



OSISA

Open Society Initiative
for Southern Africa

REINVIGORATING AND SUSTAINING A VIBRANT WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Regional Roundtable Meeting BACKGROUND PAPER

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Background

Preparations for the review of Beijing+10, which took place globally between 2003 and 2004 brought to the surface progress and challenges, and further made proposals for future measures to address constraints. Part of the Beijing + 10 preparatory processes in the Southern Africa region included consultative meetings in Johannesburg and subsequently in Addis Ababa, and both meetings – and other forums – raised concern with the dwindling vibrancy of the women’s movement, especially during the 10 years after Beijing. Incited by this, the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) convened a brainstorming session of a few activists, (who subsequently became the Task Team) to reflect on possibilities for reinvigorating and sustaining a vibrant women’s movement, which has been identified as one of the major challenges of achieving gender equality in Southern Africa. The meeting made proposals for a critical assessment of the women’s movement to be undertaken in 13 SADC countries; Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

With the assistance of the Task Team and its Gender Programme Advisor, OSISA commissioned three consultants involved in women’s issues to provide a situational analysis report of the Women’s Movement in 13 SADC member countries over a 20-year period (1985 to 2005), as well as recommend some practical interventions as to how the movement could be strengthened. The findings were to be presented at a regional roundtable meeting, to be attended by key stakeholders in the women’s movement at national and regional levels, to collectively engage with the findings and develop a plan of action that would help towards reinvigorating the movement.

It is against this backdrop that this current roundtable meeting is being convened in Johannesburg, spearheaded by (OSISA), in partnership with the SADC Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF), the Women and Law in Southern Africa (Research Trust) and HIVOS, with support from the Women’s Network Programme of the Open Society Institute.

Objectives of the roundtable meeting

The main objective of the Regional Roundtable meeting is to engage with the findings of the research on the dwindling vibrancy of the women’s movement in the SADC region and collectively develop a road map towards reinvigorating and sustaining it. Essentially, the participants will undertake to:

- Receive the findings on the situational analysis of where the movement is at both national and regional levels;
- Examine the causes identified in the research and how these are affecting the vibrancy of the movement;
- Engage with the proposed strategies and modalities to address the loss of vibrancy;
- Draw up an action plan with defined roles, responsibilities and timeframes for its implementation.

Expected Outcomes

- An honest and critical review of the challenges faced by the women's movement;
- Collectively develop a plan of action with clearly defined short-, medium- and long-term regional level interventions and strategies towards reviving the women's movement in the SADC region;
- Renewed commitment to a revived and reenergised women's movement in the region.

SOME DRIVING CONCEPTS

A number of concepts guided the research and the situation analysis of the women's movement. These included:

Vibrancy criteria specific to the women's movement

The vibrancy of the women's movement was measured in relation to its level of feminist orientation, against:

- Ability to push forward with the women's rights agenda; and
- The extent of organisational appropriateness.

Ability to push forward with the women's rights agenda

This set of criteria explores a series of roles that the women's movement could consider adopting in order to push forward with action to fuel the women's agenda. These are seen as laying the embryonic foundation for the women's movement's vibrancy and these include:

Role 1: Protection

Protecting and claiming those women's rights and entitlements that exist in present law and government policy; making sure that women can actually exercise these rights; ensuring that these rights are recognised, maintained, and not eroded. In other words, maintaining and protecting women's *existing space*.

Role 2: Spearheading

Leading the women's movement to claim the domestication of women's rights agreed upon in regional and international declarations, instruments and conventions. This includes pushing for action along the sequence of domestication of conventions into law, incorporation of agreements into policy, and government's implementation of the policy as well as the development of new strategies to keep this women's rights agenda alive.

Role 3: Challenging Inequalities

Pushing for the recognition of gender issues, and public action to address these issues in areas not currently recognised in national legislation, regional and international conventions, or in areas where governments lack political will to address such issues. Various strategies go into addressing such issues; using various strategies such as advocacy, lobbying, public protests, drafting of model legislations, as well as participating in legislative and constitutional amendments.

Role 4: Watchdog/monitoring role

Maintaining a shared overall vision of the women's rights agenda and its priorities; monitoring and evaluating progress on this agenda, ensuring that a high level of vision and focus is maintained, as well as devising new strategies to push the agenda forward. In other words, this role requires enabling the collective management of action and success in Roles 1, 2 and 3.¹

Each of the pillars has a critical role to play in invigorating and sustaining a vibrant women's movement. Combined, the pillars are complimentary, with some possible overlap in some roles. A well

balanced women's movement would have key players well spread in the different roles, leading to vibrant performance in pushing for a women's rights agenda. This formed the framework for analysing the women's movement in the SADC region, and from the findings of the assessment, some key issues for consideration have been drawn. These issues will contribute towards a way forward for reinvigorating the women's movement in SADC.

SOME KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION AND DISCUSSION

Effectiveness and harmonization of national gender machineries/institutional mechanisms

Since Beijing, government has become a powerful stakeholder in the women's movement. The research has shown that this has had several far-reaching consequences which merit reflection and analysis for the women's movement throughout SADC countries.

Governments have accepted the main responsibility to end discrimination against women and girls. The chosen strategy has been to integrate gender into all government sectoral programmes and PRSPs. For this reason, governments have established institutional mechanisms mandated to promote and oversee gender mainstreaming. One important issue is the extent to which these institutional mechanisms have been able to function effectively.

It appears that each country has opted for its own model (e.g. Gender Commission in South Africa, Conselho Nacional para o Avanco da Mulher in Mozambique etc.). The result is that throughout the region we find a multitude of institutional mechanisms that have their own characteristics in terms of where they are strategically located (inside the Prime Minister's office, presided by the Ministry of Women etc.). Even within countries, there is often a variety of institutional mechanisms (e.g. the creation of Gender Units in certain Ministries, the appointment of Gender Advisors to the Minister, a multi-sectoral coordination body such as the Conselho Nacional para o Avanco da Mulher etc.). While all agree that working with government is strategic, many models of collaboration are possible and there has to be reflection on which type is most appropriate generally, as well as for each country.

Consequently, it is necessary to ask, what the relative merit/success of each of these models is and to what extent institutional mechanisms should be harmonized, both internally and externally? (i.e. bringing all institutional mechanisms that exist within a certain country in line) and externally (i.e. uniformising all institutional mechanisms across the region)

Autonomy of women's organisations vis a vis government

Although the presence of government as a stakeholder in the women's movement is strategic in the sense that it can be a powerful ally for the women's movement, the presence of government is also felt in many negative ways.

These range from the co-optation of militant gender activists in senior government positions and bureaucratisation of gender mainstreaming to the replacement of the "feminist" discourse by gender mainstreaming (which does not challenge patriarchy), to the total redefinition by government of the role of women's organisations (e.g. government invites women's organisations to contribute on national debates in selected areas but not in other areas, "subjugation" of women's organisations in national NGO councils that are akin to para-statal).

Although women's organisations are included in the institutional mechanisms, government is in a strong position to define their role therein. It is therefore necessary to consider to what extent

women's organisations in civil society have been able to maintain their autonomy as critical observers who are fully enabled to monitor government compliance with international gender commitments. This begs the question, NGO/Civil Society and government partnerships: are they strategic or compromising the women's movement?

Non-partisan, inclusive and representative aspects of the women's movement

The women's organisations need to safeguard their autonomy in order to be fully non-partisan, inclusive and representative of all women in their various constituencies.

In most countries, the women's movement has retained its essentially urban and elitist character, and this tendency is reinforced by the growing emphasis on the technical skills and competencies required by gender mainstreaming and lack of available resources at provincial and district levels, as well as by personal affiliation to political parties or by the political origins of certain women's organisations which have become predominant in the women's movement (e.g. Angola).

Many countries are struggling for equal participation of women in politics, but this struggle has not been able to overcome the divisive influence of party politics on sensitive issues such as abortion, polygamy and gender based violence, to mention a few.

There is also a need to reflect on the coordination mechanisms that exist for women's organisations: how can they be less adversarial and competitive, more autonomous, so that they can hold their own in relation to government or donors, and more inclusive of organisations based outside capital cities?

Partnership with donor agencies

Donor support was generally viewed with mixed feelings as dual and inconsistent. The funds were appreciated so far as they enabled the women's movement to further its agenda, of pushing for equality. Within the same relationship, there were regrets on the disempowering aspect of the relationship ranging from stringent conditions to succumbing to being donor driven at the expense of the women's movement agenda. The movement needs to engage with donor agencies for improved and empowering relationships, which will actually empower the women's movement through enhancing its capacity. The roundtable offers a good forum in this regard, as development partners are also in attendance, as stakeholders.

Definition of a common agenda

Without a broad support base that includes young and old, urban and rural, rich and poor women, it has been notoriously difficult to establish a common agenda for women.

In the absence of a strong common agenda defined by the base, women's organisations often find themselves fragmented and divided. Thus, their role is weakened, and without concrete victories and successes, few younger women will be attracted to join the women's movement. Without a common agenda, it is difficult to establish strategic alliances, and it will be unrealistic to expect MPs to support women's concerns beyond party political lines. Key is the ability of women MPs to rally around a common agenda that transcends party politics – and if they don't have such an agenda, they will not have a common vision to defend. In turn, it will be easy for them to become involved in individual politics (i.e. just follow the party line and/or try to climb ranks or get a ticket without thinking about women's movement). Without a clear woman's rights agenda, we are just looking at skirts in parliament (tokenism).

It is therefore critical to create a national and regional debate on issues that are perceived by women – all women – as emerging priorities.

The definition of a common agenda may be based on better use of regional instruments for accountability on progress in implementing Beijing, CEDAW and other instruments. (SADC, Commonwealth, CPLP = lusophone countries community) and better use of regional expertise for mainstreaming (SADC gender bureau/Commonwealth etc.).

Reconstruction of discourse

Reflection is required on the vision and mandate of the women's movement vis a vis new concepts (such as gender mainstreaming). Is gender mainstreaming sufficiently effective in challenging patriarchy? What are the consequences of "gender mainstreaming" vs empowerment or women's human rights and opportunities to create space for new leadership? Essentially, is there a need to reconstruct the discourse?

Men as allies

The majority of respondents felt very strongly for or against the involvement of men as allies. For some, part of the dwindling of the women's movement was seen as being caused by the focus on male involvement which was associated with donor funding conditions. On the contrary, for the others, without male involvement the women's movement's attempt of reinvigoration were seen as futile. The Roundtable offers a good platform to address what the women's movement wants.

HIV and AIDS

The findings revealed that most respondents to issues of HIV and AIDS vis a vis the women's movement seemed to be more concerned with the impact the pandemic has had on funding of projects and programmes than other dimensions. Nonetheless, it is paramount for the women's movement in the SADC region to adopt a very inclusive approach and strategise around harnessing HIV and AIDS, since women are the worst affected by the pandemic. In essence, as the epicentre of the pandemic, the women's movement in SADC is the hardest hit as HIV and AIDS together with poverty are affecting women more. Failure to mainstream HIV and AIDS in the women's movement's agenda will lead to increased fragmentation of the women's movement. In fact, it implies the women's movement's failure to fulfill its mandate of protecting women's rights, as women continue to die and state responses continue to exploit them with programmes such as home-based care, adding on the burden of women's work load. This concern should be analysed in the context of seemingly uncontrollable violence perpetrated against women and girl-children in the region. This is one issue which probably requires focusing on and the concentration of all four pillars of the women's movement, lest women and girls are wiped out. The roundtable meeting should consider how to ensure that HIV and AIDS issues are the core agenda of the women's movement.

Women in decision-making

In all the countries visited, the issue of women in decision-making was raised as a dire need and varying successes identified. The SADC Gender Declaration to which SADC governments committed to having at least 30 percent women in decision-making by 2005 also played a significant role in popularising and following up on women in decision-making positions. Findings revealed that only three of the SADC countries had reached the 30 percent target as at 2005. Findings further revealed that the women's movement has expectations on women in decision-making positions, especially those in parliament and cabinet. However, without a clear agenda as outlined above, these expectations will continue to be dreams in the pipeline. Also, without strong alliances with the women's movement ideally, before, ascending to these positions and during, it might be again

another uphill task for these women to deliver. The critical question is, what does the women's movement expect of women in decision-making? What catalysts can be employed to improve on delivery by women in decision-making positions?

Mentoring of young women and new comers

Whilst the movement may have a choice in some of the strategies to be employed, it seemingly, does not enjoy the same in regards to mentoring of young women and new comers. Firstly, the findings revealed that the movement has failed to attract and sustain the ground swell of numbers it needs for its increased effectiveness. Secondly, without new blood being attracted and mentored, the movement would die a natural death, which certainly is the least of its intentions. Cutting edge innovative ways of attracting and sustaining young women and new comers in the women's movement should be one of its priorities. In bringing young women in their numbers, the women's movement will have to be strategic about it, to dispel the current generational gap problems. The movement will have to be aggressive in making both the seasoned, founder feminists and in-coming members appreciate that each player brings in different skills and talents which are required in one or more of the four pillars. All players will have to appreciate the massive spaces that need occupation by passionate and willing feminists. In this way, the women's movement will graduate to beyond numbers in terms of age. Young versus old, will be a bygone and the same free spirit will be maintained in terms of advocating for numbers in decision-making positions. The thinking and advocacy will be beyond 50! The roundtable needs to grapple with the question of what strategies can be employed to attract and sustain young women regardless of their background.

Volunteerism

Generally, respondents viewed volunteerism as a positive value which contributed significantly to a vibrant movement between 1985 and 1995. Younger professionals in the women's movement were heavily criticised for insisting on being paid professional rates for their services. Whilst it may be true that the women's movement may have made some gains through women's voluntary work, the line between such gains being positive and perpetuation of women's unpaid labour may be blurred. There is need to discuss this in light of advocacy for recognition of women's work and advocacy for its remuneration and the continuously shrinking funding sources.

CONCLUSION

This background paper merely highlights the major issues raised in the research report and the challenge is for the roundtable meeting to engage with these and others and collectively agree on strategies for addressing them, and for reinvigorating and sustaining a vibrant women's movement in Southern Africa.

Endnote

- 1 At the conceptual stage, the use of the term "*gate keeper*" was toyed with, as an expression of the level of preparedness to jealously guard the agenda and gains that the women's movement has made over time. In this paper, the earlier term *gatekeeping* has been replaced by *watchdog/monitoring role*. This is partly because the term *gatekeeping* is already a well-established term in sociological literature, with the very different meaning of "the system of entry controls used to control membership of a privileged social group", and partly because of fear of backlash in using a term whose conventional meaning has negative connotations.



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