

Women talk votes and power

Separate but equal in government?

BY RONEL SCHEFFER

IN THE run-up to South Africa's first non-racial elections, political parties and organisations are likely to come under pressure to demonstrate that they are serious about women's issues. If they want women to vote for them, they may have to begin to deliver.

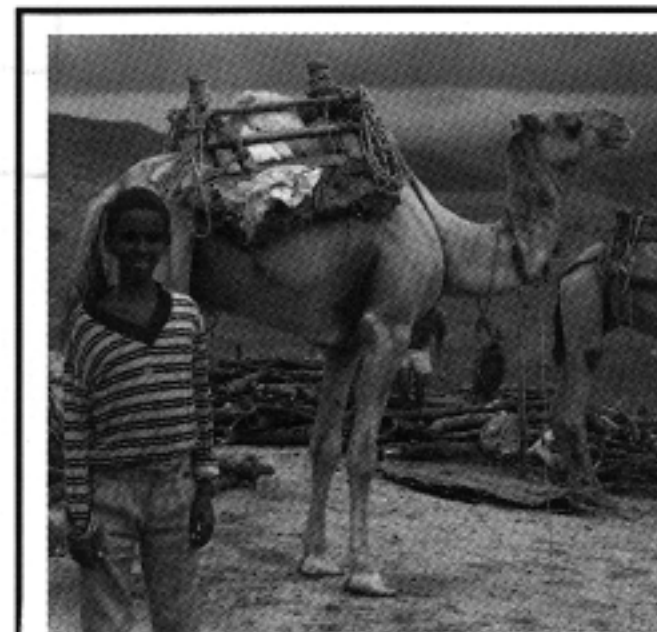
Even if not mounting an actual campaign, this was the spirit in which women parted after an important workshop in Durban this month which examined the ways of empowering women in a democratic government. A large contingent of the 70 participants – with affiliations as disparate as the South African Communist Party and Kontak women's group – attended en bloc from the Women's National Coalition (WNC) which has initiated a process of drawing up a charter of women's rights.

Delegates stressed the importance of building the power of women before the elections. They lamented the demise of the Gender Advisory Committee to Codesa, and the poor results it rendered. Its work was hampered, they said, by procedures which meant that recommendations first had to be taken through Codesa's secretariat before it reached the working groups. By the time Codesa was suspended most of the



UNDER PATRIARCHAL GAZE...Delegates grapple with the need for women's empowerment.

committee's recommendations had not been implemented or considered by the working groups. While the workshop grappled with the intricacies of empowerment strategies, government structures and mechanisms to



Idasa took a journey through the destruction and decay that today characterises Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea ... and found hope and a tremendous will to succeed.

HENNING MYBURGH records his thoughts. See page 8.

protect rights, a wide range of other debates were also raised. At the close, delegates undertook to exert pressure in their own

parties to seek out ways of capturing the imagination of women so that mass involvement in the struggle for equality could be achieved. It was stressed that women's rights were human rights, that they constituted the rights of the majority of people and could not be addressed separately. A delegate observed that the country's commitment to human rights would continue to remain in question

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until women's oppression received greater priority on the political agenda.

The discussions during the workshop, which was hosted by Idasa and a steering committee of Durban-based activists, reflected a desire to unite on gender issues but also highlighted the difficulties this would entail because of historical divisions, particularly those relating to race, class and economic status. It was therefore generally accepted that a true women's movement would have to evolve over time. There was some soul-searching among delegates about exactly whose interests they would represent if they were elected to parliament, and how (or why) women at grassroots level should be persuaded that it was important to vote for women representatives.

Frustrations were expressed about the "chilling and hostile" political environment that exists around issues like sexism and discrimination; the poor level of gender consciousness in the country; the stigmatisation, and even victimisation, faced by those who concern themselves with women's issues. Women's organisations, it was said, were still dismissed as "gossip forums", activists regarded as "frustrated women who don't have anything to do at home" and ambitious women derogatorily referred to as "men".

But the participants were also self-critical, particularly about their performance in raising awareness of gender oppression among grassroots women, the majority of whom still do not see the connection between their daily suffering and gender oppression.

The main purpose of the workshop was to debate ways to meet women's needs and demands in government, and to look at the constraints and capacity of the government and women's organisations to meet those needs. However, by the end of the discussions it was suggested that the "cart might have been put before the horse" in that little discussion had taken place on what women wished to *achieve* in government.

The title of the workshop raised the question of whether a women's ministry — women's ministries were introduced in



SPEAKING OUT...Thoko Msane, secretary of the Women's National Coalition, and Carole Charlewood, DP MP for Umbilo.



KATHI ALBERTYN...We need a package deal.

many developing countries after a United Nations call in the 1970s — would be the most appropriate structure to facilitate participation and representation for women in government.

Kathi Albertyn of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies at Wits University outlined the mechanisms and structures required inside and outside government to advance women's issues. Foreign guests also related the experiences of women in Bangladesh, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone.

Albertyn cautioned against expectations that a single structure like a women's ministry would advance democracy and equality for women. She recommended a "package" approach as a solution.

Required firstly are strategies to get women elected. Options include a constitutional mechanism such as a quota of reserved seats, a quota for women on party lists (in the case of proportional representation) and advocacy groups that support

women's candidacies.

A women's ministry, a women's affairs department and women's desks in a number, or all, government departments are among the options for taking up women's affairs at the executive level of government. Albertyn pointed out that the success of these structures depended on their power, resources and the quality of staff they received. Another dimension of the "pack-

age" consists of mechanisms to ensure that gender interests are safeguarded in the law-making process. Options include a gender committee to scrutinise legislation, a system that compels parliamentary select committees to consider gender issues in legislation or one which stipulates a minimum number of women for passing legislation.

Independent advisory structures, appointed or elected but funded by the state, could also play an important role in influencing policy. These structures may fulfil a variety of functions, including researching, reviewing and recommending policy and providing public education.

Albertyn also highlighted the need for mechanisms outside the court system, such as an ombudsperson or an equal opportunities committee, that have judicial and investigative powers. The main purpose of these mechanisms is to reduce the cost of redress for the average person.

A final requirement is a legal and constitutional mechanism, such as a bill of rights, to protect rights.

Although the subsequent discussions did not produce consensus on any of these measures — in fact it was noted that much more research was needed to inform decisions — delegates were mindful of the danger of marginalising women's issues in a women's ministry.

The comparative experience of women in Bangladesh, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone (which does not have a women's ministry) seemed to support the suggestion of a package approach, and also highlighted the need for a strong and independent women's movement to act as a lobbying and mobilising force. However good they may look on

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paper, the success of women's ministries appeared to depend perhaps on too wide a range of prerequisites, including an ample budget, adequate status, a progressive political culture and the authority and charisma of the individuals heading them.

Stephen Gelb of the University of Natal's Institute for Social and Economic Research provided the background for a discussion on the constraints and capacity of the government to meet the needs of women. He emphasised the importance of a healthy macro-economic situation for redistribution to women and the need for clarity as to who would gain or lose from any policy embarked upon.

Kate Truscott of the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action warned that women would remain marginal to the economy if they were treated as a "welfare category" and their advancement was not seen as a part of legitimate economic development.

Many international donor agencies, she said, had adopted this approach to the detriment of women. In Zimbabwe, for example, policies emphasised income generating projects for women, with the result that they were saturating the market with commodities that rendered little income.

Ronel Scheffer is Idasa's production editor.

South African women

WOMEN in this country may not readily refer to South Africa's assortment of women's organisations as a "women's movement", yet many foreign women fully admire our efforts as such.

Shireen Huq, a Bangladeshi development specialist who was among the foreign guests at the recent workshop held on women's empowerment, is one foreigner

who thinks that South African women are too modest about their achievements in the field of women's rights.

"Outside South Africa we think you do have a women's movement," she told delegates. "You are too modest...I feel a lot of energy here and I am privileged to take some of it back with me to Bangladesh."

Huq, who works for the Danish Development Agency and a women's organisation known as Nariphokko, told the workshop that the women of Bangladesh lagged behind their South African counterparts in

the struggle for equal rights despite having a woman as prime minister, a women's ministry and other mechanisms to advance the status of women. Although their equal status

in public life was guaranteed in the constitution, personal freedoms were still determined by religious laws which meant that equality remained in dispute.

Bangladesh was the third country in the world to get a women's min-

'Outside South Africa we think you do have a women's movement...I feel a lot of energy here'

- Huq



istry, in response to international pressures in 1975, but according to Huq the successes of this structure, located in an autonomous government department, as well as other mechanisms such as quotas, have been limited. Traditional thinking defines the policy goals of the ministry which has no representational base and focuses almost entirely on developing small-scale projects, giving little attention to democracy.

Quotas have not been effective as women representatives are expected to give first loyalty to their political parties rather than a

Bruised, battered, ignored

BY ERIKA COETZEE

IN THE monumental hierarchy of South African iniquities and ills, it is alarming how violence against women remains such an obscured and neglected issue.

It is not that anyone would come right out and admit that the daily misery of a large percentage of South African women just doesn't make it onto their list of priorities. On the contrary, the new South African political vocabulary is littered with lip-service to women's rights and occasional public commitments to gender equality. Yet these

are easy and fashionable talk-shop words, rarely supported by concrete thought and even less often by concrete plans of action.

Where women meet with other women to discuss their needs and experiences, the issues of violence and personal safety emerge time and time again as a central theme of crisis proportions. It is not as if the need to address violence against women is voiced with hesitation or ambiguity: it is an urgent and clear-cut emergency situation.

Then why is it that within the larger political discourse, references are made to "the needs of women" as if they constitute a vague and distant collection of frivolous desires, like better washing powder and cross-your-heart bras?

The slightest understanding of the laws of cause and effect would lead one to conclude that violence against women has something to do with violence on the part of men, yet "the needs of women" are repeatedly spoken about as if they exist somewhere outside the real world in a cloudy blur that doesn't intersect anywhere with the behaviour and

demands of men.

In spite of the tremendous hard work and ongoing efforts by many women's organisations to put violence against women at the top of the agenda, and in spite of the unequivocal message that this is an urgent issue - this loud and clear call seems to fall on unperturbed ears.

What makes it worse is that other kinds of violence are receiving so much attention. There is no doubt that this is necessary and that every effort must be made to establish peace and safety for all citizens. Yet every day, domestic violence causes far more injuries and wounds than the inter-group violence we are witnessing. And while more and more monitoring structures, international delegations and dispute resolution committees are being set up to address violence across the country, Cape Town's only shelter for battered women has been closed due to insufficient funds.

It is as if violence against women is not truly and honestly regarded as violence at