# CONCLUSION

This book tells the story of a voluntary organisation, the women who founded and developed it, and the civic and cultural work they engaged in under its banner of autonomy in South Africa's most infamously exclusionary historical period. It shows how gender, class, religion, and both generational and political change shaped the practical realities and meanings of their organisational work and collective self-understanding.

From 1954, the Women's Cultural Group has defined and pursued its vision of the social good. Marginalised in relation to formal and customary institutions of power, the Group aimed to make a contribution that would shape the life of the nation and community to which they belonged. Through an organisational form that both straddled, and made prosperous use of, the boundaries between political and non-political, secular and religious, and public and private, their history reveals an impressive range of accomplishments and successes. As brokers of culture, their agency in contributing to a local creole conception of 'Indianness' can be seen in a variety of activities and productions – plays, cookery books, poetry and music festivals, culturally themed fundraising events such as 'Oriental' dinners and 'Meena Bazaars' – that have galvanised a sense of community, inviting participation in a performance of being 'South African Indian'. Extraordinary labour in a wide range of fundraising activities and the dispersal of funds via educational bursaries and loans have made an

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

impact on hundreds of individuals, and have had an even wider effect on class mobility for thousands more. Donations to charities and active involvement in welfare work have been nothing short of spectacular.

Documenting and celebrating the achievements of the Group and its work has been one important aim of this book. Dedicated civic labour, as an act of faith, duty, optimism or love, is an involvement that does not merely deserve, but also requires, more general acknowledgement, since the world continues to offer the challenges of poverty, inequality and suffering. Considered by some to be a quaint or redundant operation, especially when set against the professionalism of some non-governmental organisations which command large sums of money and trained personnel, the voluntary work of ordinary citizens and the motivations that inform collective charitable work should rather be seen as an endangered but crucial resource, a practice to be encouraged as a standard of good citizenship and self-empowerment. Seen in this light, the Women's Cultural Group provides an inspiring example.

Yet, in this book we have also presented a historical narrative with the aim of identifying some broader trends and patterns, humanised and specified through the life stories of individuals. The case of the Women's Cultural Group draws out the complex and shifting nature of the social worlds that Muslim women in Durban have inhabited over the last half of the 20th century. With women's gendered subjectivities largely defined within household structures as daughters, wives, daughters-in-laws and mothers, the Group's assertion of a civic and public agency was largely engineered as an extension of feminine roles. Some scholars have emphasised the limitations of this tactic, and the dangers to autonomy of working within (rather than challenging) patriarchally defined norms. It is certainly true that the Women's Cultural Group cannot be conceptualised within the framework of feminist movement politics, since its aim has not been to effect a deep alteration of the gendered order of power in society. Although egalitarian in orientation, the Group has benefited as an organisation from maintaining an ambiguity in regards to the overtly political world. It has situated itself within, and draws upon, local community networks and has made itself a conduit of action for the 'ordinary housewife', allowing large numbers of women to join. In this way, it has opened up a public life for many. The balance required of such an approach has, of course, sometimes created impediments to its autonomy and

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

aspirations – with fraternal structures at times wielding their authority, as documented in Chapter 8. But, far from forfeiting power, it appears to be much more the case that the Group's valorisation of the domestic has in fact ensured its public standing and its remarkable longevity. This is most striking in the literary success of *Indian Delights*, an enterprise in which kitchen knowledge operated as the vanguard to economic and organisational independence, as well as national and international acclaim.

Another notable feature that emerges in this history are the complexities of class and status that have shaped Muslim life in Durban, rooted as it is in the histories of migration as well as apartheid-era engineering. Durban claims the largest diasporic Indian population outside of India, yet this population is characterised by its diversity as much as by a creolised sensibility – a sensibility developed historically in the racialised crucible of institutional discrimination and through solidarities mobilised in resistance to exclusionary governments. A number of Group members are progeny of powerful, dynastic trading families whose assets in the past included ships and chains of business enterprise linking port cities around the Indian Ocean basin. The elite ranking, entrepreneurial success and cultured worldliness of these families made them key agents in the development of Durban, despite the city's segregated, parochial character.

The Group's 'elitist' reputation, one that is sometimes invoked disparagingly by critics, has undeniably emerged from the generally middle- or upper-class socio-economic position of many members. Similarly, because of its avoidance of formal political action, it is sometimes labelled 'conservative', or cast as a society of tea-drinking ladies from the leisured classes with an interest in protecting the socio-economic status quo. But many members, including Zuleikha Mayat herself, hail from relatively modest petite bourgeois backgrounds, characterised by a strong work ethic that dictated long hours of labour for all members of the family, including children. Many were raised in modest economic conditions buffered by the strength of extended family ties, which shouldered the weight of financial losses or the death of a breadwinner. As is evident in the life stories of many women, marriage can effect transformations of fortune. And, while marriage has not been the inevitable fate of all women, family standing has influenced the ability of women to gain the education and training needed to fulfil professional aspirations and independence. The gendered structures of kinship and migration that long constituted a collective

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

strategy for capital accumulation in Muslim trading families are not easily summed up through descriptive class rankings such as 'elite', particularly since access to formal political influence through state processes was so notably absent during the apartheid years.

Elite power – and, in particular, the power of men – has, however, been a historical force in the life of the Group. For the founders of the Women's Cultural Group, the figure of the modern woman and the modern housewife provided leverage for autonomy and a legitimate basis for civic participation. In grasping an ethos of modernity that had become prominent in imperial relations of British India and in the pre-apartheid South African state (advocated through the figures of Agents-General, through club life and voluntary societies), the founders of the Women's Cultural Group were riding a wave of community enthusiasm. Though clashes with particular religious institutions and tenets have also characterised their fifty-year trajectory, they have continued to view themselves – and to be viewed by others – as grounded in the principles of an Islamic way of life, motivated by calls to offer help and succour, mainly in the broader Durban context but also on occasion in other parts of the world. Seen in this light, the Group has been a powerful asset to the Durban Muslim community, strengthening its collective identity and circulating and redistributing its wealth, the beneficiaries of which have included many non-Muslims. In the absence of a functioning welfare state, the Group has operated as a non-political organisation, subsidised by the unpaid time, talents and labour of its members as well as the resources of their households and social networks.

The Group places an ethical premium on its voluntary nature, its model of civil servitude resting on the more spiritual principles of collective action than on productivity traded for individual remuneration. Gender as well as faith informs such a perspective, since women's work has often been associated with the emotions of caregiving: love, loyalty, dedication, selflessness, etc. This has shaped not only the Group's relationship with its beneficiaries, but also relationships within the Group itself. Much of this is very positive. The Group is made up of gracious civic agents, who enjoy a lively camaraderie as partners with a common, relatively egalitarian purpose. While disparities in media attention and recognition sometimes cause hurt and friction, the ideal of shared responsibility and shared satisfaction is deeply felt throughout the

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

organisation. And the work has substantial and measurable rewards: the pleasures of friendship, the satisfactions of altruism, the admiration of patrons and associates, the stimulation of ongoing intellectual, social and ethical challenges. All members who choose to participate do so knowing that their work and rewards are – on principle – similar.

But there are also drawbacks to this model. There are, increasingly, limitations on time and human resources as women juggle formal employment, family responsibilities and Group enterprises. It is probable that skilled women who might offer something valuable to the group cannot always afford to, though a measure of remuneration might secure their ability to serve. Across the decades, it is clear that there have been some very worthy projects begun but not completed, and this may be related to the Group's status as a voluntary association. Finally, the formalities of egalitarian sisterhood have meant that personality, as much as portfolio and office, is able to operate as a means to claim power. Personality-defined hierarchies and cliques often operate informally in such associations to drive agendas and particular directions. While members we spoke to rightfully downplayed these types of power-struggles as inevitabilities common to most Groups, all could verify that feelings are sometimes injured and fall-outs do occur. On the odd occasion, feelings of being undervalued or marginalised have prompted women to leave the Group, as have personality clashes. But it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which an expectation of egalitarian treatment is responsible for the disappointments experienced. The Group has many strong personalities and the dynamics makes differences inevitable, as Hajira Omar pointed out:

> Of course, there are personalities that clash, you know. And Aunty Julu [Zuleikha Mayat] plays the perfect mother-in-law for everyone, she manages to calm things down, put things into perspective and she'll tell you – it's a strange diplomacy – but she will make you feel that you are right and I'm sure she does that to the other person as well, and somehow you feel that you have won, but she just manages to bide the time and after a month or two you realise that's not the issue, you know, it's a common goal that you are working towards.

Ayesha Vorajee observed, philosophically:

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

> With any women's group, there will be bickering, but then we laugh it off eventually. There are sometimes tears – or sometimes the members can't talk to Mum [Zuleikha Mayat] about some issue. Then two, three of them would get together, come to me and tell me, 'You are the diplomatic one, please, we want you to speak to Mum.'

Most of the women that we interviewed, even those no longer active in the Group, believed strongly that it would not have survived for over fifty years if the friendship and companionship it cultivated were not genuine, outweighing the tensions. There are many opportunities for community service available in Durban, and even women such as Hajira Omar who are involved in several of these still find value in participating in the Women's Cultural Group.

Identifiable changes in the Group over its fifty years of existence have been observed in various chapters in this book. Firstly, the Group has moved from having an amateur to a more professional sense of its own status and abilities, a confidence that has come with skills and experience in fundraising, book production and charity work. With opportunities for women in education, younger members arrive with skills that can be put to good use in managing finances, marketing, design and recruitment. Secondly, the Group's age range has also changed over time: from its beginnings as a youthful, horizontal, single age-set enterprise, it now incorporates several generations of members and offers (as an asset) the nurturing and disciplinary age-spectrum sorority its founders – living in very different circumstances – once sought to escape. Such changes highlight not only the internal transformations of the Group but the society-based revolutions that encompass it – changes in family and gender relations, as well as political changes in relation to culture, class and race in South Africa. Finally, global shifts both in Islam and in the globalisation of western-style consumerism have created a tension-filled edge that middle-class Muslim women may face as a special challenge. As religion is politicised around the globe, and blocs within both Islam and Christianity reject modernity in favour of doctrinal fundamentalism, a 'mainly Muslim' organisation that was founded with progressive, modern optimism is bound to feel pressures as it moves into the future.

The Group is no longer 'mainly Muslim' but, in effect, squarely so. Over the years, it has incorporated more religious routines into its functioning – prayers at meetings, for example – and seems to be comfortable with its identification

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

*Group members at a meeting in February 2010.*

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

as a Muslim women's organisation. There may be a variety of reasons for this shift. Ironically, with the end of apartheid, racialised residential communities have in some cases become more insular. Without the moral imperative to defy state-engineered segregation, less energy has been focused on integrating into the broader rainbow of the nation. With the opening up of markets and the democratic election of a state that promises service delivery to the poor, there is a perception that the philanthropy of voluntary groups is now more supplemental than central in providing welfare.

Over the past five decades, the development of a solid Indian middle class has transformed the once dramatic polarisation between wealthy trading families and indentured working classes. With women now an established part of the wage-earning population, and with new commercial and institutional activities available, women's voluntary societies are no longer the only avenue for civic and public participation. Definitions of family and gendered respectability have incorporated many new forms of entertainment and socialising, and the recreational industry has burgeoned in a new climate of commercialism. Culture and cultural activities are valued in a new way, and with fewer speakers of vernacular languages the nature and meaning of cultural participation and practice has changed. Though poverty continues, the Group's focus seems less expansive – it is no longer proactive about reaching across boundaries, but rather has made its work about ameliorating the needs of tried and true charity organisations and addressing new kinds of needs among applicants in the Muslim community.

The new political visibility of Islam and the US-led 'war against terrorism' has certainly upped the stakes in relation to religious identity and places Muslim womanhood under fire. The way that global and national trends have influenced the Group can be seen in the issues they have taken up more overtly as political. In some ways it seems that the Group has almost come full circle with gender boundaries being vigorously policed once more. Mixed gender seating at the annual dinner, for example, became a bone of contention in 2008 when a large Muslim corporate body did not want to attend a fund-raising dinner because it was a 'mixed function'. The company offered a gift pack for guests in 'compensation'. But the Group chose to decline to distribute what would have amounted to free advertising for an enterprise keen to retain

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

its public (and commercial) image by officially distancing itself from their event. Mayat wrote a sardonic reply, affecting concern for the company in question:

> The purchase of the tickets may or may not impact unfavourably on [you] since that will have a certain amount of anonymity, but the gift packs will clearly label the sponsors and therefore leave you with the smudge of being associated with an event that is not considered kosher. Because of my close relationship with [your institution] since virtually its inception I cannot permit this to occur. We therefore regretfully decline your gracious offer of the gift packs. There is no obligation on a donor to explain or apologise when refusing an application but since you have given a reason, our members recall that recently [you] sponsored and prominently attended [two] Dinners which were mixed functions.[1]

It remains to be seen what the reaction of the ulema will be when Zuleikha Mayat no longer leads the Group. She commands the respect of many stakeholders in the community and it is unlikely that anyone else in the Group would be able to write a similar letter without consequences.

This raises the problem of finding a successor for Mayat, whose iron dedication and ease of authority derives both from strength of personality and from her status as the Group's founding leader. Although the formal offices of president, treasurer and secretary rotate, Mayat has shown little hesitation in using her influence to direct how things run. Officially, she has moved away from this role on a number of occasions, to complete her own projects and research,[2] but appears unlikely to withdraw from the role of mentor as long as her energies and intellectual zest remain. Although her fear of nepotism has made her hesitant to promote her daughter-in-law to leadership, Shameema Mayat enjoys the support of many members and has the conviction and personal traits needed in a leader. It is clear that regardless of who takes the helm, the Group will continue to change.

For the women within the Group, both change and continuity are notable but these have been experienced differently by different generations of membership. Friendship is one of the key resources that many life members treasure. For example, at eighty-eight years of age, Gori Patel still remembers

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

the camaraderie 'very much. I don't forget the members – I don't forget the old members. You know, Amina Moosa and myself, we do lots of jokes and laughing so that Mrs Mayat say, "Keep those two away from there", in the meeting too, like, you know, like a good team and we were enjoying ourself.'

Fatima Mayat, a second-generation member, confides:

> The Group has meant a lot for me because I met a lot of people, a lot of our old members like Mrs [Mariam] Motala, Mrs [Zohra] Moosa, you know, they were real hard workers. We learnt a lot. They were my seniors. When I joined the Group, I was very young then and really, with these ladies and their pushing, we really, you know, I grew up.

Zubeida Seedat also observed that there have been 'many changes' over time. 'We have progressed from time to time, our way of doing things has changed, older members like Zohra Moosa guided us – what to do and what not to do – but I always enjoy my time still.'

Zarina Rawat, a member for about ten years, is 'awestruck' when she 'looks at old magazines and brochures', as she perceives that older generations were much more involved: 'they did more'. But Rawat perceives this less as a change in work ethic and more because of the changes in women's lives over the decades. 'Younger women with children have many more commitments – in those days they did not worry about lift clubs, madrassah rounds, sports. We can't commit too much – we also like getting together but have lots of other things to do in the day, like taleem.' Hajira Omar makes a related point that different types of individuals join the Group and for different reasons. Some women have professional skills that have been developed outside of the Group, either in the business world or in non-governmental organisations, and want to contribute to social welfare work and view the Group as an avenue to do so – they may not necessarily be seeking social bonding because they have their own friends and networks. For others, Group membership is desirable precisely because of the friendships and camaraderie, as 'an extension of their social life'. And she added:

> That's a positive thing because I think there is such a strong social link between the women that they will want it to survive. They like seeing each other often, they like working together, You know, when I'm called in there and I have the time, I take my rolling pin and help with whatever is happening there, and there is a wonderful friendship between a lot of

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

*Friendship and fun: Fatima Manack and Ayesha Vorajee at a Group luncheon in 2008.*

Free download from www.hsrcpress.ac.za

> the women and a lot of chirping and, you know, jokes about husbands and that kind of stuff.

Friendship, laughter, cooking – and, yes, many cups of tea. The half-century history of the Women's Cultural Group certainly reveals the strenuous labour and long-term vision of a remarkable set of women who crafted a modern citizenship for themselves in exclusionary conditions. But the history also conveys the delights of civic participation and the light-hearted spirit that has both guided and rewarded their ongoing exertions. Like a recipe for sutherfeni, that beautiful and delicate nest of complicated sweetness usually attempted only by expert mithai makers, their story shows how a combination of ordinary ingredients, determination, lots of practice and a fair measure of luck can combine to make something that sustains and delights us all.