a year, it felt like 'they had dumped a big elephant in front of you and said: Here is gender inequality in South Africa. Eat it' (Stucky 1998: 4).

The agenda of the Commission encompassed controversial issues related to women's subordinated status in customary law and tradition that disempowered the majority of South African women, and that were in danger of not being pursued in parliament with as much vigour as women caught in the machinations of 'tradition' might have wished. The Commission was thus intended to represent a new connection between the 'grassroots' and the parliamentarians, remaining 'with the people while being part of the leading force'. Despite limited funds and an initially hostile environment, the CEG managed to do important work, such as coordinating with civil society a close watch on gender aspects of the 1999 election process.

'EATING THE BIG ELEPHANT'

Unlike in any other African country, South African women have come from a life of struggle which has emboldened them to push for gender equality policies within their party and to get a foot into the door of the opportunity that the transition to majority rule constituted. They thus managed to avoid the mistakes of their sisters elsewhere in Africa, and they were included in the decision-making processes in numbers too large to be easily reversed. The 1999 elections brought even more women into both parliament and cabinet posts. But their now close to

equal participation in government has come at the price of weakening the mass-based women's movement that was the driving force behind South African women's move into parliament.

There were a number of reasons for the disorganisation of the women's movement, not least the estrangement between those in power and those 'left behind', which even if born out of circumstances rather than intention, will have to be reversed. Moreover, the success of South African women helped to unwrap the differences between comrades once united in the struggle against apartheid, initially under the banner of 'motherhood' and later in the desire to claim a stake in the new society. Their success has inspired women in other African countries, but it has not inspired a new women's movement in their own country.

This poses a new 'terrain of struggle' to women parliamentarians and the women's movement alike. The vacuum that now exists between South African women and the women parliamentarians who are expected to represent their interests will have to be filled with new issues that have the potential to unify women across the divides created by race, class, religion and party doctrine. The shared concerns of South African women over the escalation of gender violence during 1999 may act as a new rallying point.

Closing the gap also means that national policies will have to be extended and made relevant to the majority of South African women. Only the empowerment of ordinary women will guarantee that all women's voices and priorities, truly representative of South African society, are heard at the national level. It also required women representatives at the national level to vehemently address even issues that do not immediately concern them. For Mtintso (Cape Town, 19.5.1995), now the deputy secretary-general of the ANC, 'the beautiful start was made by the ANC on numbers. The next step is not just to get the numbers but also the quality of the numbers, not just quality in women numbers, quality broadly with women and men.' There is no reason to doubt the ability of the South African people to move another step forward.

NOTES

1. Women occupied 27 per cent of all seats in the National Assembly in 1994. This figure increased to 29.7 per cent (119) in the 1999 elections. The 1994 government started out with two women ministers and three deputies, which in 1999 had increased to eight ministers and eight deputies.

2. References noted by place and date are to interviews.

3. Data compiled by the Inter Parliamentary Union, 10 June 1999.

4. One of the maxims of the struggle was 'liberation before education'.
5. The unit was an initiative by Frene Ginwala, geared towards training women MPs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
6. A small number of women MPs talked about 'adopting a granny' in parliament to help steer them through the institutional maze, but a lack of time prevented their efforts (Interviews, Cape Town, 1995).
7. Jessie Duarte was a member of the Gauteng provincial legislature.
8. Forty per cent of seats were determined by proportional representation, and 60 per cent by first-past-the-post ward candidatures.

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