



Revisiting Women's Organisations for National Liberation in South Africa: Struggles for Rights and Representation

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyse the strategic alliances of women within South Africa. It attempts to examine and access the challenges in front of women's organizations for their rights and representation under the apartheid era from 1948 until the early 1990s. The paper further analyses women's activism in these movements that pressurized the government to make constitutional and legal provisions for them. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine the evolving forms of women's activism in South Africa that played a significant role in the end of Apartheid and the rise of democratic government.

Keywords: *Women's Movement, Apartheid System, Feminism, Rights, Representation*

1. Introduction

South Africa became a significant country in the African continent after the end of the apartheid system though it is one of the most unequal countries in the world where women are severely affected by inequality, poverty, and patriarchy. South African women have faced unjust forms of discrimination at all levels. They have been stripped of basic rights and of opportunities to improve their position on several occasions like the right to live with their husbands, or the right to take care of their children. African women were dragged to the very lowest status under apartheid legislation. Therefore, the common oppression and suppression led women to form strategic alliances against the apartheid system. Women have played a crucial role as supporters and organizers of the national liberation movement. The analysis reveals that women's organisations and movements have challenged the discriminatory nature of the state and women from time to time have shown great strength throughout the country's history. Even the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council resolutions condemned the policy of apartheid and acknowledged the strategic alliances of women and women's movement in South Africa for their outstanding contribution to the struggle for a free, democratic, and non-racial Southern Africa. Hence, it's a struggle for freedom from oppression, equality, and rights for women in the public and private sphere.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the status of women in the apartheid era and the role played by South African women in the apartheid era. It turns to an evaluation of the nature of women's organisations in the 1950s and 1980s. The final part explains how the shift from the anti-apartheid movement to democracy has changed the nature of politics and women's organisations in South Africa.

2. Status of women in the Apartheid Era

The eradication of apartheid legislation is a matter of concern to all humanity as it is a crime of genocide, whose primary victims are women. The South African women were degraded under apartheid legislation. An increase in the deterioration of the economic and social role of women in the apartheid legislation had an adverse effect on the women like compulsory separation of women and children from

the father of the family; the policy of passes controlled the movement of women; the difficulty of having access to adequate medical care, and to access elementary education; and the absence of choice concerning employment, which restricted women to choose the occupation of their choice.

The cruel apartheid system was criticised at the international level and the elimination of this system was on the agenda of the United Nations from the beginning. The appeals made by the international level contained in the resolutions, decisions, and recommendations of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the International Court of Justice to put an end to the practice of apartheid were unheeded by South Africa. Taking into account, the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council took various measures to combat apartheid legislation by ensuring the release of political prisoners in South Africa; providing full support and assistance to oppressed women in their struggle for the total eradication of apartheid; and urged the UN agencies to do the same, in order to reduce the sufferings of the women under apartheid.

3. South African Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

At the beginning of the 20th century, women have been the most marginalized group in South Africa. At the top of the hierarchy were the white men and at the bottom were the black women of South Africa. Alice Walker with the help of her novels familiarizes her readers with the real struggle women face in society. In one of her novels, "The Temple of my Familiar", she writes about black women who have suffered the most under patriarchal social order, where women were suppressed and oppressed by both white and black men. Also, women in South Africa have been victims of sex-based inequality, socio-economic inequalities, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and so on. Thus, South African women have been engaged in several organisations and movements in opposition to patriarchy.

The Bantu Women's League (BWL), 1918 was the first women's organisation in South Africa. Africans except for African men whose labour was required were forced to move out of white areas to the Bantustans due to which all black workers were turning into migratory workers as they were permitted to stay as long as they can be employed by the whites. 'It is accepted Government policy that Bantu are only temporarily resident in the European areas as long as they offer labour,' said an official circular from the Department of Bantu Administration.

All the black women and children in the white areas were shipped back to the homelands and they were not allowed to enter the white areas without the pass or if her labour was needed. So, these women were severely affected by the three policy factors- the pass laws, population removals, and migratory labour system because it controlled their movement. As a result, BWL was formed to force the government to abandon the policy of passes for non-white women. This non-pass campaign was formed in order to remove the restriction on the movement of non-white women by the government.

Women were severely affected during the time of world wars due to which they have to take informal jobs in order to survive. They even formed "Women's Food Committees in Cape Town" after a growing discontent about the food situation, the rising cost of living among Cape Town women. Furthermore, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) pressurized the government to introduce a ration system. The food crises of the 1940s established a gateway to National Liberation Movement for many black women. Guardian, 1946, 'today we fight for food, tomorrow for the vote and then for the freedom of all.' So, there was a shift of focus to wider political issues. Another women's organisation named African National Congress. Women's League (ANCWL) was formed in 1943. The BWL was replaced by ANCWL in 1948. Women continued their struggle against the odds. Their main agenda was a national struggle for freedom rather than a fight for women's rights.

4. New Racist System

In 1948, the National Party won the general elections. They formed the Apartheid System after winning the elections. The term apartheid comes from the Afrikaans word 'apartness', one in which emphasis is

always on the differences between people. In this system, the resources and wealth of the country were controlled by the minority white in South Africa, to oppress and suppress the blacks, especially black women. The new system increased the rate of racism in South Africa. In the Apartheid System, all the decisions were taken against the interest of black people. As a result, this system faced criticisms from all around the world and women's organisations became visible challengers to the very existence of this system.

5. The Federation of South African Women (FSAW)

To end the apartheid system there was a need to unite. FSAW was established in 1954. It was a very powerful organisation formed under the slogan 'Forward to freedom, security, equal rights and peace for all.' The primary objective of FSAW was to establish a massive women's organisation in which all women would be given equal opportunities irrespective of their race, colour, or creed and to end the apartheid system. In 1955, protest against the passes became a major concern for ANCWL and FSAW. On 9th August 1956, a national meeting was held that focused on the anti-pass campaign. The ban of ANC in 1961 hindered the functioning of FSAW as it had links with ANC. Many politically active leaders were removed from the organisation by the government. In the late 1960s, the view of equal rights and equal status was challenged in the west, where women were treated as second-class citizens and didn't enjoy full equality. They were being oppressed and suppressed by men. This didn't break the spirit of women and they revived and regroup on different occasions, but was finally dissolved in 1991. During International Women's Year (1975), Black Women's Federation (BWF) was founded at a conference organized by a local Natal organisation. It encouraged women of urban and rural areas to realize the importance of education which will help them to earn a living, self-worth, and legal rights.

6. The United Women's Congress (UWO/UWCO)

The uprising of the students, as well as mothers, marked the beginning of the end of the apartheid system in 1976, the Soweto riots. The birth of UWO in 1981 was a result of the New Educational laws based on the lines of the apartheid regime, where the Afrikaans along with English was made a compulsory medium of instruction in schools in 1974. In 1976, around 600 children were killed by the South African police. Since then, the organisation aims to protect the children from police brutality and to remove all laws that were against women. They played a major role by organizing women at the grassroots level. Even members of the organisations like the Women's Federation of South Africa (WfSA) and BWF were actively involved in struggles in opposition to Education and provided full support to the Soweto students.

7. Women's organisations in the 1950s and 1980s

The women's organisations aimed at ending the apartheid system in the 1950s and 1980s. For instance, the FSAW had been a voice for women in the 1950s and 1980s. In both periods, women's organisations didn't have a feminist ideology. FSAW aimed at improving the conditions of women. The Women's Charter was established, it challenged gender stereotypes and gender equality. It ensured that women's issues were reflected in the charter. The FSAW organized women for struggles of their own in the townships, concerning food prices, housing, education, and the children. It was not able to continue all its activities when the ANC was banned in 1960 and when all its main leaders were put under house arrest. Several UWO members were former FSAW and ANCWL members. It aimed at mobilising the women in the struggle against apartheid. It drew its inspiration from traditions of the FSAW, i.e., based on individual membership. The major objective of South African politics in the 1980s has been to mobilise women for liberation, rather than to mobilise them for women's liberation.

8. First experience with democracy (1990 onwards)

The women's organisations played a significant role in the end of Apartheid and the rise of democratic government. It marked an important stage of growth of unity among all the oppressed. The shift from the anti-apartheid movement to democracy has changed the nature of politics and women's organisations in South Africa. The transition to democracy provided a window of opportunity for

women's organisations like in 1991, the ANCWL called women's organisations to raise awareness of the neglect of women's issues and to make sure that the new constitution reflects the equality between men and women. It was agreed by the majority that there was a need for a coalition, rather than a new organisation. A Women's National Coalition emerged out of ANCWL.

A Women's National Coalition aimed to provide equality for women in the new constitution. The WNC realised that women across the race and class experienced oppression and subordination. This recognition helped in a coalition of women across different ideological interests. It played a major role in promoting women's rights and gender equality. The WNC saw commonalities between women from different classes, races, and ethnic backgrounds. The WNC presented the Women's Charter for Effective Equality. The focus had been dispersed in national politics, rather than in fighting the gender struggle. The WNC could not sustain its existence because of a lack of money and leadership problems.

The feminist agendas were marginalised because it was not viewed as a 'reformist' ideology, but a 'foreign' ideology. However, women's politics in South Africa can be seen as a struggle against the marginalization of women. It has played a major role in mobilizing people having different ideologies and inserting gender equality concerns into mainstream politics.

Three areas that sparked radical changes in the women's movement;

1. The end of Apartheid and the rise of democratic government.
2. Emergence of autonomous organisations for representing women's movement.
3. Unbanning of the liberation movements allowed the inclusion of demands of gender equality, representation, and participation of women in the decision-making structures.

The main challenge in front of the women's movement is not only to confront patriarchy but also to challenge their exclusion and direct access in mainstream politics.

The primary objective of the ANC Women's League in the 1950s and 1980s was to draw together women's organisations within the ANC, whereas in the 1990s the main motive was to build a national women's structure that would link women across racial and ideological divisions. The vision of the Freedom Charter and the Women's Charter of the 1950s focused on the mobilisation of women who may be reluctant to join political discussions through education and empowerment. On the other hand, the transition offered an opportunity to raise the level of political consciousness among women.

Therefore, the transitional period created a space for a feminist movement to emerge and challenge the existing forms of women's organisations. A more collective approach is needed to protect democracy and gender equality, i.e., by protecting and monitoring the quality of life and status of women, and to reflect the needs, claims, and interests of women.

9. Conclusion

The women's organisations played a significant role in the end of Apartheid and the rise of democratic government. Since the establishment of the first women's organisation, the Bantu women's League (1918), women have played a key role in establishing women's organisation and movements whenever it was required. Historically, there was a rise of women leaders in several organisations and movements. Women have opened up new spaces for building women's movement at the grassroots level. During the struggle against the Apartheid system, women formed strategic unions to end this racist system. The protests in South Africa received international attention and United Nations General Assembly condemned apartheid.

The debate about the relationship between nationalism and gender oppression was not a part of discourse until the 1990s, where the birth of feminist perspective began to articulate by women within the ANC itself. The new women's organisations build coalitions to bring together women of diverse

backgrounds. The formation of the women's coalition at the national level was a major turning point in history because it was able to build women's organisations at the grassroots level and opened the gateways in politics. The National Party government of Pieter Botha was forced to step down and this led to the end of the apartheid system in 1994. The success of antiapartheid activists played a crucial role in defining the interests of women in the constitution of new South Africa.

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