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FRAGILE UNITIES: CONFRONTING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN.
A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL COALITION IN SOUTH AFRICA

A Research Paper presented by

Susan Hollander-Muter

(South Africa)

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for Obtaining the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Members of the Examining Committee

Ms. L. Keyzers

Ms. B.M. Matlanyane Sexwale

The Hague, December 1994



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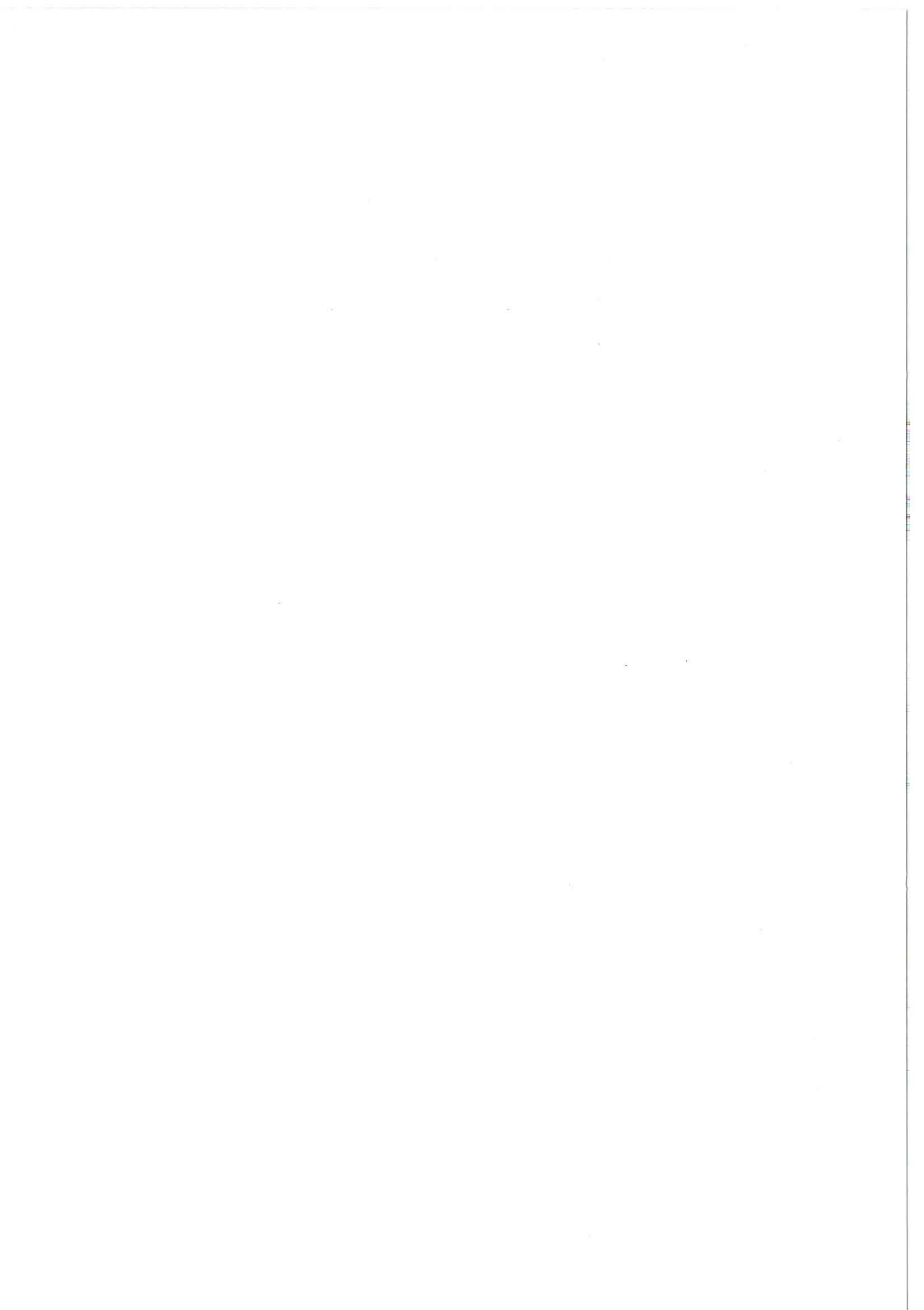
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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The transition period¹ in South Africa was a period of many changes at both the political and social level. The National Party had been forced to unban the liberation movements and organisations, to lift states of emergencies and to slow down its overt and militaristic attack on anti-apartheid organisations. A few years previously, the government had begun a process of social liberalisation, repealing a range of apartheid legislation. There was an intensive negotiations process which discussed the hand over of political power and the creation of an interim constitution. This process was fought at a leadership level behind closed doors, limited to political parties, with the exception of the ANC and the traditional leaders. In its attempts to mobilise and consolidate its power, the ANC attempted to win and maintain the support of a range of constituencies.

The ANC had a broad mass based support which represented a range of interests. There was a continual struggle to be seen to fulfil all these interests. Standing for a non racist, non sexist unitary state, it established itself as a symbol of unity, with a policy of non racialism, the solution to the divisive, exploitative and oppressive system of the apartheid regime. Politically the ANC did not confront the conflicting interests of its members ie the differing class interests, the issue of race relations and tensions or legacies of apartheid. It is argued that non racialism "propergates a culture of not mentioning race which is highly problematic. We are unable to deal with burning issues, and we

¹The transition period refers to the period between the unbanning of various liberation movements on 2 February 1990 to the elections which took place on 27-29 April 1994

can't go forward" (participant in round table discussion, Meintjes, 1993). A few examples of 'burning issues' I would infer would be the discussion of racism within the movement, the effects of living in a racially segregated society, the racial inequalities and tensions that exist within the movement, and in society more generally.

Thus, one can see that the policy of non racialism for example, is a debated one and over the last few years, there have been increasing calls to recognise the different social positions and tensions between the races. This has been one of the more central debates that have taken place within the women's movement(s) and I will be discussing this issue in more detail throughout the paper.

1990 also saw the ANC make a major policy shift in its policy on women in the national liberation struggle. For the first time, the National Executive Committee (NEC) in a 'Statement of the NEC of the ANC on the Emancipation of Women in South Africa' acknowledged that the emancipation of women had to be addressed 'in its own right'.

"It was the first official acceptance of the independent nature of women's liberation. It was also significant in its acknowledgment of the material, cultural and ideological context of gender oppression ..." Albertyn (1990:17).

This shift was partly a response from internal pressure within the organisation and a response to changes in the political context.

These changes in the political context allowed for more political debate on a range of issues, including that of the 'women's question' in South Africa. The return of exiles also introduced a range of experiences and political understandings into the debates of the existing women's movements(s) in South Africa. There was an urgency to the discussions as there was a strong sense of decisions being made in the negotiations process, that would determine the

future of South Africa, and a need to ensure that women's interests would be included. Women were concerned that the gains that had been won during the liberation struggle should not be lost, and in fact much work had to be done to address the issue of gender inequalities in a post-apartheid South Africa. These were discussed within political organisations and non-governmental organisations, they were the subject of volumes of research and articles by intellectuals, and spawned a range of conferences and workshops around the position of women in a new South Africa. Important issues concerned what national machinery should be created to best facilitate a gender sensitive and representative government in a post apartheid era, of putting women on the agenda in the negotiations process and within the constitution (Albertyn, 1994). Generally, there has been an increased awareness and consciousness of the need to address women's oppression and subordination; and women have developed a stronger voice within the political parties and within the trade unions. There has also been a growing voice of predominantly black women calling for a recognition of the differences in interests and power between women (Mazibuko, 1993).

One cannot write of a women's movement in South Africa because there was and is not one united women's movement in the country. As a result of apartheid, different groups of women had different issues around which they mobilised, had different views on what the problems were that women faced and how to solve them. Feminism in South Africa has a strong tint of western imperialism, and was (is) seen to represent the interests and experiences of white, middle class women. Not all white women would call themselves feminist, however, it was mostly white women who called themselves feminist, with many black women refusing the label. This situation is changing, with a growing number of black women challenging these definitions of feminism while claiming the label. Many of these women would be critical of white feminists and 'white feminism'

(Aziz, 1992)² and would see the need for creating feminist theories that reflect the lives and realities of the majority of women in the country³.

Debate and discussions took place in already established forums. These were progressive journals, women's studies departments and universities generally, within organisations and NGOs, in conferences, workshops. Increasingly the criticism has been raised, predominantly by black women, of white domination of academia and leadership positions, of white interpretation of black women's experiences, of white women's control of knowledge and knowledge production. This has resulted in black women challenging the definitions of feminism, of feminist theory. This also raises serious problems with the conceptualisation of a political struggle based on the principles of non racialism. These debates are of particular importance if one considers the realities of the South African social and political system and society, with the history of apartheid leaving a legacy of institutionalised racism, sexism and classism.

1.2. THE CALL FOR A WOMEN'S CHARTER

The ANC's 1990 'Statement on the Emancipation of Women' called for women, particularly the ANC Women's League, to take the lead in the creation of a non sexist South Africa. An important part of doing this was to initiate the debate on the need for a Charter for Women's Rights which could be mobilised through a broad based coalition of women's organisations. The ANC saw the need for a Charter so that women could "in their own voice ... define the

²This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

³By focusing my discussion on who does or does not label themselves as feminist, I do not intend to view it as being superior to any other label that women may choose to describe themselves.

issues of greatest concern to them and establish procedures for ensuring that the rights claimed are made effective" (Statement of the ANC NEC, 1990). The Charter was envisioned to draw "millions of women directly in the process of determining how their rights would be protected in a new legal and constitutional order" (Statement of the ANC NEC, 1990).

The Women's National Coalition (WNC) was launched in April, 1992 with a membership of 70 national organisations and eight regional coalitions. Co-convenor, Frene Ginwala stated that the aims and the objectives of the WNC were:

" ... to co-ordinate a national campaign for the development and education of women, which will:

1. Acquire and disseminate information about women's needs and aspirations;
2. Unify women in formulating and adopting a Charter or other document and entrench equality in the Constitution of South Africa"

(Ginwala, 1994).

Over the next two years, the WNC's membership grew to 92 national organisations and thirteen regional coalitions (Albertyn, 1992).

In both 1. and 2. above, the idea of 'women's rights as human rights' was an important part of the campaign. Firstly, rights were seen as tools around which women could organise in formulating and adopting a Charter, and secondly as legal and constitutional guarantees that would help to ensure equality for women in the interim constitution of a new South Africa (Albertyn, 1994). The Women's National Coalition was conceptualised to be part of a process that would develop a women's movement in South Africa. A process that would draw women together around the need to protect women's rights in the constitution beyond a mere recognition of formal equality ie to recognise the gendered interests in society. Although each organisation had differing understandings of what this would mean in practise, there was that basis recognition of

this commonality. In the strategising and discussion documents, mostly written by Frene Ginwala, there is a call to recognise the 'fragile unity' that exists between women in the WNC. There is an acknowledgement of our political differences and of a need for women to be tolerant and flexible with each other. There was a recognition of the impossibility of an automatic or natural sisterhood between women, and an acknowledgment of the divisions, and legacy of distrust and suspicion between women. The argument was 'Let us agree to differ and work together on issues of agreement and protect our 'fragile unity'.

1.3. WHY A WOMEN'S CHARTER?

The Women's Charter was seen to be part of 'a package' that encompasses a number of strategies to ensure effective equality for women. Women's oppression is not a matter that can simply be legislated away. It is entrenched within society and its institutions, and it is reflected in its economic, social and political practises. It is argued by the WNC that the very organisation and structure of South African society is premised on male dominance and female subordination and as a result is unable to deliver equality for women⁴. Even if we do have gender clauses in our interim Constitution and Bill of Rights, it will be a struggle for women to claim and exercise their rights as citizens offered by these laws and regulations because of the structured subordination of women in society. A document like the Women's Charter is thus required to deal with this structured subordination by going into the specific details of what would be required to ensure that women can claim and exercise their rights as outlined in the constitution and the Bill of Rights. For example the Bill of Rights does not include social and economic rights (second generation rights) whereas most of the issues identified by women

⁴I would have added white dominance and the difficulties that this poses for proposing a political document that would effectively outline what is required to acknowledge the different interests between women.

for inclusion in the Women's Charter fall within this category (Ginwala, 1994).

1.4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Working on similar principles to that of non racialism of the ANC, the Women's National Coalition believed that it was too politically explosive to confront women's differences in terms of their conflicting class interests, racial inequalities and discrimination, heterosexism etc. The time period was short and the political stakes were high and confronting these differences would more than likely divert the energies of the WNC from affecting the political process. They chose not to confront the differences between women, to focus on the issues that would divide us. Rather, as has been discussed above, there was a focus on the need for a 'fragile unity' in our fight as women against our common political exclusion. The WNC thus attempted to sidestep the differences between women, the general power inequalities, and in particular the racism, and the classism within the women's movement(s).

Historically, the dominant analysis of the oppression of women, emerging predominantly from white, middle class, educated women in Europe and the United States, has also not confronted the differences in power between women. For many years, these theorists influenced and formed the framework within which feminists (also predominantly white) in South Africa discussed and debated. Depending on their analysis, feminists have mainly categorised their differences between them as liberal, radical and socialist feminisms. There are significant differences within each of these groups, however, what they broadly have in common is an identification of the oppression of women as being primarily located within the unequal gendered relations in society, particularly within the family. They also advanced a notion of patriarchy which would account for the universal subordination and oppression of women.

The power of naming and creating knowledge that comes with the privileges implicit with these group identities, allowed this group of women to universalise their experience and argue that universally women have a common subordination and identity, and a common political agenda of eradicating patriarchy. These beliefs are encompassed in popular slogans emphasising the 'sisterhood' of women eg 'sisterhood is global'. In this way they made their experiences equal what it means to be a women, as a norm against which everything else is measured.

In the last decade, these analyses have been critiqued by groups of women who felt that the present analysis and subsequent strategies adopted by the women's movement, did not reflect their experiences, and hence were often marginalised or made invisible in the analysis and resulting programmes adopted by the women's movement. These responses were coming from predominantly third world women, lesbians, other-abled women, young and old women (these groups are not mutually exclusive and there are overlaps between them). The level of awareness, organisation, public profile and challenge to the dominant understanding of women's oppression presented by these 'marginalised' groups varies within and between each country. This has generally been theorised and addressed as the 'difference debate'.

An understanding of difference would lead one to challenge the existence of a universal category of 'women' (both politically and theoretically). It is argued that one's gender identity cannot exist independently of one's racial, ethnic, class, religious and various other affiliations. One is never simply a woman, but always a white woman, or a working class woman, for example. Thus one has to contextualise an analysis of women's oppression and subordination within its particular set of social relations. As Mohanty (1991) argues, what then becomes important are "the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation" which position us as 'women'.

1.4. a) Power Imbalances

These differences are not simply indications of diversity, but are also indications of different social and structural privileges, with the resulting power differentials being vested in these differences. One of the main problems with the concept of difference is that one may speak of class, gender and race as 'sites of difference', without at the same time recognising that these sites of difference are also 'sites of power' (Barrett, 1987). Mohanty points out the need for us to recognise these as relations of power, which "anchor the common differences between and among the feminist politics of different constituencies of women and men" (Mohanty, 1991:13). These relations of power are not binary oppositions with white women having power over black women, for example. She suggests that one needs to be conscious of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while at the same time being aware of the capacity to resist, and for individual and groups of women to be accorded an agency. In this way, we are aware that not all women will respond in the same way to a common situation, and more importantly, that women do have power and agency to resist. Thus relations of power are a fluid, contested terrain. A useful concept to use with regard to a discussion on power is 'relations of ruling' (Dorothy Smith, 1987 cited in Mohanty, 1991). What it offers is that it looks at the multiple intersections of power between 'ruler' and 'ruled' and addresses the actual processes or form of ruling.

1.4. b) Multiple and shifting identities

The above discussions challenge the notion of static and homogenous groups. Instead, one must begin to think of an individual subject, or social agent as constituting a variety of 'subject positions' that are not fixed. Each woman's social and individual identity is a 'mediated relationship' between collective and individual differences. As women, we all have multiple identities constructed along and between the lines of difference. These do not merely co-

exist with each other but at various times and within different contexts, one's identity shifts, with each identity having different ratios of power, acceptance and legitimacy to other people's shifting identities. These multiple and shifting identities are produced and reproduced within social relations of 'race', gender, class and sexuality. One has to examine these 'categories' or interweaving of various identities as experienced at the level of processes. The boundaries and the meanings of these differences are constructed in particular historical contexts, and can and do transform themselves. Thus, we should be cautious about creating fixed categories of difference (Brah, 1992).

1.4. c) Dangers of relativism

The recognition that there is no single category of 'woman' has led some theorists and activists to conclude that a political project for the emancipation of women cannot exist. This argument assumes that too many contradictions exist between women, with these undercutting any possibility of women working together without some women being dominated or some aspect of particular women's experiences being ignored.

"Feminism, like any other politics, has always implied a banding together, a movement based on the solidarity and sisterhood of women, who are linked by perhaps very little else than their sameness and 'common cause' as women. If this sameness itself is challenged then the idea of political community built around women, ..., collapses (Soper, 1990 quoted in Mouffe, 1992:381).

Thus, one may ask, "What kind of group are women, when their occupational, social and other loyalties are varied, when not all women view 'women's' interests or what constitutes sex discrimination the same way?" (Cott, 1990 cited in Hirsch & Keller, 1990:371). From this perspective, both the group 'women' and the notion of what constitutes 'interests' splinters across economic, class and racial divisions (Hirsch & Keller, 1990).

However, in practically every country, we have seen the existence of women mobilising and organising, despite these post modernist claims. In fact, feminist politics should not be understood as a separate form of politics, but rather the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands (Mouffe, 1992). Thus it would concern itself with the struggle against the multiple ways in which the category 'woman' is constructed in subordination. Mouffe and Laclau (1985) argue for the need to establish a 'chain of equivalence' among the different democratic struggles so as to create common links and struggles between the demands of all women, black people, workers, gays and other social movements for change. Thus, denying the existence of a necessary link between subject positions does not mean that there are not efforts to establish links. There is a need to create historical, contingent and variable link between the various subject positions.

1.5. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The above considerations of 'fragile unity' within the WNC on a conceptual and strategic level have led to the formulation of the following sets of questions to be investigated within this paper. These will provide a deeper understanding and increase our abilities to further strategise on questions of constructing inclusive and representative feminist theories and practises within South Africa.

1. How does an understanding of the differences between women affect political theory and political practise?
2. To investigate what has been the nature of the difference debates within South Africa?
3. a) To investigate how differences amongst women who were involved in the Women's National Coalition affected the basis on which women came together, ie to explore the

conceptualisation of 'fragile unity' between women.

b) As a result of the 'differences' between women resulting in unequal relations of power, to investigate the processes of inclusion and exclusion of interests between women within the WNC.

4. To investigate how the above processes impacted on the content of the Women's Charter, particularly the WNC's use of a rights framework and their conceptualisation of effective equality. It also raises the question of whether aspirational documents for women necessarily have to sacrifice an acknowledgment of unequal power relations between women?

5. a) To investigate coalition politics.

b) To explore the development of a strategic framework which addresses the possibilities of a coalition politics based on differences.

c) To explore the implications of the above for coalition politics between women in South Africa.

1.6. METHODOLOGY

Harding (1987) defines methodology as "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding, 1987:3). The methodology which I employ within this paper is a feminist one. In particular, it is an understanding of feminism that begins with the assumption of differences between women, in this way breaking down the universal and homogenous category of women. I will outline some of the characteristics that Harding (1987) proposes as distinctive to a feminist methodology.

Traditional social science has generally begun its analysis and asked the questions about life that appear problematic from the social experiences and perspectives of white, western, middle class, heterosexual men. One distinctive feature of a feminist methodology is that it is women's experiences and perspectives that

inform the kinds of problems and areas of study that are defined. Thus women are seen as an empirical and theoretical resource. However, it is women's experiences and problems, in the plural, that concern us. Women's experiences differ depending on their class, race, culture, sexual preference and a variety of other social divisions. Thus, one would be concerned with the moving away from notions of women's sameness and to explore a feminist methodology informed by a framework of difference.

A second feature of feminist methodology is that it sees its role specifically to answer questions for women. In this way, the purpose of research and analysis does not become separated from the origins of the research problems (the first feature). Thus, we can see that feminist methodology does not attempt to arrive at claims of pure truth. Rather it addresses questions of how to address subordination and domination in all its forms ie of how to change and challenge concrete conditions. Thus, a feminist research methodology originates from women's experiences and needs in political struggles. It also uses these experiences as indicators of the 'reality' against which hypotheses are tested.

A third feature of a feminist methodology is that of locating the researcher within the research process. Placing a researcher's beliefs, assumptions, behaviours, race, class and gender are an integral part of the methodological process. In this way researchers become real, historically located people who state their framework and how this has affected and interacts with the issues at hand. This 'subjective' element of the methodology then becomes part of the process which can be 'evaluated'. This kind of relationship between researcher and the research area is a reflexive process. An awareness of this results in an increased awareness of the positionality of the researcher's perspectives.

Part of the motivation for writing this thesis was to continue the process of engaging with the challenges posed by predominantly

black women at the various conferences, workshops and organisational campaigns in South Africa of the need to address racial domination, and racial experiences. Within this process, I would need to confront the privilege of my position in South Africa as a white, middle class women, to examine the 'racialness' of white experience (Frankenburg, 1993) in my engagement with challenging subordination experienced on the basis of one's race, class, gender, sexual preference and so on. I would look at the many ways I am both privileged and disadvantaged, within a transformatory project, within both the social relations and structures of society. Within this paper, I have drawn on my own experience, understanding and engagement with these debates within the various organisations in which I have been active, the personal discussions and debates and a range of literature.

As mentioned above, the questions that I would like to raise are what have been the implications of not taking differences between women into account in South Africa? Is there a possibility for coalition work between women in South Africa? I take the case of the Women's National Coalition as it was an organisation that played a central role in the transition period for women in South Africa. Due to the nature of the organisation, the WNC contains the conflicts and social divisions within society. The campaign raised issues that I am raising here. Although I discuss the questions within the context of the WNC, the general debates and organisational questions are ones which can be applied more broadly.

I would like to explore on what basis should women work together in their political programmes and campaigns? What do we need to do to confront differences between women and what are some of the ways these can be done? In particular how do we deal with issues of racism and racial inequalities? As a result of the non racial policies of the national liberation movement and the prevalence of class based analysis within the left, it is not a subject that we

discuss easily. We do not have a culture of publicly talking about race, and we especially shy away from addressing it organisationally. However, as a result of apartheid, it is one of the major determinants of our lives as South Africans. Within this paper, I want to raise the need to find ways to bring the discussions within which we are all engaged in the various 'corridors', and behind closed doors, out into the open. In particular, we need to explore the roles and responsibilities of women from the various 'racial' groupings.

The questions are complicated because I am aware that racial divisions are themselves divided by one's gender, class, sexual preference and on a variety of other axes. In South Africa there has also been a convergence between race and class divisions which often leads people to subsume black and working class, and white and middle class. However, the realities and distinct position of black, middle class women and white, working class women need to be explored as well, and how they are divided further along other social differences. In addition, we need to start seriously charting how we engage with issues of anti racism which do not polarise the discussion into white and black, which looks at the possibilities of forming what Mohanty (1991) calls 'imagined communities' of struggle which extend beyond biological and cultural delineations to ones where we form like minded groupings based on political connections. Within this process, it is important to recognise the need for marginalised groupings of women, for example black women and lesbians to form separate organisations to confront their particular oppressions. This should be done in such a way as to link the oppressions of racism and heterosexism to those experienced by other social groupings.

The sources that I consulted in exploring the above questions ranged from minutes of national meetings and workshops of the WNC, and various discussion documents written by women involved within the process. I also conducted a series of interviews with women

activists and academics in Johannesburg and Cape Town, who were either active in the WNC, in the women's movement(s) or the more general progressive movement in South Africa. The women interviewed do not form a representative sample of the WNC. However, I did attempt to ensure a spread of racial groupings, a range of opinions held on the WNC, women from different class positions, differing sexual preferences and political affiliations. I approached them as a member of the progressive women's movement(s), as a white woman concerned with addressing the issues that have been raised while working within, and observing the activities of the WNC. The identities of the women shall remain anonymous. This provided the scope for women to talk more freely, particularly when it came to discussions which centred around racial tension and conflict. The limitation of this is that the locations of the various sources will not be revealed to the reader. Instead the discussions are interpreted and analysed by myself, supplemented by own analysis developed during my involvement in the progressive women's movement(s) and a range of secondary material.

1.7. ORGANISATION OF THE PAPER

Thus, I have explained why I think it is necessary to challenge the assumptions under which the WNC organises women, particularly the notion of creating a unity between women, however fragile. In this chapter I have presented the conceptual and strategic background against which I have raised my research questions. In Chapter Two, I will create an analytical framework within which to place a discussion on the concept of 'differences' between women, and the notion of effective equality for women. In Chapter Three, I will show how the power inequalities between women as a result of their 'differences', led to processes of exclusion and inclusion of interests of different groups of women within the WNC. In Chapter Four, this will be taken further to show how this impacted on the 'product' of the campaign, the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, and resulted in shortcomings in the conceptualisation of effective equality for women. In Chapter Five, I will explore what

some of the implications for our political practises and theories will be when we acknowledge the differences between women, particularly for coalition politics.

CHAPTER TWO: Creating an analytical framework

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Within this chapter I will be exploring the conceptualisation of effective equality within the WNC. The shortcomings of the liberal conception of equality are outlined, and I will explore the limitations within its assumptions and the alternative offered of effective equality. An important part of this critique is the acceptance of the need to move away from notions of sameness when talking about equality between different groups. I will also outline how notions of sexual difference have been challenged further by groups of women who have felt excluded from the prevailing feminist theories and practises. I will explore how within South Africa, differences between women have become an important area of debate, particularly the issue of racial differences and inequalities. Thus, I will conceptualise what we talk about when we speak of 'differences' between women, both within South Africa and more generally. To prepare for a discussion of the WNC, I will conceptualise what coalitions are all about and begin the discussion of how we approach coalition work.

2.2. EQUALITY

The WNC examined the particular position of women within the debates that were taking place in the country around equality, democracy and human rights. The country was in the throes of defining a future dispensation. For the first time we saw the extension of the political franchise and the definition of citizenship in a new South Africa to include the majority of people in South Africa.

"In establishing a legal framework for a democratic state committed to human rights, the interim constitution makes a distinct break from the apartheid past and affirms the principles of democracy and equality developed over many years of struggle" (Albertyn, 1990:1).

The principles of liberal democracy are enshrined within the

constitution and form the framework for any challenges from excluded interests.

Contemporary notions of equality developed out of 17 Century liberalism and the Enlightenment. It arose as a response to and rejection of a way of life that was built on the recognition and enforcement of unequal statuses, powers and qualities. The claim for equality in liberalism is grounded in a rejection of 'natural' authority based on difference and on the assertion of the existence of a fundamental human sameness (Flax, 1992). It has tended to identify the abstract individual and impartiality as crucial points of departure. This abstraction from the situation generates a dichotomy between universal and particular, public and private, reason and passion. This corresponds to the Enlightenment ideal of the public realm of politics where one could attain the 'universality of a general will' and which leaves differences, particularity and the body behind in the private realm of the family (Young, 1990).

Equality within liberalism has been defined as 'equal opportunities before the law' and 'equal treatment by the law' ie political and legal equality. Liberals are said to reduce the dreams of equality to the formalities of equal rights. Thus, we can see that liberalism has distinguished between the abstraction of the individual and the living realities of actual people ie as citizens we should be treated the same, whatever the differences between us. However, this is a pointless argument as the equal right to vote cannot guarantee an equal distribution of power because as Phillips (1993) points out, access to political influence is shaped by the distribution of wealth. In addition, the right to equal treatment before the law will not translate into legal equality, "for the laws incorporate the privileges of property, while those with money can ensure more favourable terms" (Phillips, 1993:39). In addition, the abstract rational individual was in fact based on the needs and life experience of a masculine individual. When women and men are

treated the same, it effectively means women being treated as if they were men. This would not reflect their particular experiences and needs, and they would be disadvantaged.

Thus, the social divisions and inequalities structured along race, class, and gender lines will all negate the liberal dream of political equality. In other words it does not take cognisance of the social inequalities and unjust nature of society, of the existence of exploitation and oppression. All those with needs that are different to that of straight, white men, would as a result be structurally unable to benefit from such provisions. Thus, when equality is theorised through concepts which presume sameness, it ends up favouring those who most fit, (heterosexuals, whites, men) and excluding persons associated with the 'body and feeling' - especially women and black people. (Phillips, 1993; Young, 1990).

This has led a range of people to posit alternatives to formal equality. The moment that one acknowledges the fact that all are not 'equal before the law', one moves away from notions of sameness to a recognition that people are different from each other. As a result people need differential treatment before the law. Then one would begin talking about notions of 'relative' equality, 'substantive' equality or in the case of the WNC, 'effective' equality.

The WNC confined itself to discussions on sexual difference, and debated what it required to achieve equality for women within a new South Africa. The Coalition was organising itself, and placing itself within a framework of attempting to unify women in South Africa around women's common disadvantage in relation to a male dominated patriarchal society. They rallied around notions of effective equality with men within a new South Africa. It was from this position that it was contesting the right to be active citizens, and claim their 'equal' share within a new South Africa.

Women came together around the need to protect women's rights in the constitution beyond the mere recognition of formal equality. ie they had to recognise the relative disadvantage of women and take note of women's particular needs and demands, and of the need for the effective participation of women in shaping their lives. Thus, women organised and spoke about the need for an understanding of equality that would take account of the differences between women and men, and of the need for affirmative action. By calling for 'effective equality', the WNC was employing a conception of equality that would extend beyond the recognition of formal political rights (first generation rights), to include the social and economic rights of women (second and third generation rights).

However, throughout the campaign, there has been a demand that we do not just recognise sexual differences in South Africa, but recognise that we are coming out of an apartheid era, and that socially South Africa is still characterised by racial oppression and discrimination, class privilege and exploitation, heterosexism and gendered subordination and oppression. There was a demand to recognise that different groups of women have had different access to political power and resources, and had differing class interests, for example, and that these needed to be recognised and taken into account in both how we conceptualised the campaign and the political programme adopted. What was being contested was the differing powers and hierarchies between different groups of women, issues of legitimacy and representation; and of democracy and participation. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Debates such as the ones taking place in South Africa are occurring internationally and challenge the fundamental assumptions upon which feminism was based. This has resulted in a host of writings and discussions on its implications for feminism, and for the most extreme, in a questioning of the category of 'woman' and of a possible political project for women.

2.3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Currently in South Africa, the difference debate is a central issue within particular sections of the women's movement. In the last few years, questions about difference and representation have been raised in feminist literature, conferences, workshops, meetings and organisational campaigns. Lewis and Hendricks write that in South Africa the difference debate has usually taken the form of

"black women questioning their representation by white feminists, the white monopolisation of academic, research and financial resources and the domination of whites in feminist politics" (1994:62).

This has also resulted in a critique of the dominant tradition of non-racial politics as espoused by the ANC and of 'neo marxist revisionism'.

'Traditionally' , difference was conceptualised and debated within the context of sexual differences. Apart from providing the means with which to critique the androcentric basis of society, it also was one side to an important debate between the need for women to fight for 'equality' ie to be treated the same as men, or to fight for the differential treatment of women. As discussed earlier, one can see that the WNC would align itself more closely with the latter practise in their call for 'effective' equality. However, the debate takes place within a framework where they prioritised the sexual differences between women and men. Thus, at times the categories of 'women' and 'men' are seen as homogeneous (Barrett, 1987) in the context of their common goal. These differences have become a site of struggle within the WNC and the women's movement(s) more generally. However, before we go any further, I think it is important to conceptualise what we mean when we speak of differences between women. It is a term that has been loosely bandied around, but which has much significance - both theoretically and politically.

2.4. WHAT IS THE 'DIFFERENCE'?

In the next section I draw heavily on Brah's (1993) conceptualisation of difference. At the most general level, Brah writes that difference

"may be construed as a social relation constructed within systems of power underlying structures of class, racism, gender and sexuality, my emphasis" (1993:30).

At this level, one would be concerned with the ways in which one's social position is determined by the social relations and the system governing society. This level is extremely important because it impacts on shaping our life chances (Brah, 1993). Talking about difference as a social relation ensures that we see our social position being shaped by the broad parameters set by the social structures of a particular socio-historical context, thus it is not reductionist or ahistorical. It also draws our attention to the fact that differences between women are not static, but changing along with the social relations and context within a particular country. Brah (1993) makes the important distinction between difference as a process of differentiation which would draw out the social experience of the group, as compared with where one's difference becomes the means by which one is subordinated. This allows us to make the connection that one's differences need not necessarily lead to hierarchical divisions between women (this will be discussed in more detail below) and that our experience of difference is not just in terms of oppression and exploitation. Rather it allows us to talk about what we find positive in our various group identities, not just oppressive (Brah, 1993). This affirmation of our differences, and our enjoyment of them are an important component that often gets forgotten, but which provides much potential for challenging the placing of particular identities and social practises as the norm.

Difference is also conceptualised at the level of **experiential diversity**. Barrett (1987) argues that there is now a widespread recognition of both class and race as major differences between

women. In addition, people are also speaking of differences where one's "nation, region and ethnicity, as well as age, sexual orientation, disability and religion are being pressed as important and politically salient forms of experiential diversity" (Barrett, 1987:50). The idea that difference justifies domination is deeply embedded within our societies, and is often defended as natural. When power hierarchies are accepted as inevitable, people can be manipulated out of fear that those who are different from them are a threat to their position (Bunch, 1990). To avoid seeing groups as static and solid groupings, Brah (1993:30) argues that we should focus on the many "different manifestations of ideological and institutional practises in our everyday life". It is these everyday practises (of claiming difference and having it imposed on one) which make up our life experience, and form the matrix within which we make and remake our group, as well as individual histories.

However, we need to make a distinction between the 'difference' which constitute our group experiences and 'difference' which constitutes our personal experiences. Although these two levels are mutually interdependent, they cannot be 'read off from each other'. Our personal experiences are 'mediated relationships' between our location and particular interactions within the social relations and institutions in a particular society. Thus, how we perceive and understand our experience may vary enormously. We will have common group histories and shared experiences which will contain their own measure of contradictions, however, there is no necessary simple one-to-one correspondence between our personal experiences and collective experiences (Brah, 1993).

Thus when we talk about differences between women we need to make a distinction between 'black' and 'white' women as

"historically contingent and analytical categories constructed within and referring to specific historical processes of colonialism, imperialism and anti-Black racism, and black and white women as individuals. Whilst

the former describes a social division, the latter draws our attention to human subjects as complex beings who are sites of multiple contradictions, and whose everyday praxis may reinforce or undermine social divisions" (Brah, 1993:30).

Brah moves us away from an essentialism by distinguishing between the institutional practises of domination, and how individuals experience and respond to their social location - both individually and collectively.

THE APARTHEID LEGACY

In South Africa the discussion has been racially polarised with only a few white women publicly acknowledging the central thrust of the arguments put forward by black women. Some white women have engaged with the debates and begun the process of examining their own racial privilege, however, more often than not, it has resulted in many conversations behind closed doors amongst all groups of women, with growing levels of tension. Thus, very little organisational or co-ordinated response to the debates has taken place within the women's movement(s) so far. At one level, one could argue that at this stage the debate on differences between women is relatively new. However, Rohina - a participant in a round table discussion on difference makes the point that "the debate began a long time ago, when we had differential laws treating people differently, ... Apartheid was one way of saying we are all different" (Meintjes, 1993:40).

The Nationalist Party government viciously enforced its system of racial definition and boundaries and "elevated the concept of race to the centre of their conceptual universe and ... constructed a system that (like patriarchy) permeated all aspects of private (and public) life" (Berger, 1992:293). Although racial groupings are themselves constructed along various lines of differences, it is clear that as a result of apartheid there are clear racial tensions

and inequalities between women in South Africa. As race is a social construction, it is important to outline more clearly what it is that I am referring to when discussing issues of race, and racism.

Race, ethnicity and racism

"If you unpack race too much, it will become meaningless. In the transition it will be important for us to deal with race in the way people experienced it, and come to a realistic portrayal of what it really means" (participant in round table discussion, Meintjes, 1993:41).

Maynard (1994) argues that it has long been accepted that races do not exist in any scientific sense. However, within societies, people do act as if 'race' is a fixed objective category and Anthias (1990) points out that it has real effects, both in material and representational terms. Thus, it is important to examine the social construction of race, how it arrives at a particular meaning according to time, place and circumstance. Afshar and Maynard point out that

"The effects of historical legacy, political context, culture and variables such as class and generation all combine to influence perceptions of what counts as 'white' and 'non white' (sic), and when and where 'non-white' (sic) is seen as 'black'" (1992:2).

Donald and Rattansi take this further when they suggest that we need "to examine how racial logics and racial frames of reference are articulated and deployed, and with what consequences" (1992:1). This allows us to understand and comprehend the way in which various categories of race are constructed and materially located in a particular society over time.

The apartheid government's grand plan created four broad racial categories - african, asian, coloured and white. The white minority government further divided society up into various 'ethnic' groups

in its system of 'divide and rule', maintaining that there was no one dominant group in South Africa as we all had distinct cultures which had to be preserved. It fostered political tension and maintained the conflictual and tense relationships between the various ethnic groups. The history of apartheid capitalism has left a legacy of institutionalised racism, ethnicism, sexism, heterosexism and ageism which is reflected in the institutions and social relations of South Africa.

Thus, the position and status of a woman in South Africa is interwoven within social divisions of race, class, age, sexual preference. Considerations of the differences between women would include an analysis of the historical location of women in South Africa, and how different groups and individuals have constructed their 'mediated relationships'. Lewis argues that race is a central definer of one's life, and calls for a recognition that "although new power structures will develop in the future, the politics of race is presently salient" (1994:65).

As I mentioned earlier, these differences are not just an acknowledgment of diversity, but we also need to examine the "mechanisms and processes through which distinct and specific forms of subordination are brought about" (Maynard, 1994:10). We need to examine the conditions that give some forms of 'difference' value and power over others. In the context of a discussion on 'race' and ethnicity, we need to be aware of issues of racism, racial domination and white supremacy.

Audre Lorde (1992:48) defines racism as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance". This is unpacked by an argument that maintains that any racism relies on two assumptions: the first is that different races exist in the world and secondly that these races exist in a hierarchy of inferiority and superiority. Racism therefore requires a perspective of deviance which implicitly or explicitly, speaks

from the position of the white dominant group. A racist perspective therefore would include the failure to own the particularity of whiteness and the failure to own that in a racist context, a 'white' voice stands in a relationship of authority to a 'black' voice. In this way, when one sees 'deviance' instead of difference, one takes on the experience of the dominant group as the implicit or explicit standard or norm (Aziz, 1992).

White feminism and black feminism

In the early 1990s in South Africa, we have seen the academic versus activist debates which broaden into issues of representation generally (see Hassim and Walker, 1993; Lewis, 1993 and Fester, 1993). Black women have challenged their representation by white feminists, and the white monopolisation of academic, research and financial resources (Lewis, 1994). There has been a bid for a feminism that 'sees' agency and struggle explicitly within black women's lives (Aziz, 1992). In the discussions within the women's movement(s) in South Africa, the debate has been framed in such a way as to make it seem that white feminists are the adversary. This has resulted in many white women being defensive and guilty, with heated denials and emotionally charged confrontations. Aziz (1992:296) attempts to shift these debates by saying that the adversary is in fact white feminism. She does not mean that this is any feminism that may be proposed by white feminists, rather it is any feminism which comes from a white perspective, and which universalises it. It is not a coherent and homogenous body of thought that consciously feeds off racist intentions. Rather it is a feminism that fails to consider the wider social and political context of power in which these feminist analyses take place. Within this framework, white women do not recognise their own white particularity which masks the fact that whiteness is every bit a part of the workings of racism, for example, as is blackness.

Although few black women in South Africa would identify as feminist, Lewis (1994) argues that the mood and debates which have

recently surfaced in the women's movement(s) are reflective of a Black feminism. This would include black women's reactions to male dominance in racial struggles as well as the dominance of white women in the feminist movement(s), with black women condemning the explicit and indirect ways in which they are marginalised and objectified by 'mainstream' feminists (1994:66). Thus, it is making the point that black women need to be seen as social subjects and agents, not as victims (Aziz, 1992:292).

Solidarity and alliances

It has been put forward that feminists should abandon the notion that all women automatically have common interests (and that women and men necessarily have oppositional interests). Rather common interests between women will only emerge as a result of a

"common appropriation of historical experiences of oppression, subordination and exploitation through the political practise of solidarity, alliance and resistance" (Aziz, 1992:297).

The need for a politics of solidarity between women, and how to use this in confronting the politics of difference will be explore more fully in Chapter Five.

IN COLLUSION, IN COALITION, IN COLLISION¹

Solidarity politics between women can be very effective within coalitions. It is through coalitions that we may effectively establish 'democratic chains of equivalence' (Mouffe, 1992) and work together for the 'vanishing point' of the 'common good'. However, our starting point of working together should be to acknowledge the differences between us as women, and to develop a political practise which incorporates the use of coalitions based upon these differences. This would allow for organisations to work on their particular programmes, as well as co-ordinated programmes based upon areas of co-operation (hooks, 1991). Coalitions have

¹This title is from Anzaldua, (1990).

traditionally referred to

"groups or individuals that have come together around a particular goal (for a limited period). These groups operate autonomously and are usually not connected with each other; and most organisations also have their own particular different agendas" (Albrecht and Brewer, 1990:3).

A range of issues spring to mind when one thinks of groups coming together from different backgrounds, such as who sets the agenda? what are the different skills that are being brought to the table? what different versions of social change are there? Another important issue to consider is the power differences between groups and within groups. In societies which are divided by race, class, gender and various other social divisions, those in the dominant positions wield a degree of systemic and individual power. (Albrecht and Brewer, 1990). In this way we can see how the socio-political context within and outside the coalition both moulds and mirrors its development (West, 1990).

When looking at what coalition work is really all about, Anzaldua argues that we should remember that "coalition work attempts to balance power relations and undermine and subvert the system of domination-subordination ... " (1990:224). Thus, we should engage in a two pronged strategy of transformation: effecting change in the institutions of society, forming alliances with various groupings, while recognising and working with our differences between us. We need to actively confront issues around power and privilege, and the various means through which we both dominate and are dominated (Anzaldua, 1990). This challenges the idea that feminism is a vision for women only, and one becomes aware of the need for a feminist power base that can transform social relations, addressing both women and men within the framework of 'feminist' principles in our attempts to build democratic and participatory societies (Carillo, 1988). It also reinforces the political

necessity for us to begin to see coalitions and more longer term alliances as essential for our political survival. Coalitions which would allow for an understanding of the systemic nature of oppression and domination ie racism, sexism, classism etc and how various organisations and individuals are placed within the 'relations of ruling'.

CHAPTER THREE: Processes of inclusion and exclusion in the Women's Charter campaign

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Having created an analytical framework within which to place this discussion, I will now look more specifically at the Women's National Coalition and the Women's Charter campaign, Operation Big Ears. The conceptualisation of the campaign will be discussed, particularly the notion of women organising together under the assumption of a 'fragile unity' between women. Within this I will argue that the WNC has reinforced and perpetuated existing tensions between women in South Africa. These tensions and conflicts within the WNC will be drawn out more explicitly using the metaphor of 'bubbling issues' and how the various issues highlighted resulted in processes of inclusion and exclusion of interests of different groups of women. Notwithstanding all of the criticisms and tensions, I will also elaborate on some of the successes of the WNC.

"You don't go into Coalition because you like it. It is a matter of survival" (Reagon Johnson, 1983:356).

I would argue that the Women's National Coalition was a 'matter of survival' for women in South Africa, at a time when they were struggling to ensure that 'women's interests' would not be marginalised in the process of negotiating political power in a new South Africa. Thus it was a defensive strategy, not a proactive one. Not all organisations were excited at the prospect of working with women from differing political backgrounds for example. The Coalition was made up of a range of organisations representing differing and, at times, conflicting racial, political and class interests. Women also had differing cultural and religious (if any) backgrounds, lived in the urban and rural areas, spoke different languages and had various sexual preferences. It is the first time that such a broad range of organisations have come together in an

attempt to work for a common goal. We may have little or no history of coming together, but we do have a long common history - that of apartheid. As Ginwala (1992) states:

"We have been divided by race, ethnicity, language, by poverty and privilege; divisions (have been) entrenched in law and sanctified by practise. These we have shared as South Africans, men, women and children alike" (Speech at WNC Workshop).

As a result, women do not have a common history of working together across racial and other divisions. Except for those organisations that aligned themselves with the broad mass democratic movement, we have been divided in our struggles, fighting in a range of organisations that are racially segregated in our different battles.

3.2. STRUCTURE OF THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL COALITION

The Constitution of the WNC allowed for three types of participation at a national level. These were women's national organisations, national organisations which include women members, and lastly, regional coalitions (Budlender, 1993). The Constitution entrenched the autonomy of each of the organisations at both the national and regional level. In addition to co-operating together in the Campaign, each of the participating organisations continued to engage in their usual campaigns and activities. Each of these organisations was free to take up the campaign on any specific issues that they wanted, as well as campaign against issues where they disagreed (Budlender, 1993). It had a fixed life span of one year, which was later extended for another year as the campaign was nowhere near completion¹.

¹At its latest national meeting in June, 1994 the WNC decided to extend its mandate.

The **National Steering Committee**, which was elected at the annual National Conference consisted of elected portfolios (Convenor, Co-Convenor, National Secretary, Co-Treasurers), at least ten additional members, a representative nominated from each region and any persons co-opted by the Steering Committee. It had to establish **sub-committees** which would tackle particular areas of the campaign (for example, the legal, media and publicity and fundraising subcommittees).

The **National Working Committee** was appointed by the Steering Committee from among its own members and managed the daily administration of the Coalition on behalf of the Steering Committee.

The WNC also had its national headquarters in an office in Johannesburg. It initially employed two women - a Research officer and Campaign officer. The staff were later increased by an additional five positions.

3.3. OPERATION 'BIG EARS'

Operation 'Big Ears' consisted of the WNC functioning as 'ears' for women's demands and needs. They mobilised and provided the space to 'hear' the issues, interests and needs that women raised and discussed. The research process was designed to elicit and 'hear' these demands more systematically. Operation 'Big Ears' also consisted of raising the profile of women's subordinate status within the general public and within key constituencies of the politicians and the policy makers. The Campaign consisted of workshops, seminars, public meetings, a vigorous media campaign, questionnaires, chain letters, shopping centre campaign. Near the end of the campaign, different focus areas were chosen for every month - legal status of women, land and property rights, violence against women, health, work. The issues of affirmative action and political and legal representation were regarded as crucial issues which had to filter into the monthly foci at all levels throughout

the campaign. The National Office provided resource packages to the regions to aid them in developing activities and ensuring a tightly co-ordinated and effective campaign.

The research process included a series of focus group discussions which attempted to involve women in an intensive and open discussion of how they would like to see their lives in a new South African constitutional dispensation. Through questionnaires, interviews, workshops, rallies and seminars other information was fed into the campaign².

3.4. CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Coalition was conceptualised to be part of a process that would develop a women's movement in South Africa, a movement where women would be concerned with fighting for their rights as women ie to recognise the gendered interests in society. Although each organisation had differing understandings of what this would mean in practise, there was that basis recognition of this commonality. In this process:

"'equality' and 'women's rights' proved to be important mobilising devices. In this sense, rights constituted an important political resource as they provided a set of broad principles and concepts which allowed women to mobilise without confronting the differences between them" (Albertyn, 1990:21).

The Coalition acknowledged the diversity of women's backgrounds, the fact that as a result of apartheid policies black rural women had particularly urgent needs that had to be addressed, women in the informal sector had particular needs. However, in not wanting to upset the 'fragile' basis of the alleged unity of the Coalition, they attempted to side step the differences between women by

²This process was itself fraught with racial tensions and conflicts within the research subcommittee. I cannot discuss these issues in more detail as I did not have access to everyone within the committee to form a clearer picture of the process.

focusing on a discourse of the rights of women.

Within the Women's Charter, they write of women as having rights as a group, women having common demands as a group. The Charter is seen to speak for and represent all women³. However, this does not problematise the fact that the rights of a particular group of women could conflict with another, as would be the case in South Africa. In other words, the Charter does not problematise the power relations between women, and their differential access to rights eg african women did not even have the vote!

The call was for women to organise around the power of their majority vote. It was a recognition of the power that women have as citizens within the new political dispensation, and of their bargaining power during the pre-election period. It was an attempt by women to confront their common political exclusion from the process of creating a new citizenship in South Africa. A conception of citizenship that would recognise the disadvantages of women and recognise their particular needs within the call for effective equality. It was argued by the Co-convenor, Frene Ginwala in a range of discussion and strategising documents that even though there may be differences between women, and that there have been political conflicts in the past, within the WNC we should be tolerant and flexible with each other. The argument was 'Let us agree to differ and work together on issues of agreement, our common needs and within this process to recognise our 'fragile unity''.

At this level, there was a recognition of the impossibility of a sisterhood between women, an acknowledgement of the divisions and barriers between women as a result of the years of living under the

³The Women's Charter will be critiqued in more detail in the next chapter.

system of apartheid. However, Ginwala argued that the WNC could not afford to acknowledge and confront the differences between women, to seriously challenge the unequal power relations, the structural tensions and contradictions between different groups of women, and the conflicting agendas. There was a fear that the conflicts would be too controversial and would result in a destabilising, and perhaps even threaten the existence of the WNC.

Thus, the need to confront the differences between women was subordinated to the more short term political need to influence the national constitutional process through the WNC, having a common need to fight around their political exclusion, and for the legitimate need for women to participate as women and to make their claims for 'effective equality' (Albertyn, 1990).

The campaign was conceptualised and driven by a small group of women. Many of the key decisions, much of the strategic thinking and drive behind the campaign came from them. This in itself was often an area of conflict and there were struggles and debates amongst different groups of women who all attempted to influence the process. These tensions will be elaborated further in the section on 'Bubbling Issues'.

3.5. BUBBLING ISSUES

'Bubbling issues' is a symbol of the eruptions, the simmering tensions and conflicts between different groups of women in South Africa. For the last few years, we have all been witnessing the increase in the levels of debate and conflict between women in the women's movement(s). Moodley (1993) describes it very aptly:

"We've listened to its simmerings as it hissed, sighed and bubbled along. No doubt about it - feminist discourse in South Africa over the past three years has increased and sharpened" (Moodley, 1993:19).

I am going to explore what have been some of the causes for the 'bubbling issues' in the WNC campaign. These are constant areas of

tension and debate within the WNC, which do result in 'simmerings' and 'hisses'.

3.5. a) The battle around the conceptualisation of the campaign
Within its two year lifespan, there has been a constant tension with the campaign being officially conceptualised and strategised around a 'fragile unity' between women. An alternative argument coming from within the WNC maintained that it was important to speak of women's differences, to acknowledge racism and our class differences⁴. These tensions were not normally acknowledged as an organisational issue, and were discouraged from surfacing (Interview). The way that unity was constructed meant that the Coalition was incapable, perhaps did not want to, or was scared to respond to the challenges of needing to acknowledge the differences between women (Interview). As discussed in Chapter Two, if one does not begin from the starting point of the differences between women, and explore what are the conditions that give some forms of difference power and value over others, various dominant groups will continue to define the agenda.

This situation has often led to conflicts, tensions, suspicion and distrust between women in the Coalition. For example some COSATU and National Party women 'exchanged words' when the latter said that women had common problems. COSATU women responded by pointing out that women were divided racially and economically.

"They were telling us that we have common problems. We were saying no, that's not the case. You have to acknowledge that we have differences as women, in terms of race and class" (Interview).

⁴There was no particular organised grouping fighting to recognise the differences between women, however, some challenges came from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and from groupings within the ANC Women's League, for example. There was no homogenous position, and women often abided by their organisational policies.

This was part of a broader demand to examine the basis for a coalition. These kinds of challenges were met with a response which charged COSATU of being divisive, of trying to break up the Coalition (Interview). Thus one can see that the very conceptualisation of the WNC and the Women's Charter campaign were issues of hot debate. The tension that underlay the entire process constantly tested the limitations of 'fragile unity'. This often resulted in differences and conflicting interests between women being suppressed.

3.5. b) The politics behind it all

Not all organisations were equally committed to participating within the Coalition. Some organisations might have been members, however, in practise they hardly ever participated in the daily functioning of the campaign. In addition, the involvement of the membership of those organisations that did participate was uneven and limited to a relatively small number of individuals. This might have been boosted on some occasions during demonstrations and more mass based activity, however this was not a constant occurrence. It is also argued that the Coalition provided the organisational space for those women who wanted to climb politically. Perhaps, once those women get into positions of power, they would attempt to protect their own vested interests (Interview).

A very convincing argument was put forward which pointed out that the whole style and nature of the WNC privileged particular political styles and skills (Interview). In this way, the co-existence of a variety of political styles and skills was not recognised, and there were demands for a more inclusive and participatory style of organising. For example, the fact that the discussions were in English meant that those women that did not speak or understand English could not participate as easily. Within the broad mass democratic movement, I would say that there is a general acceptance of the need for translation. When some organisations or individuals have raised the need for translation

in a variety of forums (for example, at the Launch, during campaign meetings at both the national and regional level), they have generally been met with a negative response. At the planning meeting for the launch of the WNC, a request for translation to take place at the Launch was met with the following response from the National Party representative:

"But my dear, you don't have to worry about that, you tell all the Zulu women to sit together, and you tell all the Sotho women to sit together and they can help each other as the workshop goes on" (Interview).

In another instance, a request for translation at a meeting within one of the regions was met "with guffaws and laughter" (Interview).

Another exclusive practise was meeting during times which excluded many women from participating. For example, some of the subcommittees within a region would set their meetings during working hours. Some women, particularly workers, could not get time off during the day. After this was raised, they were subsequently changed to the end of the day (Interview). In addition, most of the meetings occurred within the urban business centres, or in traditionally white suburbs located close to the city centre. There was hardly any attempt (if at all) of organising meetings in the african townships, for example⁵. There was a general assumption that the city centre was the closest for everybody. There was also an unspoken assumption that any work in the african areas would be done by african women or organisations of predominantly african women, like the ANC for example.

Different organisations also have differing political styles and

⁵I am not referring here to meetings specifically organised within african townships for african women, but to those meetings which drew women together across racial groupings.

rituals in the way that they meet, how they organise, and the issues that they organise around. For example, organisations like COSATU, the ANC, the SACP, YWCA to name a few ie broadly from within the progressive movement, have a tradition of a more participatory style of organising. The need for mandates, to represent a constituency, for accountability, established meeting procedures with an elected chair through whom discussion is channelled, a degree of democratic debate are all part and parcel of every day political life. These were quite different to the more hierarchical and top down organisations like the National Party, the Democratic Party and the IFP for example. These two political styles and culture often conflicted and fed the tension between different groups of women. There have been numerous cases mentioned of white women dominating discussions, not raising their hand before talking - all which fed into tensions between women from different political backgrounds and generally, from different racial backgrounds. The need to have mandates and to discuss the campaign with one's membership would also take differing amounts of time depending on the degree of commitment to the process, the methods used, and the size of one's organisation. This would affect the length of time it would take an organisation to respond to a situation, which fed into the tensions between organisations. A political style that was not positively regarded was that of 'the exile' who was seen to practise politics bureaucratically and autocratically, without consultation and the democratic tradition that has been built up over the years within the 'progressive movement(s)' in South Africa (Interview).

Another deeply felt tension within the WNC was the domination of the political parties in the Coalition. The fact that the campaign had been structured towards affecting the negotiations which only included political parties (except for the ANC and the traditional leaders) affected the nature of participation of the various organisations and their 'voice' within the process (Interview). This also meant that the political rivalries and tensions between

the political organisations who were contesting an election in the near future were constantly 'bubbling' into discussions. With Frene Ginwala, who was seen to represent ANC women's interests, as a Co-Convenor of the Coalition, the National Party women also demanded their own space within the Steering Committee. There were constant accusations of ANC domination of the process. I would argue each political party saw the WNC as a means of staking out territorial boundaries and ensuring that their constituency is served within the Coalition. Throughout the campaign, there were reports of political parties canvassing for support in the upcoming elections (Interview). This also obviously raised the issue of the differing political interests between women, and of how the need for unity as women to impact on the negotiations was undermined by the very real and bitter political differences between different groups of women. For example, there were women from the National Party within the Coalition who were representing the political party responsible for the creation and implementation of apartheid. It is an organisation that has waged war against those organisations fighting for democracy and national liberation like the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU. It has been responsible for the torture, assassinations, detention without trial and police brutality against the members of those organisations. As an illustration of these tensions:

"How do we see ourselves as women sitting at the same table, saying these are our problems, with the people who are in power and contributing to those problems" (Interview).

3.5. c) Issues of structure

Many organisations and individuals have spoken of the need for an apex body in South Africa. This would provide overall direction and co-ordination, be a representative of the women's movement(s) at forums and to provide a contact for international bodies and funding, to name a few considerations. The WNC was constantly being called upon to act as such an apex structure. It was requested to

comment and participate as the representatives of the women's movement(s) both by external groupings and from women within the Coalition. This was a source of tension as women had differing perceptions on what the coalition could and couldn't comment (even within the National Office). The argument that the Coalition had to stick to its limited mandate of the Women's Charter and constitutional negotiations was often contested⁶.

The WNC was supposed to function as a coalition, but in effect it operated as a single organisation (Interview). Those women representing their organisations often found themselves becoming members of another organisation, the WNC. It was the same group of women going to a range of meetings who were in more close contact with the WNC and the Charter campaign. Although reportbacks might have taken place within member organisations, and more women were drawn in to workshops, on the whole, the campaign was carried by a small group of women. The end result was a weak grassroots support of the WNC and a limited outreach. This was an uneven process, with some regions being more rooted than others.

The WNC had a constitution which initially called for each organisation to affiliate. This created problems for organisations like COSATU who withdrew because of their organisational policy not to affiliate to other organisations. Amidst the range of tensions outlined earlier, I suspect COSATU saw it as a means to quietly

⁶This was especially the case when the National Party government proposed three bills on women. These were quite controversial and it was seen by many women as an attempt by the National Party to win votes for the election, and in many ways it undermined the process of the WNC. However, there was also a call from within the WNC to support these bills. The WNC was thus called upon to comment on these bills. However, the WNC decided that it could not address these issues (it could not be seen to take a side) and recommended that if women wanted to support the initiatives, or to lobby against the bills, they would have to do so outside the Coalition. This fed the frustration with the WNC as it would not do anything that would jeopardise the Coalition, even confront issues which fall very squarely within its mandate.

withdraw from the Campaign. However, after a series of meetings between COSATU and the WNC it was agreed to amend the WNC so that COSATU could participate.

The national office was supposed to provide direction and co-ordinate the campaign nationally. However, severe conflicts within the national office hindered it's abilities to fulfil these functions. These centred around the need for a particular individual to dominate and control the process to the point of stifling all energy, creativity and input from other women. This contributed to the resignation of one staff member and others threatening on various occasions to resign. One of the staff members presented the tensions in the office to the various regional bodies so that they could be aware of the conditions in which the co-ordination was taking place (Interviews). The above dynamic reinforced the broader tensions and practises of inclusion and exclusion within the WNC.

Regional offices complained of communications being very bad between the national and regional offices, with little or no follow up, and that the information provided was often contradictory. This fed into tensions that existed within the regions. For example, some women were charged with manipulating the reporting back of knowledge and information from the national to the regional structures. Those women (from another political party) would then contact their national office and bring information which was seen to be more correct (Interview).

3.5. d) White domination and representation

A constant criticism was that the structures co-ordinating the WNC were dominated by white, middle class women, particularly those from the more conservative political parties and groupings. Thus while white women had a smaller constituency or were not even linked in to women's organisations on the ground, they were more vocal and visible (Jaffer, 1994). They would also have more access

to determining decisions which shape the Coalitions programme as a result of their membership of the Steering and Working committees.

A related issue that was raised, and which became a fundamental criticism of the WNC, was that each organisation was given the same voting power, irrespective of its size and outreach. Thus organisations that were more mass based and who could mobilise large sectors of the community, were not accorded more proportional representation and power to effect decisions. This fed tensions that existed over the fact that some women were there without a clear indication of their mandate and who they actually represented (Interviews, personal observations). To complicate matters further, there are also differing types of membership in an organisation with the size of an organisation not necessarily being the best indicator of strength.

3.5. e) Race Relations Within the Coalition

As discussed in Chapter Two, and through out the paper, one can see that there are racial tensions and conflicts between women within the progressive movement. These have discussed earlier and characterised as the 'difference debate'. These tensions became embroiled in the broader range of interests and groupings within the WNC. Women entered into the Coalition having particular ideas and stereotypes of different race groups which might have been confirmed and strengthened during the process. We had not worked together across such a broad spectrum before, and the tensions that existed politically and within society more generally would have been present more starkly within the WNC.

It is important to make this distinction between women on the left and women in the WNC more generally. One's political position has implications for how one relates to and constructs one's racial identity. For example, although the structural racial privilege may be the same for example between a white woman from the NP as compared to a white woman from the ANC, the relationship to one's

structural privilege is different. This is because the NP woman would be engaged in perpetuating the privileges of white supremacy in South Africa, whereas a white woman from the ANC would be at some level challenging white domination. Thus, one has to become conscious of the 'positionality of racisms'. I think it is important to make this distinction between women on the left and women within the WNC more generally. Interestingly, when black women spoke of white women dominating the structures within the WNC, on being questioned more closely on which white women, some said 'those white women from Kontak, the NP, the DP' (Interview), thus distinguishing from white women on the left. One thus becomes aware of the shifting alliances between black and white women within the 'left', and how these can be simultaneously conflictual and affiliative.

It has also been said that most white women are not conscious of their positions of power and privilege, and do not really feel that racism is an issue that directly affects them. One woman raised the question of "Why should it always be black women who raise the issue of race all the time?" There was a frustration with the belief that it is always black women who keep bringing up the fact that delegations and committees need to be representative of all races in South Africa (Interview).

Thus, when looking at the processes of inclusion and exclusion of interests between women, I would argue that for our very survival as women's movement(s) we have to let go of that 'fragile unity'. For a variety of reasons - fear, denial, political expediency, some women hold on to a fragile unity. However, the tensions and the conflicts are there, and are being spoken about in many circles of the women's movement(s). By naming the racial inequalities, the racism, the classism, the heterosexism, the ethnicism and generally recognising the relations of structural inequality, we place it on the political agenda. With this we can go some way towards confronting the politics of difference in South Africa. However, in

the process of achieving the short term goal of creating a women's Charter and affecting the constitutional process, the Coalition has in many instances merely perpetuated the tensions, suspicions and conflicts based on social inequalities that currently exist between women in South Africa.

One cannot discuss the processes of the campaign and the existence of a Women's Charter in South Africa, with all its attendant problems, without also discussing some of what the Coalition has achieved in its admittedly very short life. The existence of the Coalition is valued by many as is witnessed in the decision to maintain the structure to take on some of the more pressing co-ordinating roles that are now required in terms of ensuring operationalisation of the Charter, co-ordinating research needs and preparation for Beijing (Minutes of National Council, June, 1994). The following section will pick up on a few of the 'successes' of the WNC.

3.6. THE SUCCESSES OF THE COALITION

The Women's National Coalition is the largest and most representative women's organisation in the country. The groups and their affiliates represent an estimated two million women (WNC News, May 1994). Over the past two years, the organisation has met regularly, and together with the campaign, 'Operation Big Ears' and the research process, managed to elicit women's demands for a new South Africa. Despite all the problems, it provided the forum for women to come together to debate, discuss and mobilise for their voice to be heard in the new South Africa. It drew women together who would not have had the opportunity to meet before and provided a forum where some level of consensus on what needs to be done could be established from an organised movement of women.

The WNC provided the organisational direction and impetus for fledgling women movement(s). It was the umbrella structure, or the apex structure that could play some level of co-ordination and

direction, which had been lacking for women before. It set out to empower the women of South Africa, to encourage them to take part in the debates on how best to create a democratic citizenship in South Africa, to participate in the discussions on what we as women needed to ensure that we can be properly represented in a new dispensation. For some women, it was perhaps the first time that they had got together to explore and discuss what their needs and demands were, as women. More importantly it provided the co-ordinated organisational campaigns for women to feed into - it provided co-ordination and an organisational space.

It established regional and national structures where women's organisations are now working together in a more co-ordinated fashion. This has brought some organisations together for the first time, expanded existing networks and increased the potential for joint action. After the Women's Charter had been adopted, as a result of the working relations established and because of the future work that needs to be done, many women were particularly reluctant to disband the regional coalitions and have decided to retain the national structure. There was a fear that the level of co-ordination that the WNC had provided would be lost if we all agreed to go our separate ways.

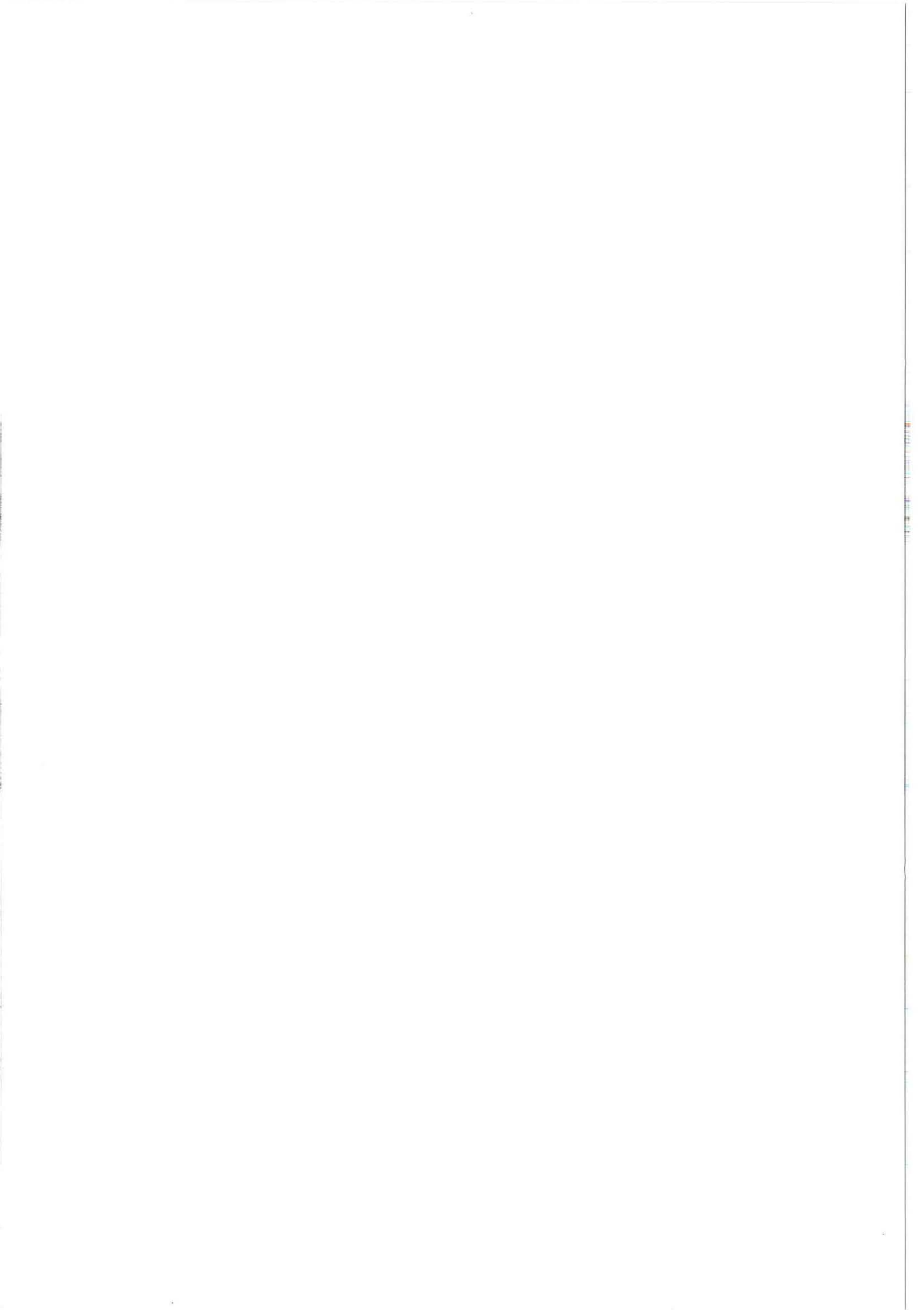
Through the campaign and the research process, we are more knowledgeable about the position of women in South Africa. We have more up to date information on what organisations exist in the various sectors, what campaigns and activities are being conducted and what different sectors of women are thinking on a range of issues. It has facilitated the creation of a data base on who is working on what area in South Africa - both individuals and organisations, and what some of the major concerns are in the different sectors. It has laid the groundwork for many areas of research and political action, provided information for organisations which can be fed into campaigns.

The WNC also set out to influence and convince politicians and decision makers in the country of the need to be aware of women's particular demands and position. It created the impression of an organised and aware women's movement in South Africa that was a force to be reckoned with. However, at the time when the interim constitution was ready, neither the research nor the Women's Charter were ready for inclusion. Women delegates at the constitutional negotiations (some of them members of the WNC) requested assistance from the WNC. Through the establishment of the Negotiations Monitoring Team, the WNC facilitated a process where each member organisation could mobilise their respective memberships around issues and lobby the various parties involved in the negotiations (Albertyn, 1994). Thus it provided very important organisational back up, expertise and skills during crucial debates within the constitutional negotiations and impacted on the nature of citizenship negotiated for women.

Through the campaign the WNC raised the profile of women's position in the country. Some of the key events in the publicity campaign included the handing over of the interim Charter at Kempton Park, regional conferences, meetings with political leaders and the National Conference which adopted the draft of the final Charter (WNC News). Using a mixture of television advertisements, newspaper articles and interviews with participants, debates on TV, demonstrations, conferences, chain letters, street theatre, house to house meetings, the WNC attempted to ensure that the need to address women's discrimination and call for effective equality was a household name.

Although in the end, the outreach of the Women's Charter was not as effective or as extensive as one would have liked, it did affect political processes and negotiations at a national level. Perhaps because it was attempting to impact on a process that itself was characterised by exclusivity, it got caught in the same position. I suppose one could say that it is merely the beginning, and the

WNC will go through a process of evolution to meet the demands that are made upon it, the nature of debates and tensions shaping the end result. But for the women of South Africa, at this time it is all we have. On the one hand, we have to be proud of what we have achieved, and on the other, critical of the shortcomings and serious weaknesses, and begin the process of formulating our alternatives.



CHAPTER FOUR: The Women's Charter for 'effective equality'

4.1. INTRODUCTION

The processes of inclusion and exclusion within the WNC that were discussed in the previous chapter would obviously impact on the 'product' of the Campaign - the Women's Charter itself. It would also have implications for the WNC's conceptualisation of effective equality. Within this chapter, I will be exploring more closely which groups of women's interests have been included in the document, and where applicable, discussing which issues and groups of women have been excluded. I will show how the processes of exclusion of particular groups of women have led to shortcomings in the concept of effective equality for women. I will not discuss each article separately. Instead I will focus my discussions on the general Preamble, and the Articles on Equality; Education and Training; and Family Life and Partnerships. All quotations are from the Women's Charter unless otherwise stated.

4.2. PREAMBLE - 'BREAKING THE SILENCE'

"The Women's Charter gives expression to the diverse experiences, visions and aspirations of South African women. We are breaking our silence. We claim respect and recognition of our human rights and dignity. We require effective change in our status and material conditions in the future South Africa"

The document places itself within a framework for human rights and a democracy that includes the experiences of diverse groups of women and require changes at the political, legal, economic and social level. In particular there is a recognition of the role that women have played in the home, the workplace and the community, and their contributions they have made to society generally (in spite of gendered discrimination). Importantly, the Women's Charter calls for a complete reorganisation and restructuring of society and its institutions to take women's experiences into account. Both human

rights and democracy have to be extended to include the diversity of women's experiences.

This challenges the traditional androcentric conception of human rights and breaks down the public/private dichotomy where rights, duties and democracy are restricted to the public political sphere, using the yardstick of men's lives for measurement. There is a recognition of the fallacy that relations within the home are private, are inherently just and equal (ie that there are no gender conflicts), and should not be interfered with by regulations from the state. Thus it points out that formal equality, democracy and human rights is not possible for women within the existing system and framework.

The Charter does not merely propose to compensate for sexual difference. It speaks of the diversity of women's experiences by the following statements:

"Women's subordination and oppression has taken many forms under patriarchy, custom and tradition, colonialism, racism and apartheid" and "We recognise the diversity of our experiences and recognise also the commonalities of our subordination as women". However, both these statements are written without acknowledging the potential and real existing conflicts that occur between different groups of women in their struggle to attain democracy and human rights, and in how they would want institutions of society to be restructured, for example. Diversity conjures up images of cultural pluralism because pluralism is one model of politics in a society characterised by diversity. Political scientists developed it to explain political processes and interest group activity in the United States. Popularly it is believed that various social groups compete for resources, with the demand and conflict never being such to demand radical transformations in society. As the theory goes, pluralists believe conflicts are never irreconcilable because each interest group sometimes wins and sometimes loses in its competition with other groups (Alperin, 1990). Thus, diversity

provides for a need to acknowledge that women's experiences are not the same. Yet I believe that it does not provide for an understanding that takes the social context of structural inequalities based on group differences, and thus an understanding of the need to address social relations of inequalities of access to power and resources, and the resulting domination and oppression in women's lives, in our analysis and in our campaigns. My question is, do we have to sacrifice an acknowledgement of unequal power relations when we are producing an inspirational document for women.

When restructuring society and institutions to take women's lives into account, the Women's Charter proposes affirmative action for women as one of the means of redressing the imbalances of the past. However, I would have looked for an affirmative action clause for black women, more specifically. By stating this explicitly, one would immediately have to acknowledge and deal with the racial differences in opportunities, access and social well being. Thus, one has to break down the homogenous category of women with common interests. Rather, one has to look more closely at how issues like race and class would fundamentally alter women's position in society, for example. In this way, one becomes aware of the inequalities in power and access to material resources being not just between women and men, but between women with all their 'diverse' experiences.

4.3. ARTICLE ONE: EQUALITY

The Women's Charter states that "the principle of equality underlies all our claims in the Charter". It includes the recognition that if one is wanting to achieve equality, one would have to recognise the indivisibility of social and economic rights from issues of formal equality. Albertyn argues that "the WNC sought to construct an understanding of equality that took account of the social, economic and cultural reality of women's lives". In this way, the Charter was seen by some to be part of "a feminist

project to develop a substantive understanding of equality in the constitution and the law" (Albertyn, 1990:22).

As the Charter points out, the struggle for equality for women involves the recognition that "women suffer (disadvantages) in all spheres of our lives". If women and men were treated the same, it would perpetuate the relations of dominance. This is because the conception of the citizen and the structure of society is structured around the norms and interests of white, middle class males. It would thus be incapable of delivering equality to women. As the Charter states:

" ... the promotion of equality between women and men will sometimes require distinctions to be made. No distinctions should be made that would disadvantage women".

The Charter makes a clear case for the need for sexual differences to be made in their critique of 'formal' equality and of the need to ensure 'effective' equality as a result of the patriarchal nature of the society. This is illustrated with the phrase:

"... the recognition of the disadvantages that women suffer in all spheres of our lives". However, South African society is also characterised by apartheid capitalism which results in groups of women 'suffering' in different ways, experiencing varying degrees of oppression and exploitation, and at times having conflicting interests and issues. These structural inequalities have to be acknowledged because as the Charter states with reference to men: "... the promotion of equality ... will sometimes require distinctions to be made".

The principle of equality is also seen to transcend the private/public divide that is traditionally characteristic of liberal democracies. Within these, women are confined to the private or domestic sphere, with men occupying the public sphere with all of its political authority and power. The Charter demands that equality should apply to all aspects of women's lives,

including the family, the workplace and the state. The state is called upon to establish 'appropriate' accessible mechanisms to ensure the promotion and protection of equality for women, although the claim to equality is not limited to the state. It extends to everyone in society, with specific mention being made of employers, family members and civil society.

The Women's Charter recognises that women's subordination is reflected in all the institutions in society and is reflected in its economic, social and political practises. It therefore demands 'educational programmes and appropriate mechanisms' to address the male bias and low status of women in society. The structured subordination of women in society results in many women being unable to claim and exercise their rights. To ensure that women do make use of their rights embedded in the interim Constitution and the Bill of Rights, women need to be empowered and the Charter calls for: "Human rights education (to be) provided to raise the awareness of women's status, and to empower women to claim their constitutional and legal rights".

4.4. ARTICLE FOUR: EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Education is seen as a lifelong process and thus the Charter specifically refers to both women and girls as having the right to an education. It is thus placed within a human rights framework. The conception of education is also broader and more holistic than was the case under an apartheid government, ranging from educare¹, adult education (basic and continuing), primary, secondary and tertiary education through to skills training. It is one of the few articles that explicitly acknowledges and begins to address the differences between women, although still within the framework of diversity. It reads:

"Education and training, including curriculum

¹Educare is the combination of education and care that one would give to small children below school going age.

development, should acknowledge and accommodate the diversity of women's needs and experiences in every aspect of life".

It thus recognises that women have different needs and experiences in relation to education and training, and that those needs should be addressed. The need for education is linked to it being an enabling experience and allowing women to actively participate in society. It thus calls for "appropriate educational institutions and social services" which would address the particular needs of women. Rural women, single mothers and disabled women and girls were seen to have particular needs that must be addressed. By acknowledging this, the Charter recognises that particular groups of women have suffered a disadvantage in relation to other groups and equal treatment would in fact lead to further discrimination and inequality.

However, later it speaks of women as a general group as needing "to participate at all levels in educational policy making, as well as in the management and administration of education and training" and the need for "women and girls to have (shall have) equal access to special funds through affirmative action for education and training (my emphasis)". This does not acknowledge the realities of apartheid education. Thus it may distinguish the need to acknowledge sexual difference as a result of the education and training in South Africa being historically male orientated, but it does not take on the challenge of racial discrimination. It is interesting to note that the previous draft of the Women's Charter did make a specific reference to racial discrimination, which has now been edited out.

4.5. ARTICLE EIGHT: FAMILY LIFE AND PARTNERSHIPS

The nature of the title of the article with the use of the word 'partnerships', and the phrases: "All family types should receive recognition" and "The diversity of family types must be recognised and treated fairly" demands that we extend the dominant notion of

what constitutes a family, ie a heterosexual nuclear family with a male head of household and breadwinner with 2 children to include the full range of family types that exist in South Africa. This would include 'extended' families, single parent families, and same sex couples to name a few. It is important that we would move beyond merely 'recognising' them and 'being treated fairly', to ensuring that the institutions and social relations of society is not geared towards privileging the nuclear heterosexual family type as it is at present. By not explicitly naming the particular family types, eg same sex couples openly, but sliding it in almost unnoticed as in 'the diversity of family types' , the Charter does not challenge the heterosexism of South African society and its institutions. I believe that it was another one of those issues (just like racial discrimination) that was considered too controversial and divisive to address. We have recognition of the need not to discriminate on the basis of sexual preference explicitly stated and included within the interim Constitution, it surprises me that the WNC felt it too controversial to include in the Women's Charter.

The unequal power relations within all households between women and men is challenged. The Charter acknowledges that women do have responsibilities and duties in the home and that these should be reflected in their capacity and power to make decisions within the home. This would include both general management decisions and decisions surrounding the economic management of the household.

The Charter demands that a woman, just like a man, has the right to control her body in terms of her sexual relationships, to be freed from various social strictures and control on her sexuality. For our sexuality to be seen as more than a means to produce the next generation and nation. In addition, it challenges the notion that a woman has to always be sexually available to partners and demands that we be seen as active and equal partners in a sexual relationship - "Women shall also have the right to decide on the

nature and frequency of sexual contact within marriage and intimate relationships".

The particular problems of women who are married under customary law and religious rites, treated as legal minors and who are thus not entitled to be guardians over their children are raised. The issue of the oppressive nature of customary law has been vigorously debated during the Women's Charter campaign and the multi party negotiating process (MPNP). The demand made by all women's organisations was that equality was indivisible and that all women should have the right to claim equality through the Bill of Rights and the Women's Charter.

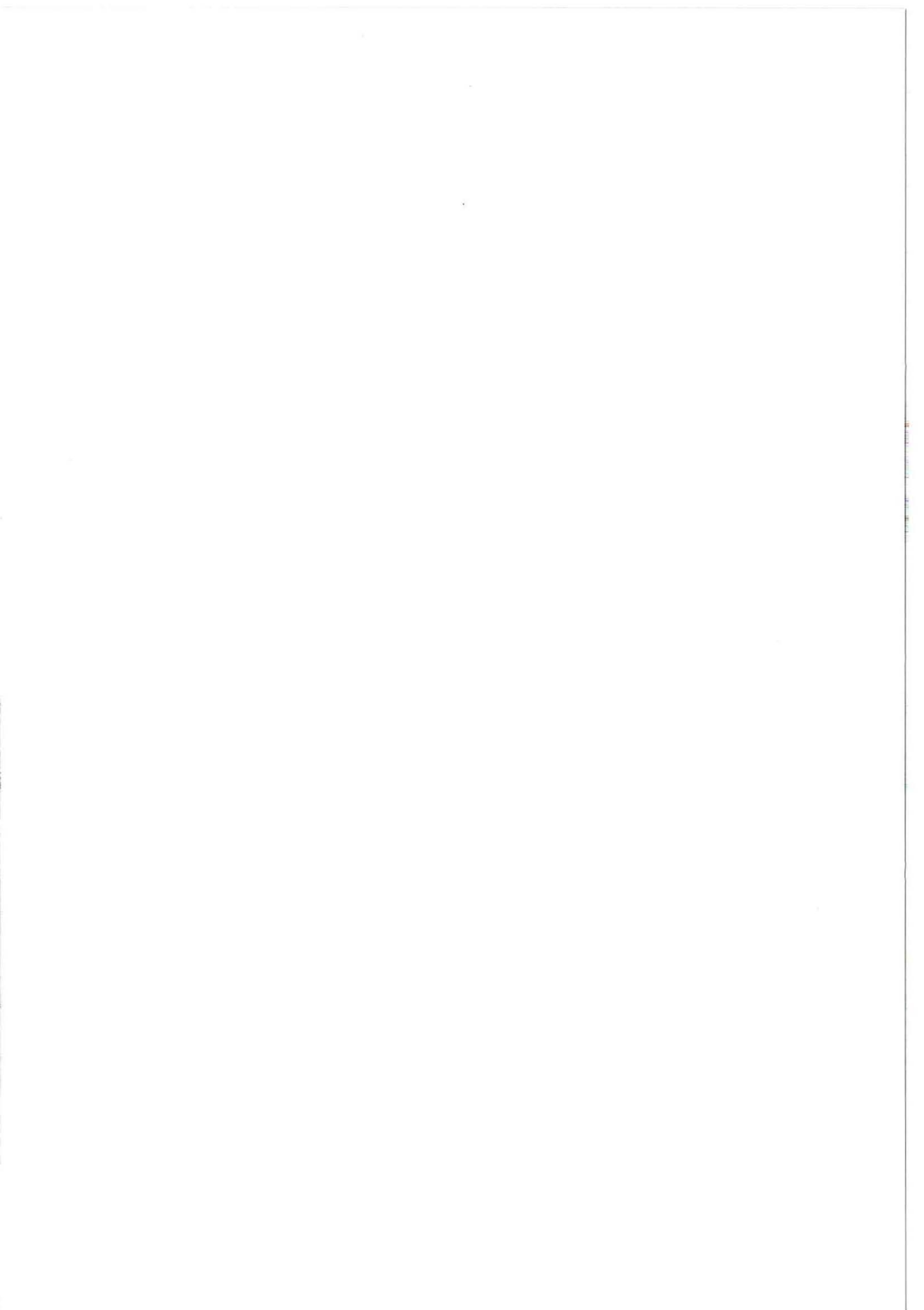
4.6. SOME GENERAL COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

I realise that the Charter was a compromise document between a variety of political and other women's organisations that represented conflicting interests. That it was an attempt to draw women together around a common political issue (exclusion from the political process) and represent their interests at these forums and in the creation of a new constitution and Bill of Rights. I am also aware that it was working within a very limited time period to be ready for the constitutional negotiations and so took on a time frame that was not conducive to its own interests. In addition, Albertyn (1990) points out that added to these political difficulties were also those of resources, the lack of financial resources, time and personnel.

In attempting to ensure the success of these objectives, the WNC restricted it's mandate to a very particular focus, that of the production of a Charter. The diversity of women's experiences and social location was acknowledged as can be seen by the various references throughout the Charter to the need to acknowledge the particular experiences and demands of rural women, women in the informal sector, disabled women, female headed households, single mothers, prostitutes, young and old women to name a few. However,

there is a striking lack throughout the Charter. It does not reflect the fact that we are emerging out of an apartheid era with the social legacies of racial and class based inequalities and conflicts, and the need to address those in our bid for 'effective equality'. There is never a mention of black women having particular interests that are different from white women's interests and of the potential conflict in this. In a country where the colour of your skin and what race you are classified alters your life experience and life opportunities, it is indicative of the need to hold on to our 'fragile unity', and of the legacy of the non racial policies of the progressive movement that it is never explicitly named and owned within a Charter. Particularly if it is setting out to lay the requirements for effective equality for all women in South Africa. Merely mentioning that we demand and want to participate in the creation of a non-racist society, and acknowledging racial discrimination as a particular force two or three times within particular clauses in articles is not enough.

Thus, because of the ideology of non racialism of the progressive movement, the attempts to maintain a 'fragile unity' between women within the WNC and the WNC's attempt to side step the differences between women, the Women's Charter falls short of confronting the power inequalities between women in a fundamental and meaningful way. The Charter does acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and social locations but it does not draw out the systemic power inequalities, and the relations of domination between women. As an inspirational document, it attempts to draw out the commonalities of women's experiences of subordination and oppression, and mentions the particular instances when particular groupings of women need to be distinguished like rural women, for example. However, it does not problematise the 'differences' in the category of women and the potential for conflicting interests. Thus, its conceptualisation of effective equality is fundamentally flawed.



CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusions

5.1. INTRODUCTION

On the one hand we have inherited the idea of the commonality of women's oppression, of the notion that women as a group suffer a common subordination. At the same time, we have also inherited the legacy of a political practise based on the principles of non racialism. This, combined with the fear of confronting the differences between women in South Africa within the Women's Charter campaign led the WNC to attempt to maintain the 'fragile unity' between women. Some women in South Africa have spoken of the need to find a home, to develop safe places where women can explore their lives and experiences. Within this is the illusion of a terrain that should be internally free from conflict (Hirsh and Keller, 1990). However, feminism is, and always has been, quite conflictual, at times explosively so.

I have argued throughout the paper of the need for building and grounding our political practise and our theories within a framework of our differences. As Lorde (1992) argues there are very real differences between all of us of race, class, sexuality, age. However,

"it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognise those differences, and to examine those distortions which result from misnaming them and their effects upon human behaviour and expectation" (Lorde, 1992:48).

As has happened in South Africa, she argues that we spend our time pouring our energy needed for recognising and exploring those differences into pretending that those differences are 'insurmountable barriers'. However, ignoring those differences between us of race, class, sexuality is undermining our efforts to build women's movement(s) which strengthen and empower all women in South Africa. Various dominant groups could then continue to

define the terms upon which we organise and write of our experiences, and we will be diverting our energies from the tasks at hand (Lorde, 1992).

Thus we need to explore a conception of feminism which would recognise the need to search for the commonalities between women with the conviction that 'there is work to be done', work that can be supported in the name of feminism (with all its different voices), and the need to construct an 'ethics of criticism' that recognises differences that cut across and along many kinds of axes (Hirsch & Keller, 1990).

In terms of both our theory and our practise, we need to start engaging in 'conversations across difference'. These can take the form of written up and taped dialogues, debates, group discussions, collaborative writing and working, conferences, forums, within our music and culture. We need to begin to realise that "practising conflict is also practising feminism" and to learn how to use our conflicts constructively, affiliatively as tools for "forging new understandings and new forms of affiliation" (Childers & hooks, 1990:70). It is through confronting the differences between us, and finding ways in which to identify our common areas of concern and political projects that women from within the progressive movement, and women more generally in South Africa can begin the process of engaging with and creating more representative feminist theories and practises.

In this way we are looking at defining what Young (1990) calls the politics of difference, and Aziz (1992) calls feminism(s) of difference. We need to pick up the gauntlet and begin our analyses and political programmes within the framework of difference. A politics of difference, and what Mouffe emphasises in her search for a radical democracy, would emphasise examining and challenging the social relations in which situations of domination exist. Different groups struggling for 'democracy' would need to find ways

in which they have a common concern. This, Mouffe argues should lead to linking the democratic demands found in a variety of movements: women, workers, blacks, gays, ecological, as well as other 'new social movements' (1992:379). Within this process, it has been argued by a growing number of authors that dominant groups need to challenge the various ways in which they are privileged, and to interrogate their position within the systems of oppression and exploitation, for example heterosexuals, whites, men, middle and upper class people; and able-bodied people. Mouffe (1992) proposes that we need to create a collective political identity articulated through the principle of 'democratic equivalence' which would not eliminate difference. This common good which we would all be fighting for would be a 'vanishing point', it acts as a 'social imaginary' to which we all strive.

It is through coalitions that the possibility exists for solidarity action between a variety of organisations and individuals. However the starting point of working together would be the need to acknowledge differences between women, and to develop a political practise which incorporates the use of coalitions based upon our differences.

5.2. DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES WITHIN COALITIONS

The questions confronting us are how can we build strong coalitions between women's organisations that take our differences into account, that do not try to erase or deny them? How can black and white women, middle/upper class and working class women (mentioning a couple of the major areas of social division in South Africa) move beyond the feelings of anger and guilt, defensiveness and accusations which have characterised women's politics for the last few years. What are the most effective ways of raising issues of difference within our coalitions and organisations in a way that is not polarising and conflictual?

5.2. a) Developing a set of practises to deal with differences

The degree to which we can work together across our differences depends on the conceptual frameworks and political perspectives from which we understand our differences. What we need to do is develop a set of principles, or sets of practises that allow us to work together, while exploring our differences. In this way, we can work together on the various ways in which we are subordinated, ie there can be a common political programme, with a recognition of the differing ways in which we are placed within social relations and structures in society.

Coalition building means that we have to examine our attitudes, prejudices and ignorances which are often the reason why coalitions do not succeed. We need to be aware that we have been taught to accept that our differences in race, sex and class bring with them differences in power and privilege. The fact that power hierarchies are seen to be acceptable can, and is, manipulated where we may begin to fear those that we see as different, and see them as a threat to our position and sometimes, our survival (Bunch, 1990).

Perhaps the first step is to have respect for other people's insights and perceptions of reality, while at the same time taking responsibility for our social position in society. This would entail working consciously to change the aspects of our lives and of our countries that are oppressive to others, and challenging the stereotypes that we might hold about people that are different from each other (Carillo, 1990). In this way, people who are in socially dominant positions eg white people, need to examine their racial privilege and notions of white supremacy. By this I mean that whites need to explore the gulf of experience and meaning, and material and political systemic power between individuals who are differently positioned in relation to the systems of domination, and be conscious of the specificity of their experiences (Frankenburg, 1993). In a similar way, other groups of women that are in other power hierarchies like heterosexuals and middle class

women, would also need to challenge their positions of privilege. The dominant groups are defined in the particular social relations of each context. The presence of mere good will on the part of members of advantaged groups is not enough to overcome the assumptions and attitudes born out of centuries of power and privilege. One has to make an effort to come to grips with 'the details of lived oppression' and recognise that their concern carries a responsibility to bring such knowledge to their attention, and use it 'with humility and understanding' in the fight to eradicate all oppressions. One of the ways of doing this is to analogise from situations of oppression where we have been oppressed ie 'insiders', to those in which we are oppressors ie 'outsiders' (Narayan, 1988).

5.2. b) Locating the interrelatedness of oppressions

This recognition that women have different interests, visions and goals means that we have to approach politics, and particularly coalition building with a need to understand and address the simultaneity of our oppressions (Smith, 1983). There is a commonality in the fact that all women do suffer some degree of subordination. However, the forms that these take are shaped by a variety of factors, with the various systems of domination interacting to shape the particulars of each woman's life. For example, a heterosexual indian woman does not experience her oppression and privilege as separate people. One cannot isolate single factors such as class, race or sexual preference to show the effects of each separately. A woman experiences life as a complete whole, with the contradictory tensions of privilege and oppression situated within one person. In this way, we can see that strategies that do not examine how women's subordination is shaped in different forms could result in some women being set up against others, which could lead to fights around hierarchies of seriousness in the forms of oppression (Bunch, 1990). Thus, a redefinition of one's own group and its place in society is only a first step in transforming one's consciousness. Often discussions

within South African women's forums have degenerated into arguments about who is more oppressed. There is still debate and discussion of the need to recognise the implications of the differences between women in South Africa. Lorde (1992) argues that we may identify the way in which we are oppressed as the "primary cause of our oppression" and forget about the other forms, "some of which we ourselves may be practising" (Lorde, 1992:116). In this way, we need to recognise that women are both oppressed and oppressors in different contexts. Thus, we all need to recognise the fluid way in which the various systems of oppression interrelate, and of the particular contexts that define the exact nature of that relationship. In South Africa, within our bid to confront the differences between women, and to ensure that racism is addressed within the women's movement(s), the progressive movement, and within the structures and social relations in society for example, we would need to be conscious of the linkages between racism, classism, heterosexism and women's subordination and oppression.

Thus, one becomes aware of the social relations and context being reproduced and shaped within the experiences of particular coalitions, and that there are many different types of oppressions which influence and are inter-related with each other in complex ways. As Narayan (1988) argues, even when people are working together on common social and political goals, "a progressive organisation cannot be sustained unless the prejudices and problems which arise between members are examined and programmatically addressed" (1988:33). Unequal power relations which occur at the intersections and interfaces between race, class, gender, and sexuality are generally at the core of any 'controversies' in women's movement(s). Much of the resentment, anger and harshness of the difference debate is located in the 'matrix of power relations' (Moodley, 1990). Thus, I agree with Moodley when she argues that when we come together in coalition, we need to always be aware of who is wielding the power in our work and relations. During our confrontations, it is important to determine which group is angry

with whom, why, and to constantly evaluate which groups of women were being represented, (and whose issues are being heard), at different times.

5.2. c) The Politics of Silences

An important question of 'silence(s)' emerges here, and that of silenced groups and silenced issues within a coalition. Some groups of women have more power (both political and material), receive more support from the state and are more socially acceptable. Groups and individuals who hold opposing or different views, face the danger of 'being swallowed up and silenced'. Silence could also occur as a result of coalition loyalties and 'mode of operation' demanding precedence over one's personal standpoint or party political interests. For example, women and organisations who disagreed with the assumption of fragile unity between women within the WNC, still participated within the coalition. Of course this was constantly contested. However, silences can also result if a woman's party political interests constrains her from pursuing interests which might benefit her and other women (Moodley, 1990). When looking at what is both written and spoken in South African theory and politics, we also need to begin engaging and reflecting on our 'silences' (both between us, and within us), and what we need to do in approaching these silences. An obvious example is that of women in South Africa to begin addressing the issue of race and racism. To look at why it is so difficult to talk about these issues, and how to do it in such a way that we do not polarise and destroy our programmes. While doing this we would obviously also have to address the feelings that underlie these processes - the anger, the feelings of exclusion, the fears, the anxieties which characterise the current climate of feminist work.

This raises the need for more co-operative struggles between a variety of social groups to develop a more accurate and potentially liberating understanding of combating unequal social relations. In addition, oppressed groupings might see the need to create separate

spaces where they can gain an understanding and awareness of their particular issues, gain a political voice and coherence, self respect and a place to name themselves. These can be continuous and ongoing processes (Alperin, 1990). This can be seen by the formation of black women's forums, networks and organisations in South Africa. In addition, there is also the embryonic development of lesbians beginning to organise separately¹.

5.3. SOME BOTTOM LINES FOR SUCCESSFUL COALITIONS

Anzaldua (1990) argues that in order for coalitions to work and achieve their aims and objectives, it is necessary to establish certain ground rules and define the terms that are used to name issues. 'Common assumptions' need to be taken out and aired - and through this process it will be realised that there are many contradictions and conflicts within our visions and the solutions that we seek. She proposes that all organisations and individuals involved in coalitions need to recognise the need for the terms of reference and 'engagement' to be defined by black women and lesbians. She states:

"When we don't collectively define ourselves and our locations, the group will automatically operate under white assumptions, white definitions, white strategies" (Anzaldua, 1990:225).

While I wholeheartedly agree with the point that Anzaldua is making, which is that marginalised and subordinated groups should define the terms of 'engagement', we need to bear in mind the potential conflicts and differences within the groups of black women and lesbians.

¹For the past few years there has been a lesbian forum (of both black and white lesbians) within the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW). Recently, this organisation has begun to meet separately to address the particular issues that lesbians within the forum are facing. Jaffer (1994) argues that organising, especially for black lesbians is increasing. In the past, whites (particularly gay men) have dominated most of the organisations.

Bunch (1990) proposes that each of us should become like 'one woman coalitions'. By this she means that we need to build a consciousness of the concerns and perspectives of those women whose oppression we do not directly experience into our daily lives, political programmes and culture. More importantly, this would also include understanding and seeing our relationship to all these oppressions. This would include recognising and confronting the social position and power provided by white privilege and white supremacy, class and heterosexual privilege.

Discussing the South African women's movement(s), Lewis (1994) argues that much of the problem between black and white women is that racism is not perceived as a white problem. White women's inability to confront their relationship to power and privilege has a lot to do with what Gallop et al (1990) writes of as "the inability to perceive of oneself as being both powerless and having power, at the same time and in different contexts" (1990:355)².

Confronting our differences will not create and enhance conflict. People often shy away from conflict thinking that it is divisive and destructive. However, I believe ignoring our divisions and conflicts in interests is more destructive, and results in a plastering over the cracks in a shaky attempt to create a unity between women. We need to construct an 'ethics of criticism', one that would address the systemic nature of racism, sexism,

²Often I have heard white women stating that they are also oppressed. What these arguments fail to recognise is that a challenge of racism is not invalidating white women's experience of oppression. Although white women may be disadvantaged, bearing in mind the differences and divisions within the group, as a result of the apartheid legacy, white women do occupy a social position of privilege in relation to black women. Thus Lewis (1994) argues, until white women address their position of privilege, there will be a struggle over interpretations of experience and of representation more generally. Black women would also need to be aware of the differences and divisions within the grouping, for example that of class, sexual preference, urban/rural location.

heterosexism, classism and the variety of other relations and of domination. Meaningful social change can only occur if it touches each one of us personally, affects how we relate to each other in our campaigns and programmes, and is reflected in the political programmes that we adopt in our attempts to dismantle institutional structures and power. As Albrecht and Brewer (1990) argue, we cannot compartmentalise our political lives.

"Generating social change engages our entire being; we cannot neatly carve up our lives into alliance work as if it were separate from our personal, family, work and social lives" (Albrecht and Brewer, 1990:148).

This is the challenge that confronts us now in South Africa. The WNC has been given an extended mandate. From the debate and discussions that have been taking place within the Coalition, it is clear that there are many issues that it needs to confront if it is going to move forward and successfully address the 'bubbling issues'. We need to re-examine the nature of the coalition, to re-examine the basis of the 'fragile unity' between women, to focus on its strengths and begin a frank and open discussion of the need to construct and develop an 'ethics of criticism'.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Within this paper I have provided the conceptual and strategic framework against which I raised my research questions. These are questions that I have raised as an activist that is concerned with the need for the WNC, the various women's movement(s) in South Africa, and the progressive movement more generally to acknowledge and deal with the inequalities and differences between women in our political programmes and analysis.

I created an analytical framework within which to place a discussion of the concept of 'differences' between women, and 'effective equality'. I discussed the predominance of debates around racial inequalities, and racism within the difference debate between women in South Africa. I explored the WNC's conceptualisation of effective equality in their attempt to challenge the male defined conceptions of citizenship in a new South Africa which was being 'created' within the negotiations for an interim Constitution and a Bill of Rights. The WNC offered an understanding of equality which took account of the sexual differences between women and men and created a conception of citizenship which took account of women's disadvantage. This was critiqued by a range of women who argued that it is important to take the differences in power between women into account. Drawing heavily from Brah (1993), I conceptualised 'difference' both at the level of social relations and experiential diversity. I argued that much of the challenges and debates about the differences between women that are taking place within the women's movement(s) in South Africa, and particularly among women within the progressive movement centre around black women challenging the white domination of academia and leadership positions, of white women's interpretation of black women's experiences in a way which results in black women becoming the 'objects' of research, and of white women's control of knowledge and knowledge production. White women were also seen to be dominating feminist politics and structures.

I argued that although there may be an awareness of other divisions between women, as a result of apartheid, 'race' is an important 'difference' between women. However, as a result of the prevalence of the non racial policies of the ANC, and the privileging of a class based analysis amongst left wing circles, we do not have a culture that can discuss racism, and racial inequalities very easily.

I argued that if we do not confront these differences between women, and particularly begin addressing the racism and racial inequalities between women in South Africa, and the variety of other oppressions and exploitations, we will perpetuate the tensions, divisions and inequalities between women. If challenges posed by marginalised groups of women are not taken into account, then the groups that have defined and named feminism and feminist practise ie white, middle class and educated women, will continue to define the terms upon which we organise and write of our experiences. Our political theory and practise should thus begin from the starting point of the differences between women in the charting and mapping out of a politics of difference and engaging in conversations across difference. Within this process, I argued that coalition politics provides an effective strategy within which to construct a political solidarity between women and explored the possibilities of developing a political practise which incorporates the use of coalitions based upon the differences between women.

Within the discussions of the Women's National Coalition I argued that just as the political strategy of non racialism posed problems and was criticised within the women's movement(s); so too was the WNC's conception of 'fragile unity'. Women were organised under the banner of the 'fragile unity' between women on the basis of their common political exclusion from the negotiations process and of the need to ensure that women's interests were represented within the interim Constitution. Within this process I showed how the WNC did not confront the different power relations and apartheid divisions

between women. In fact, I argued that the WNC actually perpetuated the tensions, suspicions and conflicts; and the existing power relations based on the social inequalities that currently exist between women in South Africa. Using the metaphor of 'bubbling issues', I explored the processes of exclusion and inclusion of interests of different groups of women that occurred as a result of the WNC not conceptualising their political strategies and analysis from the starting point of differences in power and inequalities between women. These bubbling issues included tensions around the WNC's conceptualisation of 'fragile unity', the racism and classism within the WNC, and a range of structural problems. I discussed how conflictual differences between women were articulated in a variety of ways, in particular racial, economic and ideological differences. However, I also argued that the WNC also filled a need and a political vacuum in the women's movement(s). It provided an umbrella structure which could provide some level of co-ordination and focus for women during the negotiations period. It was able to influence the political negotiations, mobilise support for a Women's Charter for Effective Equality by facilitating the development of new structures and raising the issue of women's disadvantage. Thus, there were some 'successes' within the WNC.

I also explored how the processes of inclusion and exclusion that were present in the WNC impacted on the product of the campaign, the Women's Charter for Effective Equality. I showed how using the concept of human 'rights' as women's rights enabled the WNC to side step the differences in power and inequalities between women. This resulted in serious shortcomings to their conception of effective equality. Some of these included not taking the structural differences in power between women into account and women's contradictory political, racial and class interests. It also raised the question of whether aspirational documents for women necessarily have to sacrifice an acknowledgment of unequal power relations between women?

Within the paper, I also explored what some of the implications of acknowledging the differences between women would have for feminist theories and practises. Within this, I argued for South African women to engage in conversations across their differences, and to begin talking and addressing racism, classism and heterosexism within the women's movement(s) and in our broader political projects. I argued that it is within a politics of solidarity, a politics using the strategy of coalitions based upon our differences that we will find a way out of the impasse that we always reach in our political campaigns and forums within the women's movement(s). I began the process of exploring a set of behaviours that we need to follow while confronting the differences and relations of domination between women, and what some of the bottom lines for 'successful' coalitions are.

These are issues that the WNC and the women's movement(s) in South Africa will have to address in future political programmes and campaigns. Before the 'bubbling' issues 'boil' over and result in the fragmentation and weakening of our women's movement(s), it is important that we all open our ears to the many different voices, particularly marginalised voices. We have to let go of the need for sameness and begin looking at the various ways in which we ignore how different groups of women dominate and oppress others. We need to acknowledge the racism and the various other prejudices and begin to deal with the issues that we feel are going to divide us. We need to challenge the non racial policies and political practise of the progressive movement, let go of the need for a 'fragile unity' between women and acknowledge the differences between women. This can pave the way for the empowerment of marginalised and excluded groups of women in South Africa (Synthesising exercise, group paper on difference).

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