

Abstract

This paper introduces into the debate on the character of South African civil society a selection of gender themes. Its purpose is to suggest how issues of relevance to women's participation and perceptions, and concepts central to understanding gender dynamics may alter and enrich analysis and characterization of civil society. The paper argues that women have developed different organizational and managerial talents from men, and therefore have the capacity of making a distinct and positive contribution to civil society. Then, since the most urgent of the concerns raised by the women interviewed related to violence, and particularly violence against women, the notion of a "crisis in masculinity" will be investigated. Two conceptual distinctions, namely that between the private and public domains and that between practical and strategic interests, are discussed. Finally, in drawing together some key themes of a gendered approach, the paper will indicate how these sorts of concerns have the potential to enhance our understanding of the complexity of civil society in a manner that goes well beyond gender.

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Gender Themes in Civil Society: Illustrations from South Africa¹

by

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Introduction: Contested Terrain

Observers of South Africa's political transition appear agreed on the density and richness of that country's civil society, as evidenced by a large number and variety of active political, economic, commercial, civic, cultural and religious agencies involving everything from mass social movements to national advocacy and interest group representation to local survival and self reliance organizations (Ottaway 1993:114). Some of them go on to acknowledge that this is not necessarily by definition benign or inclusive, or a phenomenon which inevitably strengthens pluralism. As Friedman notes:

. . . the prospects for a strong civil society are obstructed firstly by the uneven spread of organisations; while settled urban residents possess the capacity and opportunity to associate, "marginal" groups--shack and hostel dwellers and rural people--have far fewer resources. We face the prospect of a "strong" civil society from which the majority will remain excluded (1991:15).

A second type of concern emerges from the success of the anti-apartheid mass movement, much of it very closely allied with the African National Congress and its associated organizations; in opposition it was an outstanding example of an independent social movement; but in the post-apartheid era it may remain too close to the new ruling party to represent a "liberal" rather than a "corporatist" force in civil society (Schmitter 1991:16). Heymans, for example, writing about the civics, one of the more effective informal local agencies of the anti-apartheid movement which gained legitimacy at the expense of the formal Government sponsored local councils, observes that with the return of the ANC, it was almost inevitable that their role would have to be re-assessed. He expresses doubts that these previously autonomous shadow local authorities could continue to effectively serve as non-partisan watchdogs of the new local governments (1992:313-4). Shubane, too, worries about the dangers of hegoministic trends and obstacles in the way of competing political group and formations in a civil society so closely related to the ANC (1992:3). And finally, by way of illustration, Coovadia observes the changing nature of the community with which the civics need to deal in a post-apartheid setting.

What civic organizations are realizing is that "communities" are seldom, if ever, homogeneous, and that while anti-apartheid struggles of the previous decade were predicated upon unity within a community, development programs have to recognize divergent and in many cases conflicting interests (1991:349).

These concerns form only part of a debate on the nature of South Africa's civil society and there are strong opposing and divergent views. For one thing, the mass movement is composed of heterogenous ideological, organizational, economic, and ethnic interests, and for another, it is apparent that the interests of private capital are continuing

to play a powerful role in influencing state policies. In a period when so much international hope, optimism and emphasis is being laid on the positive contribution of civil society to democratic transitions, the significance of this debate for this paper is the acknowledgment that civil society is not inherently a benign or inclusive force, nor does it constitute uncontested terrain.

This paper intends to take the investigation of the nature of South African civil society one step further by introducing into the debate a selection of gender themes. While based primarily on interviews with women and men and responses from non-governmental organizations in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, the purpose of the paper is to suggest the way issues of relevance to women's participation and perceptions, and concepts central to understanding gender dynamics may alter and enrich analysis and characterization of civil society.

The paper will commence by indicating that for a variety of reasons women have developed different organizational and managerial talents from men, and therefore have the capacity of making a distinct and positive contribution to civil society and transitions to democracy. Then, since the most urgent of the concerns raised by these women related to violence, and particularly violence against women, the notion of a "crisis in masculinity" will be discussed as one example of the manner in which a gender aware approach can enhance the debate over the quality of civil society. Two conceptual distinctions that are often included in discussion of women and politics, namely that between the private and public domains and that between practical and strategic interests will then be discussed as a way of further bolstering the argument. Finally, in drawing together some key themes of a gendered approach, the paper will try to indicate how these sorts of concerns have the potential to enhance our understanding of the complexity of civil society in a manner that goes well beyond gender.

Women's Special Contribution

In the same way that it took some time for observers to acknowledge that in African rural families there were typically different income and expenditure streams for men and women, so it is taking time for observers to acknowledge that women's access and contribution to public life and politics may often be different from those of men. Ashworth (1992) notes that in many societies the culture of political confrontation is often alien and absurd to, and is very time consuming for, women. Wolchik suggests that women have a more diffuse and more non-partisan sense of politics than men (1992:9); Feijoo writes of how women in Argentina linked politics to their roles in the household, notably as mothers (1992:15); Tripp concludes that in Uganda and Tanzania women were more prepared to cooperate across ascriptive, ethnic lines than were men (1994:117-21); and I (1991) have argued elsewhere, in regard to Africa, for an understanding that women often participate politically in a manner that is different from that of men. Talking of their differences in approach to politics, a women in the Eastern Cape said:

Men are only interested in politics; women are interested in everything going on in the country. Politics is about blacks and whites and the military etc. But women think about the hospice, the disabled, street children, and want to involve everybody.

And a black man, in explaining why there was a separate women's wing of the political party in which he was a local officer, agreed that women seem to have a different route into, and sense of, politics. The separate wing, he said, enabled women to realize their full talents, and to see better the various areas in which they should invest their energies. "Our women's organization focuses on community participation as well as politics. It is difficult to attract women into a [purely] political organization. They cannot see what it does exactly, and what their role will be It's too abstract and vague. The whole process of liberalization becomes too vague if it is not concretized in real activities."

The orientation to cross ethnic lines, the emphasis on concrete achievements, the broader notion of social responsibility, the greater tendency toward peaceful solutions of conflict, and the organizational reliability of women, are all different and constructive contributions to civil society and to the progress of political transition.

In this study in the Eastern Cape, there was very strong agreement among both interviewees and questionnaire respondents that women typically had organizational strengths and capabilities that men lacked. Thirty of the 32 questionnaire responses from local organizations said so, and among the 25 or so women who were asked this question orally, only four said there were no special differences, although a couple of these then went on to note differences. Only one person made the point that women were actually less able to contribute than men.

The following are a few of the many answers explaining why interviewees thought women as a group were more likely to have special capabilities that could contribute positively to organizations. Some of the answers emphasized particular themes. The first set included honesty and reliability as key organizational assets of women. Men, they said, "don't even trust themselves."

Women are honest with money in general and in small clubs. Women can share. Men don't share. Few men have clubs. Women are careful about details, for example they want proof of receipts, and will check building materials.

Women are more responsible and persevering, because of household commitments and household management skills. They are more realistic about budgets and finance.

Others saw women as more dynamic and innovative than men:

Women are more innovative at making money. Men only earn a salary. Women earn a salary, grow and sell vegetables, bake scones, run a store, etc, produce African traditional drinks to sell. Men compete with each other too much.

A number of responses referred to a tradition of women's social and social welfare consciousness (which in some cases also explained their political consciousness), and willingness to unite and to sacrifice on behalf of the less fortunate in the community (which men were said to be unwilling to do).

Other answers included a variety of explanations for the differences among men and women: among other points that were repeated on a number of occasions, it was claimed that women were more cooperative, less personally competitive, more careful, less concerned with their own dignity, more flexible, better planners, and they did not like to fight. It was also pointed out that women are taught to behave honestly and to be more controlled. And finally there was an explanation going back to the long-standing need for women to rely upon each other:

It is easier for women to get friends to cover for them on a "comradely" basis than it is for men. Men will do this for each other because of political duty rather than a natural support system. It is easier for women to ask and get support from other women because they have always been doing this for their children and their homes.

It was noticeable that the few women who did not agree fully with these kinds of statements were educated middle class urban women. One remarked: "It is true that in general women are more honest, but not here. In this organization discipline and accounting are very strict and so both men and women are kept honest." A couple answered that there was no difference between men and women, but one went on to comment that "men cannot go very far without women. They really need us." A few others disagreed that all the differences mentioned above were valid, but they all tended to agree that some of them were. A couple of women made the point that if an organization was run in a disciplined manner both men and women remained honest.

With these few exceptions, however, there was overwhelming agreement that--whatever the explanation--women operated in communities and organizations in a manner that was different from, and more constructive than, that of men. Many of these answers were very emphatic in nature. In the main, the black men interviewed agreed with most of the points made, as did white people who did not so much make negative comments about black men, but tended to make practical comparisons which were favorable to the women: for example: "if I need to get a meeting arranged I would rather rely on a woman;" "If one needs to have something happen between meetings, it is more likely that a woman will get it done than a man."

Of interest too was the variety of reasons given by the interviewees for the perceived difference. A number felt that there was an inherent difference between men and women; some felt it was natural insofar as it arose from the responsibility for giving birth and therefore feeling greater responsibility for the welfare of people; many claimed that it derived from responsibility for the family which demanded continual planning, budgeting, adapting, and cooperating; a few said it was because of greater discipline instilled in women about sexual fidelity; and others believed that girls were socialized from a very early age by family and community to be more responsible and reliable.

A convincing and more generalizable explanation for women's comparative organizational talents is based on the restrictive practices of the South African apartheid system. Black women's propensity to use organizations as an extension of household and income-earning responsibilities, as in savings societies, church groups, grocery clubs, welfare societies, or self-reliance organizations, tended to involve them in non-politically threatening activities less subject to state interference. This in turn meant that a far broader cross section of women have been allowed, over fairly extended periods, to be involved in sustained organizational experience in which a reasonable amount of transparency and accountability was both permitted (by the Government) and required (by the members). By contrast, men tend to be pre-occupied with politics, as indicated by men's dominance of the political/advocacy type organizations and their lack of representation in welfare/service/advice type organizations that responded to the questionnaire, and confirmed by both male and female interviewees' responses (Hirschmann 1994). In these categories of organizations opportunities were severely restricted, and participants were consistently harassed, so limiting the proportion of men who could have been actively involved in a similar open and accountable manner.

Violence: A Crisis in Masculinity?

An essential theme of the interview responses consisted of these black women's negative perceptions of black men. There was a strong resentment of the socially destructive behavior of many men, of their carelessness, callousness, and violence, and also disdain for their organizational capacity and even more so for their lack of social awareness and responsibility, and for their unhelpful role in the home. Many women commented on how men came home, and did nothing except read the paper; and how men had ample opportunity to serve the community but seldom did. Large percentages of women were eschewing marriage completely; they found greater security in female multi-generational or sibling households.

While there was an impatience and anger with men over political violence, this paled next to these women's feelings of resentment and horror at male violence against women and children. According to many of the women, violence against women and abuse of children had achieved frightening proportions. Estimates on women raped vary, but one observer put the figure at 200,000 per year (Hanson 1991:181). A few of the more educated women interviewed made the point that the high numbers might result from improved

reporting rather than actual increases. I did not come across any reliable earlier data that would allow for a comparison, and even the figure of 200,000 must be taken as a very rough estimate. Those poorer women who were asked whether it was possible that the apparent increase resulted from an enhanced awareness of rape as a crime about which they had the right to talk openly and report upon were adamant that incidence of rape was increasing in their neighborhoods.

Indeed, Catherine Campbell (1991) writes about a crisis in masculinity among black South African males. She argues, based on recent South African data, that it is possible to start linking the current violence in the country with a more general crisis of masculinity that has developed in the identity of working class township men. The argument, in brief, suggests that in a patriarchal social order men are socialized to be powerful. In working class communities a strong emphasis is placed on a special type of masculinity--colloquially referred to as "machismo." When that type of masculinity is severely threatened, violence is one of a range of compensatory responses used by men.

Oppressed in both race and class terms by apartheid and South Africa's particular form of racial capitalism, the socially sanctioned power of men over women and children in the family was often the only arena in which men were able to exercise any dominance. More recently these men have been increasingly threatened on a number of fronts. Fathers are often not able to provide for the most basic needs of family members; therefore they feel humiliated and emasculated (given that the ideals of provider, household headship and masculinity are seen to be closely inter-linked in the township frame of reference). Closely related to this phenomenon is the ever-growing number of female headed households that are surviving without men. In addition there has been the growing role of youth in shaping community opinion, thus reducing the fathers' dominant role in community affairs and decision-making. Younger men are faced with a different set of problems: they have (had) much higher expectations about jobs and political influence and, therefore, are suffering serious disillusionment at the poor state of the job market.

How does masculinity reassert itself in this time of crisis? The behavioral option of violence is a socially sanctioned "recipe for living" which is available to men of all ages for a reassertion of their manhood. The opening up of the political arena to grassroots working class politics, particularly over the past five years, has created an important space for the reassertion of male dominance via the current emphasis on violence as a means of solving political conflict.

These arguments are strengthened by the findings of Caroline White, who in a study of gender oppression in township households near Johannesburg, was informed by all the women she interviewed that domestic violence was widespread. They attributed this to drunkenness, overcrowding, poverty, and a male desire to dominate (1993:159).

In the Eastern Cape/Border areas, Banks and Hobson, relying on other studies as well as their own research, note the widespread female response of living without husbands

and the resulting marginalization of men. They provide examples of locations where only about 50% of households are headed by men. Many of their respondents said that they wanted to have nothing to do with men, referring to them as unreliable, irresponsible, and often violent (1993:145, 151-2).

But particularly pertinent was the manner in which Campbell's interpretation was confirmed on many occasions in these interviews in the Eastern Cape by people who had never heard of it. These women bemoaned the violence of men, both politically related violence and that against women, and many of them explained that they saw one major cause deriving from a sense of humiliation felt by men as a result of their unemployment and a lack of alternatives in earning money and self respect. As one woman said, "The more unemployed, the more humiliated the men become, the more they drink." Another agreed, "Traumatized, insecure, and uncertain men who used to be in control of their lives are now no longer in control." At more length a third woman explained:

Many men are being retrenched. Many men are unemployed. They have nothing to do. They are looking for excitement. So they cause trouble. A man gets depressed over his wife's success. It causes jealousy. At home if the man is unemployed and his wife is employed he will be resentful. Alcohol is leading to more abuse of wives. Also to more abuse of children. Most families are affected by alcohol. Women are also drinking now.

Why now, in this time of transition? Campbell suggests that part of the answer can be found in the state having loosened up some of the more overtly repressive strategies that had held black people's lives in a total stronghold. This process has opened up space for forms of behavior that previously would not have been tolerated (1991:18). It is a sad irony that the ending of racial oppression has come at a time of economic recession and unemployment, with concomitant negative and violent social impacts.

The issue of violence against women and its causes should be at the core of any analysis of the nature of civil society in South Africa. Were this level of violence, 200,000 cases of physical abuse a year, perpetrated by whites on blacks or by one ethnic group on another it would be seen as representing a fundamental social breakdown. But it is a consequence of a male centric notion of civil society focusing primarily on what is seen as "political" that violence against women is all but overlooked. However pluralistic and effective associational life was on its way to be coming, ethnic and racial violence in South Africa (like religious violence elsewhere) would be seen as a fundamental challenge to a positive assessment of the quality of civil society; sexual violence, even on massive scale, is not so seen.

Private and Public Domains

Most democracy theory and discussion of civil society ignore the critical importance of linking the dynamics and practices of the private domain of family, household, and

possibly community to the public domain of politics, policy making, and economics. By overlooking the fact that many restrictions on women's legal, political, and economic capacity--for example, their mobility, contractual capacity, and expected social behavior--derive from limitations established within the household, such theory is unable to comprehend the predicament of women in political life and in transitions to democracy (Pateman 1983). This research draws attention to the analytical advantage of understanding the distinctions, but of far greater importance, it enlightens the essential inter-relationship between the public and private domains and the way they differentially affect the participation of men and women in public life.

Themes relating to the private and the public domains and the continuous and necessary overlap between them threaded their way through almost every interview response during the course of this research. Interviewees mentioned many instances of public policy and practice, both formal and informal, determining women's roles in the household; for example, rules on maternity leave, salary structures, and contractual rights.

The women also discussed a variety of constraints deriving from the private domain that limited their involvement in the public domain. For example, one set of obstacles related to the opposition of their husbands, either out of reasons of jealousy--"the wife might meet another man"--or because they did not believe the women's efforts were serious or valuable. Some men objected that the women were not being paid for their work; others that the children were receiving inadequate attention in the mother's absence. Even something as minor as time to read the newspaper, it was pointed out by one woman, meant that men were better informed about politics, and women were dependent on husbands for political information. Also mentioned were the usual list of heavy domestic demands on women's time, which restricted their outside involvement.

But rather than focus on this list of constraints deriving from the private responsibilities, which tend to marginalize women, this section will give attention to the connection between the private and the public in cases where women are seeking to act as agents of change. A few positive examples were found where fathers and mothers encouraged their daughters to be more assertive and confident; women who had this experience said it was very rare that girls received such encouragement at home, but that, where it occurred, it was key to their taking on community and public responsibility.

The case of women being motivated to take overt public political action because their children were being abused by the police provided yet another kind of illustration of the overlap of the two domains. Similarly, in one case where women were informed that there was about to be violent clash between the men and "the children" over the latter's efforts to close a drinking establishment, the women had taken immediate and effective public conflict resolution action to prevent a violent confrontation. A number of women observed that because of their particular domestic responsibilities, they understood, and would do far more about, policy issues concerned with health, social welfare, recreation facilities, street

children, and the elderly. And we have seen, too, how many of them felt that it was their responsibility for their family that prepared them for effective organizational responsibility.

Most specifically I want to use the two themes of motivation and time management to demonstrate the public-private connection. As will be seen, the women's motivations varied considerably: from parental guidance or influence, to personal experiences of poverty, to community and political commitment, to the need for personal upliftment, to concern about the rights of women and children. Early encouragement at home was often a key point in inspiring a sense of responsibility and confidence. For example, one woman said: "My mother spoke out for herself. My father made me think I can do whatever I set out to do. He said go for it. Also the exposure to politics at university added to my interest. Also I have lived the experience and I am therefore the expert." Given that the women often included a number of points in their responses, it is not possible to classify their answers neatly. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw out some main themes and provide a few examples.

A number of answers were mainly concerned about the responsibility of women to look after their own practical needs. In a sense, the organization became an extension of their household role with a focus on their political strategic needs. As they said, if they did not do it, nobody else would do it on their behalf.

I find the organization socially, mentally, and spiritually uplifting. Also the women solve common problems as women, and so we gain strength. It is also to learn skills such as sewing, cooking, and dealing with people.

I was in COSATU [Congress of South African Trade Unions] long before the other organizations were unbanned. I was involved in women's issues because we were exploited at work and by men in the community. I know that if there are no women on committees then no one will create an awareness about women. Women must fight. Also, in the particular union to which I belong and in the ANC, if we don't participate there will be no discussion of women's issues, such as maternity leave. If we do not keep reminding the shop stewards, who are all male, they will compromise first on women's issues during negotiations.

A few of the interviewees made points about their own and their community's experience of the deprivations of apartheid and the consequent wish to assist with social and political change. This theme of being part of it--"the people's problems are my problems," "I live it every day"--and therefore having the motivation of community commitment and the "expertise of personal experience" was mentioned by a few of the women.

It is one's own experience that makes you interested. You grow up learning all the difficulties of our people: unemployment, illiteracy and general ignorance. But more specifically, I gained my early and most important

experience with the Black Community programs of the 1970s associated with Black Consciousness and Steve Biko. I learned a lot from the people I worked with. In the trouble after 1976 my husband was detained and he died in detention. I knew the cause he was fighting and determined to continue.

And, in reasoning reminiscent of that of the Argentinean mothers of the "disappeared ones," some of the women explained how the effects of the government's violence against their children had motivated them to organize. It was noteworthy to hear them make the point that men would not have mobilized on this basis.

We were very angry as women and as mothers after the police action in 1986 against our children. We experienced the suffering of the children very differently from our men. Fathers are not interested. They can see children being kicked by police without reacting. We want to get things for our children like security from the police, education, and also rights for ourselves.

It is common wisdom across the world, and it was confirmed during interviews and in questionnaire responses, that a major reason for women not participating more fully in politics and community activities is their heavy workload both at home and at work (Ashworth 1992:17; Painter and Wong 1992:27). It was important, therefore, to find out how women who were motivated to serve community needs managed their time.

A few generalizations can be made. The prime one is that key to a woman's involvement in civil society is her household relationship and the time that particular arrangement allows for outside participation. It appears, if these women can be taken as in any way indicative of women who participate in community associations, that it was considerably easier for unmarried women (a category that includes widowed, divorced, separated and single mature women) to be active than for married women.

The restrictions on married women may result partly from the nature of the marriage relationship itself, and the attitudes of husbands to such public activity, as discussed above, and the amount of time he wishes to be devoted to his needs. Restrictions definitely also relate to the woman's major responsibility for bringing up children. It may also be the case, particularly in urban areas, that a joint household cuts the wife off--at least to a greater degree than non-married women--from support networks of relatives or other women who might be able to assist in the home. Most of the women interviewed were unmarried (as defined above); and most of them had to receive support from someone else, usually another woman or other women who were relatives, such as a mother or sister.

One Grahamstown woman provided a typical example. (Grahamstown is a mid-size town with a very high black unemployment rate.) She was not married and was in her early forties. She lived with her sister, an uncle, and a cousin. She had two children aged 10 and 12. She worked full-time and had a part-time job. In addition, she belonged to a women's political organization, a church organization, a burial society, a grocery group, a money-

making group (*mgalelo*), and a savings group. According to her, she was "very part-time" in the church organization and burial society; and the grocery club involved only one meeting a year. The money-making organization and the savings club both met no more than once a month. She participated in church activities, but on an irregular basis, and helped with the burial society only occasionally. Her political commitments took most of her time. The women's political group met once a month, the council (including men, youth and women) met once a month, and also for any other reason of importance or in crisis. Without her uncle and sisters, she said, she could not manage, although she obviously was required to take her turn with household duties and child minding. For example, without their support she would not have been able to go directly from work to meetings without going home first, and she would have been unable to spend time on committees. She made the point that many women who drop out of political or community activity do so simply because they do not have this support, and therefore cannot devote the time.

A number of the women were employed in NGOs rather than serving as volunteers. Yet they also found that they needed the extra support, and they also indicated that this was more easily found among sisters and mothers than husbands. The reason for this need of support was that many of these organizations required their staff to work after hours, for example to teach literacy and provide advice, as well as go on field visits, attend workshops out of town, or take funders around. All of this necessitated that, as part of the successful fulfillment of her duties, the woman have extra support in the home. In a few cases, these women were the only breadwinners of the household, financially responsible for the other women who in return helped look after the children. As a final example, one woman explained that since her child had a chronic illness she could only manage her work responsibilities, which required frequent trips out of town, because her mother lived with her and had the necessary training to look after the child while she was away.

The overwhelming sense of these responses is that the nexus between the private and the public in regard to women's ability to participate in community initiatives is so tight that while the separation has analytical utility, particularly in differentiating between men's and women's capacity to participate, it is not a distinction that most of these women themselves would feel to be relevant to their day-to-day household and associational life.

Strategic and Practical Interests

A related set of distinctions has been made between women's pursuance of their strategic and their practical interests. Strategic interests are said to require a feminist level of consciousness and aim to alter the sexual dispensation of power and division of labor. Practical gender interests arise in consequence of women's position in the division of labor. Having primary responsibility for domestic work, women are likely to mobilize in response to economic necessity and to gain better access to community services and sources of income, but they do not set out to challenge gender subordination (Molyneux 1986). Strategic interests are more often the concern of more educated and politically conscious women and practical interests those of poorer, less educated women. In making this

distinction there is an implication that the latter is of less significance insofar as it fails to challenge, and may even reinforce, the established gender pattern of male dominance. Although not usually discussed in terms of its relevance to civil society, it is clear that this kind of distinction could easily have the effect of locating women's organizations pursuing strategic interests inside, and those pursuing practical interests outside, the realm of the definition of civil society.

Mukyala and Tripp, based on a recent case study in Uganda, join a number of authors in challenging the dichotomy and the notion of hierarchy of significance for women. They point out that struggles over practical interests are inherently struggles against the subordination of women. The view that poor women only organize around economic issues in a passive and defensive way denies them agency and consciousness and misunderstands that the struggle itself can be a politically transformative process (undated draft:4-7). Landell-Mills, in observing that African women in rural areas have a long tradition of organizing themselves, mainly in times of birth, marriage, illness, and death to support each other, notes the strong and primary tendency for women's organizations to coalesce around concrete social and economic issues but be available to branch out into politics and gender politics when necessary to advance their interests. He also incidentally confirms their organizational discipline and solidarity (1992:20).

The content of this data from the Eastern Cape confirms the kind of argument made by Mukyala and Tripp. While conceptually there is value in defining two categories of action, it is misleading to suggest that strategic and practical actions are separable or that one can generalize across situations and for different categories of women as to which might be the preferred initiative. Most organizations have the capacity to empower; experience and confidence are gained in concrete situations; often women's organizations and individual women have multiple roles that can be both practical and strategic; and premature confrontation is not always the most strategic mode of effecting change.

It is through organizations such as the *mgalelos*, savings, and self-help societies that black women in the Eastern Cape, particularly poorer women, have built, and are continuing to do so, self-confidence, self-reliance, organizational capacity, leadership, analytical skills, and awareness of the need for pressing for policy changes.

Furthermore, strategic pragmatism was a strong characteristic of these women's mode of operating. This was evidenced, for example, in answers to the question about their preference for working in women-only or mixed organizations. The answers received were devoid of any overt ideology or theory. They dealt expressly with what was best for a specific group of women who wished to accomplish a particular objective at a specific time and place. Most saw general advantages in women working on their own, and particular benefits in some circumstances, but there was also recognition of the (sometimes longer-term) utility of engaging with men, and of some of the dangers of excluding them.

As an example of the essential pragmatism of these answers, one woman said that there were advantages in a women-only organization in the case of a self-reliance organization but in mixing for a money-making organization. In the former case, women needed to talk about subjects of special relevance to women, for example, children, the home, men's aggression, violence in the home, and women's work. Men would become bored, even hostile, if they were required to listen to these topics. "We could not discuss these things in front of them." In the case of the money-making group, however, men carried out some essential aspects of the work, such as buying and slaughtering the cattle and selling the meat. The women, she pointed out, supervised very carefully and provided both members of the two-person committee, at the men's request.

Further, many of the women interviewed were involved in numerous organizations whose combined objectives typically covered both the practical and the strategic. One example of such a Grahamstown woman was given above in detail. Another is the quote above of the woman participating in the trade union at committee level in order to look after women's interests, including political, material, and maternity interests.

This is not deny all validity to the conceptual distinction, nor to deny that women may end up looking after their domestic and small enterprise interests only, that they may sometimes fail to foster their political interests, or that men will often seek to turn women's sections of political parties into female support service groups. The line can be a fine one. But most of the women who were supporting more practically oriented associations understood fully the need to go beyond the practical when necessary.

Finally, it is worth taking note of the very personal decision many individual women are making (referred to elsewhere in this article) of not marrying. This appeared to be based primarily on practical considerations; that men were seen as an economic burden, as unreliable partners, and potentially violent in the household. However, when translated into a massive trend particularly among working class and poorer women, these individual decisions amount to a major strategic challenge to men's dominance and women's subordination, with important implications for the nature of household, gender, and generational relations.

Learning from a Gendered Perspective

The objective of the paper has been to indicate a few ways in which the focus on gender relations not only alters the nature of the debate on civil society, but enriches and refines its content. The conclusion will suggest the way such a gendered approach has the potential to contribute to assessments of civil society that go beyond gender concerns. The focus on women and on the relationship between men and women indirectly sheds light on a wider array of important issues that can affect the concept, the content and the definition of, and method of research on, civil society.

Elsewhere, in a companion piece, based on a different set of responses from those relied upon here, but emanating from the same research, I attempted to demonstrate the inadequacy of relying on a narrow state-oriented definition of civil society. In particular that article demonstrates how much of women's associational activity takes place in the social non-state focused sphere, but how closely intermeshed this type of activity often is with the more political state-oriented activity. The narrow definition, it was pointed out, would therefore exclude much of women's activity (Hirschmann 1994). But the broader lesson of that conclusion is that the narrow definition would omit much of the activity of all non-elite groups who seldom have the resources or incentive to even contemplate forming think tanks and advocacy groups, and thus contribute to an elitist cooptation of a component of the democratic process.

Further, a clear observation derived from focusing on gender issues in the Eastern Cape confirms that civil society is not of itself some benign phenomenon, inherently helpful to women's participation. Rather, it is a contested terrain in which the politics of gender play themselves out in a competitive, even conflictive, and sometimes violent manner. Space to participate in civil society opens up opportunities for women's participation, but many of the same constraints, formal and informal, that limit women's empowerment in other political spheres are to be found in this one as well. Similarly, it can be concluded that class competition and conflict will be core to the dynamics of civil society, and those with power will be in a position to manipulate opportunities for influence far more effectively than the powerless, most of whom are unlikely to have the information or the capacity to participate. Ethnic, religious, racial, economic, and regional differences and animosities, while contributing to a more pluralist and competitive political environment, will all impact on the nature of civil society.

In coming to a better appreciation of the fact that women often perceive of politics and political competition and conflict, and operate politically, in a manner that is different from men, a gender aware approach encourages far more culturally open-ended research on civil society. This leaves open the possibility of looking at activities and modalities of actors who may operate in ways and through institutions that are at variance with those expected by someone familiar with western industrialized experiences. For example, a society or community's customary or cultural associational propensity may say as much about the strengths and potential of a particular civil society as does the counting of a list of registered NGOs.

Next, it is clear from listening to these women, that while the neat distinction that locates civil society between the primary (state) and tertiary (household) levels of the society (Schmitter 1991:16), has some validity, the political reality is that civil society will inevitably be deeply penetrated by the forces that shape both of these two levels. The state and the political actors that pursue state power will set out to influence the middle "secondary" level. So, too, will household heads, through controlling allocation of responsibilities in the household, determine women's freedom to take advantage of the opportunities provided by civil society. One response of women, noted in this research, that of remaining unmarried,

obviously affects their role in the organizations that make up civil society. Also, the recent history of activism of South Africa's black youth has affected inter-generational relations inside the household. Finally, by way of illustrating this inter-penetration, it is clear that governments and political parties have the power and every incentive to use it, to control the environment in which NGOs of all kinds operate, by methods such as taxation and registration requirements. So it must be assumed that the state and political parties will penetrate downwards and manipulate the main actors in civil society.

A further lesson of the gender aware approach that provides a focus on widespread political and criminal violence and violence against women on the one hand, and women's specific way of dealing with organizations and with conflict is that there is a need to assess the "quality" and not only the "quantity" of civil society. Too often one is talking of dense and rich civil society in a quantitative sense, that is, there are many, varied, and active organizations and movements. The lesson is that any analysis should also take account of the manner in which those organizations behave, mobilize individual and group aspirations, interact (that is, cooperate, compete, conflict, influence, resolve conflicts, and build tolerance) with each other, as well as the way they relate to the state.

In paying attention to women and violence a gendered approach inevitably also includes issues relating to children. In Soweto alone at least 70 children under the age of fifteen were raped (that is, these were the number reported) in the first 26 days of September, 1994. According to the Police Child Protection Unit, abuse of children is on the increase. There were additional children assaulted, abandoned and stolen (*The Star*, Johannesburg, 9/27/1994:2). Again, it projected to a national level this degree of abuse on a category of people should become part of the national debate on the character of civil society. All this is not to suggest that South Africa is worse than other places or worse now than it was. Nor is it arguing that this kind of violence is the only concern of civil society. But it does argue that this level of abuse of women and children be included in analysis and prescriptions.

Finally, the lesson that these women teach is that they tend to form organizations in order to solve problems and advance interests, and not to fulfill definitions. It is not their concern whether they are operating politically or strategically or in any other way, or whether they are there to influence the state or not. Probably their preference would be to stay clear of what they see as politics. Yet when their problem requires political action, for example, public demonstrations, they will act accordingly if it solves their problem. They will probably not, therefore, remain political, but may well go back to their old functions once the problem is solved. Here, too, is a broader lesson applicable to all economic and social and income generating organizations of all kinds, and also to professional and commercial organizations, for example, nurses or teachers or traders associations that are not overtly political; many women will move in and out of politics as they see the need. Given their material interests and expertise with their occupational needs they are likely to be effective agents of influence when they need to be. The message is clear. Scholars and policy makers alike should avoid the temptation to define civil society in a manner that

derives from a western perspective and has a rigidity which may be unhelpful to those disadvantaged communities who are struggling through a variety of means to overcome some of the obstacles they confront and to gain some limited influence.

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1. The research for this article took place in the Eastern Cape, South Africa in July and August 1993. It was a period when a combination of economic woes and political disappointments had caused a mood of relative pessimism. There were two principal methods of collecting information and opinions. The less important of the two was a very brief questionnaire sent through the mail or administered orally to urban community based development organizations. In total 32 organizations responded to the questionnaire. The second and more important means of collecting information was through detailed interviews. 56 interviews were conducted, 40 of them with a cross-section of urban women, almost all of whom were black and belonged to lower income, unemployed or economically or socially disadvantaged groups (that is, with similar backgrounds to most black women), or were middle class (black and white) who worked on behalf, and were familiar with the concerns, of those groups. 16 men, black and white, mostly professional, academic, or affiliated to a political party were interviewed. These interviews aimed at eliciting broad background social and political information on the region, as well as their responses to some of the assertions made by women interviewees. The full report on the findings, including detailed quotes and tables is contained in Hirschmann (1993). The tone and content of this article are derived primarily from these women's perceptions and opinions.

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