

The Planet Heats Up: How Can Feminists Contribute To Climate Change And Energy Debates And Policy In South Africa Today?

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The issue of climate change is one of the most critical issues confronting feminism today. Since energy use, and in particular burning fossil fuels is the largest contributor to greenhouse gases and global warming, feminist input to determine what sources of energy South Africa should develop for the future are fundamental to the debate. To facilitate feminist responses, a workshop was held by the Gender and Energy Network South Africa on the 18-19 May, 2010, in collaboration with the Commission For Gender Equality, to examine some of the new state initiatives to formulate relevant policy: the Draft National Climate Change Policy, the Renewable Energy policy and the Integrated Resource Plan II. Interestingly enough, the most critical problems to emerge were not issues around the substance of the policies (although there are plenty of those) but how to relate to a state that is deaf to its constituencies, and how to deal with the lack of women's voices in constructing guidelines which are going to determine not only our national energy production for the next twenty years, but also the welfare of our planet itself. It is clear that the state is currently preparing these policies with substantial input from male-dominated sectors such as mining, engineering and ESKOM, but very little from women. Poor women are even further removed from policy processes that middle class women are struggling to be part of. The aim of this paper is to present the deliberations of this workshop, and follow-up activities, in broadening the impact of feminist activism.

At the CGE/GENSA workshop it became clear that the current consultation process falls far short of progressive practice and legislative requirements. If there are public consultation processes, they are held in one or two urban centers and are attended by a small, literate and articulate sector of society. Those women (in particular), without the information or the means to participate in public hearings are often in the numerical majority. It is well documented that the energy sources the nation uses affect poor women's and children's health most directly as they live in areas close to mines and power generating stations

comes to cook.¹ It is also well documented that poor women and farmers most directly, so these are the people who should have a say in determining policy.² Instead we were confronted in the GENSA/CGE workshop by our powerlessness.

Further criticisms of the policy process were that meetings and workshops were called at the last minute with little consideration for the realities of women's lives. Invitations were exclusive, caucuses were closed, and one often had to fight to receive an invitation, or to be heard when one got there. People were invited in drips and drabs, in fact, participants of both workshops could not recall a single government consultative event to which we all had been invited simultaneously. Information was doled out in little bits, and often assumed a specialist knowledge which created a culture of "experts" pronouncing in the absence of any real communication with women, or any consciousness of the gendered impact of climate change.

The GENSA/CGE workshop explored the reasons behind women's exclusion from even tokenistic participative processes and policy. Transformation is about behaviour and attitude change, which was evident in early policy processes but what now? The question we asked ourselves in the workshops was: under the new conditions should women struggle [again] to be included and participate in sham processes or should we remain outside 'making noise'?

In one sense the discussion at the GENSA/CGE workshop was a rights-based discussion. The current legislative framework governing policy consultation says that women have a right to be consulted. The Beijing Declaration And Platform For Action, Article 16 states that:

"Eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice requires the involvement of women in economic and social development, equal

¹ . Cf. eg. Annecke, Wendy "The Ethics and Economics of Including Women in the Electrical Supply Industry" Energia no date; Annecke, Wendy "Whose Turn Is It To Cook Tonight?: Changing Gender Relationships in a South African Township", ENERGIA News 8.2, December, 2005; Potgieter, Cheryl Ann, Renay Pillay and Sharmla Rama Women, Development and Transport in Rural Eastern Cape, HSRC Press, Pretoria, 2006, available at <http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/product.php?productid=2179>; Cowan, Bill Identification and Demonstration of Selected Energy Best Practices For Low Income Urban Communities in South Africa, APPLES and IEEA, Cape Town, 2008; Dugard, Jackie and Nthabiseng Mohlakoana More Work for Women: A Rights-based Analysis of Women's Access to Basic Services in South Africa South African Journal of Human Rights, 2009. 546-566.

² . Cf. eg. UNIFEM Facts and Figures On Gender And Climate Change, available at http://www.unifem.org/partnerships/climate_change/facts_figures.php; Petrie, Belynda Gender And Climate Change: A Regional Summary, Heinrich Boell Foundation, Cape Town, 2010, available at <http://www.boell.org.za/web/107-496.html>

and equal participation of women as agents and
economic development.” (our italics)³

National legislation giving substance to this right includes Promotion of Administrative Justice Act. PAJA, section 3.1. says that:

“Administrative action which materially and adversely affects the rights or legitimate expectations of any person must be procedurally fair.”

Obviously, global warming resulting from government decisions materially and adversely affects women’s rights guaranteed under the laws and agreements set out earlier. Moreover, women have a legitimate expectation to socio-economic rights in an environmentally sustainable way, as set out in the South African Constitution.⁴

Most importantly, PAJA section 6.2.e.ii states that administrative action taken because:

“irrelevant considerations were taken into account or relevant considerations were not considered”

can be set aside through the judicial review process. It is clear that any energy or climate change policy which does not take into account women’s voices – and especially the voices of the poor and rural - as a ‘relevant consideration’ is open to a court challenge.

In another sense, the GENSA/CGE workshop discussion was about the extent to which this new democracy belongs to women. The workshop considered the options that women had in making ourselves heard in these important processes. The first option would be a written submission. While we agreed that we would make a written submission, no-one at the workshop thought it would change the minds of the decision makers. Similarly, presenting our response at a public hearing would be necessary. However, such presentations have been experienced as demeaning, with members of the government panel taking little interest in GENSA submissions. It has not been unknown to see them strolling in and out and talking on their cell phones while the presentations were being made.

We also began to ask: whose voice is represented when women do get a chance to stand at a podium and give their opinion concerning a policy process? Does a meeting of a few women (and men) standing up for gender issues and inclusion

³ .Cf. also the African Union Protocol To The African Charter On Human And People’s Rights On The Rights Of Women In Africa. Article 9.c; and the South African Development Community Protocol On Gender And Development, Article 13.d.

⁴ .Applicable here are sections 9.3, 24.3, and 33.1-2.

enough representation of women's voices? The
that there needs to be enough consultation of
women in these processes and those that represent women should be able to
prove that they speak on behalf of the masses and not a chosen few. A major
source of concern at the workshop was the way some of us were in danger of
becoming 'professional consultees', running from meeting to meeting while the
mass of women were being kept outside. We were aghast at the way the
presence of one or two of us at a meeting was considered to be evidence of
"consultation". This weakened us, as it both kept us from spending time with
women on the ground, and silenced the voices of the communities we claim to
serve. As a result of this discussion, we considered ways and means of being
more strategic in deciding when and where to participate in government
processes.

If the obvious and legitimate channels of participation no longer work, there are
other ways to be noticed, such as through the marches and protests. It was
cynically noted that the more violent the protest, the more chance there is that
you will be listened to. However this option did not appeal. It was suggested that
there were other ways of being heard, some of which were to find a champion
inside government who could lobby for the feminist energy and climate change
positions, to use moral persuasion, or the legal route.

But, interestingly for 'old timers' in this debate, the notion of excluding ourselves
from the process came to the fore as the only authentic response to being
ignored. Many feminists in the workshop did not want to legitimize the policy
process by even trying to be part of it nor did they want to be seen to 'rubber
stamp' it. They asked pertinent questions such as - what benefits can be gained
for women from a state to which we are politically aligned, but which has
reverted to masculine and patriarchal forms of process and policy making from
which women are largely excluded?

The facilitators of this diverse with respect to race but mostly middle-class
GENSA/CGE policy workshop subsequently ran an information workshop on
gender and climate change for 120 women (and a few men) from community
based organizations (CBOs), organized by Earthlife Africa Women, Energy and
Climate Change Forum in August, 2010.⁵ Some of the same issues were raised,
but there were significant differences. The community based women immediately
understood the implications of climate change for poor people and the urgency
to act. They put themselves at the service of their communities and the
government, saying in effect:

⁵ . Women, Energy and Climate Change Forum, Earthlife Africa, GENSA and Gender Climate Change Justice
South Africa collaboration, [Conference on Women In Energy And Climate Change](#), 5 August, 2010,
Johannesburg.

is going to affect us all. We think it is critical that climate change be told to school children and more parents so we can stop the damage and prepare ourselves for change”.

The CBOs said they were prepared to go to schools themselves and pass on the message to others. All they needed was the support of the government to request the school principals to open the schools to them. Some mentioned stipends and/or money for transport, but all were essentially volunteering their services in the face of what they correctly understand to be a global crisis.

Imagine having such resources at your disposal! Does the national government know how fortunate it is? If national government was in the habit of consulting with community based groups such as the ones that attended the WECCF workshop, they would know the resources they have in their citizens. The simple act of including groups of different organizations through all available channels of communication that can reach all the country’s citizens could change the way women contribute to energy and climate change policies in South Africa. How should this energy and dedication be harnessed for the national good? How should this power to mobilize be used to improve women’s lives? It stands to reason that a society which mobilizes only half of its human resources is going to diminish its capacity to act. In the face of the enormous challenge posed by climate change, we as a nation need everything we have got to make it possible to change human behavior which is the root cause of climate change. The task is gigantic: as a species we must learn both to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the inevitable warming which cannot now be prevented. Most importantly, women are going to have to re-examine classic feminist issues such as reproductive rights and gender based violence for the role these play in the uncontrolled population growth which is also a contributory factor to global warming.⁶ To challenge the notion of infinite growth on a finite planet is to threaten the core assumptions of both patriarchy and capitalism. It will require courage, and also every last human resource we possess.

What was clear from the 120 participants of the WECCF workshop, who were mostly women, was that mobilization has not stopped. Many of these CBOs oppose government policies and practices such as pre-paid metering of water and electricity, forced removals, and raising electricity tariffs, but are nonetheless strong supporters of the government when it comes to elections. It is a different kind of oppositional politics that is being practiced. Nonetheless, within their movements these women have built the kind of organizational skills and capacity

⁶ . Cf. eg. Abrahams, Yvette *Plaiting Three Strands: Gender-Based Violence as a Cause of Global Warming*, Paper presented at the Department of Arts and Culture/Human Sciences Research Council [Colloquium on Social Cohesion, 2009](#), Durban, 29-30 October, 2009. Available at www.cge.org.za

our nation into one which will survive global women like these into the climate change and energy consultation process, the state is depriving the nation of necessary skills.

These are social movements. The women attending the workshop probably would not call themselves feminists, but they are motivated, mobilized and powerful in their domains. The contrast with 'traditional' women's movement meetings was striking. It can be argued that it is the same patriarchal system which oppresses women that is producing climate change, and that in a sense the earth is the biggest victim of gender based violence of them all. Still, the established women's movement has been slow to take up the issue. In part this could be due to that fact that this movement is splintered and divided against itself.⁷ In part it could be that people are just not making the connection between, say, the increase in the price of bread and global warming.⁸ So how do these community-based women link into participative process and decision making policy forums? Our understanding is it up to cross-class alliances to use the power of all women. This proposal needs to be contextualized, since this article has just bemoaned the lack of power amongst middle class women. It is worth recalling Ramphela's observation that:

"There is strong historical evidence of the importance of the middle class in any society in shaping and strengthening democratic systems. Societies with significant middle classes benefit from their tendency to demand better-quality public services and to exercise their rights and hold public leaders and officials to account. Unlike poor and vulnerable people, middle classes tend to be independent of political patronage. They usually have higher expectation of their governments and are more likely to demand freedom of expression and respect for human rights."⁹

Ramphela rightly goes on to caution about the track record of the middle class in South Africa as compared to this world-wide trend. The mere fact that South Africa is the world's most unequal society¹⁰ means that our middle class, while it has been growing since 1996, remains relatively small and weak. This has had deep and profound influences on the ability of the middle class to build effective

⁷ . Cf. eg. Abrahams, Yvette *The Creation Of The National Gender Machinery, 1994-2008*, GAP Policy Brief No. 1, Gender Advocacy Programme, Cape Town, 2009; Gouws, Amanda *Women In The Executive: Can Women's Ministries Make a Difference?* GAP Policy Brief No. 2, Gender Advocacy Programme, Cape Town, 2009; Watson, Joy and Lisa Vetten *Polokwane: Taking Women One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?* GAP Policy Brief no. 3, Gender Advocacy Programme, Cape Town, 2009.

⁸ . Cf. eg. Abrahams, Yvette *Stop Complaining About the Price of Food! Start a Bakery: Colonial Patriarchy As The Cause Of High Food Prices*, in Karen Koen, (ed.) Proceedings of GETNET Feminist Consultative Conference On Women and Socially Excluded Groups Bearing The Social Costs of The Economic And Social Crisis, Gender Education And Training Network, Cape Town, 2010.

⁹ . Ramphela, Mamphela Laying Ghosts To Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2008, pp. 143

¹⁰ . As measured by the Gini coefficient, currently 0.67 for 2008. Cf. The Presidency, Development Indicators, 2009, Republic of South Africa, Pretoria, 2009, pp. 26.

any would agree that the post-*apartheid* history classic example of an educated group of women using a powerful movement to catapult themselves into the middle class within the state, leaving a shambles behind.¹¹

The extremely high levels of ownership concentration and a prevalence of oligopolies in the economy are a legacy of *apartheid*. A consequence of our failure to fundamentally transform relations of production in the private sector means that the South African middle class is unusually dependent on state patronage and amicable relationships with the ruling party. It is fortunate that, so far, there are still a few middle class radicals with struggle roots who have had no qualms about speaking out. It remains to be seen whether the born-free generation will be more independent or more accommodating to statist hegemony. Our point is that in the context of climate change, accommodation on the part of the middle class will, quite literally, kill us as a species. While other species may survive uncontrolled climate change, it is unlikely that the human species will. In fact, it is likely that our political and economic systems are already under huge stress, as the effects of global warming begin to make themselves felt. Therefore this article proposes that the middle class use its economic strength and discursive powers to act as gate keepers, keeping the gate to state power open and consistently using their access to bring in women from impoverished and rural communities. The role of women with access to decision-makers must be to make noise on the inside, pushing for slow incremental change as well as major structural transformation, but all the while retaining a vital link with social movements on outside of state power to push the change along. On their own, middle class women will not be heard, and will be used to buttress the state's claims to legitimacy.

This approach is not completely new, of course. Cross-class alliances were one of the strengths of the anti-*apartheid* struggle and a significant factor in post-*apartheid* victories against the state such as the Civil Union Act.¹² We are driven by necessity. The accelerating pace of climate change and the stress this has put on our human economy and ecological interface is so urgent that it forces alliances. For us this approach continues to raise questions about where women's power lies and how it can best be mustered for an equal society. The GENSA/CGE alliance has committed to open communication (however complex this may prove to be), to holding ourselves accountable, all the while grappling with the realities of women's double working day. We do not expect it to be easy. Bernice Reagon's classic observation still rings true:

"...I belong to the group of people who are having a very difficult time being here. I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is

¹¹ . Abrahams, *The Creation Of The National Gender Machinery, 1994-2008*, *op cit*.

¹² . Cf. Judge, Melanie, Anthony Manion and Shaun de Waal (eds.) *To Have and To Hold: The Making Of Same-Sex Marriage in South Africa*, Fanele, Johannesburg, 2008.



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you're really doing coalition work. Most of the to the core and if you don't, you're not really

doing no coalescing.

Since these two workshops, GENSA/CGE have gradually taken forward decisions made. Most notably, we made a joint submission to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism's pre-Green Paper process. We are happy to say that, though much pressed for time, this submission was soundly workshopped with women from social movements on four separate occasions. They contributed much common sense and innovative thinking to the process.

We have also managed to have some conversations around engendering Department of Energy's Renewable Energy Policy and its Integrated Resource Plan II process. They may not be taking us seriously yet, but it can be said we have succeeded in getting the attention of government. That this is the first step in a lengthy process goes without saying, but for six months' work the progress is heartening.

An important part of the work has been to work closely together with the climate change movement in general. Most fortunately, economic justice organizations have also been working on making the links between capitalism and global warming, so there are many opportunities to do coalition work, building on the networking already done. Many strong women are doing excellent work in the various organizations, so all we have had to do is assist in bringing a feminist perspective to the analysis. That this entails an activist double working day – enthusing the feminist movement about climate change work and enlightening the environmental justice alliances about the role of patriarchy – is perhaps no more than we are used to.

The biggest improvement is probably in our own institutional cultures. While co-operation is nothing new, we have now made a point of working together and consulting one another before deciding to attend government meetings or interact with officials. We pay careful attention to making these decisions strategically rather than on an *ad hoc* basis. We have fallen into the habit of checking with each other first and reporting back afterwards to ensure that what we say is representative of a broader group and not merely the product of our own individual minds. We try to expand our notions of sisterhood in practice by

¹³ . Reagon, Bernice Johnson *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century*, paper presented at West Coast Women's Music Festival, Yosemite National Forest, California, 1981, available at <http://shewhostumbles.wordpress.com/2008/01/12/bernice-johnson-reagon-coalition-politics-turning-the-century/>



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to the moans, encouraging each other to take it
arding one another against burnout. We strive to
ensure that there is always someone able to pick up the work when someone
else needs to rest.

Best of all, although probably involving the hardest work, is setting in place the organizational infrastructure to bring knowledge of, and power over, climate change to as many impoverished communities as we can. We know we can do this. Climate change is due to the actions of people, and the agency of people has been largely invisible in the policy process. Transformation is largely about behavioural change and therefore any climate change policy must begin and end with people. Vulnerable groups such as women must be seen as part of the solution and not part of the problem. But the women's movement is rich in experience on how to create human behavioural change. The challenges we have met over the past decade and a half, be they promoting gender mainstreaming in the state; ending gender-based violence; or overcoming HIV/AIDS; have all been about changing entrenched patterns of behavior in the face of extreme inequalities of power. While we all have had our moments of despair at how tough the work is, and how slow progress sometimes seems to be, the fact is that this work has equipped us well to deal with energy and climate change. All that remains is for us to take our power.