

# *Significant sisters: Pietermaritzburg Women's Coalition*

*by Mary Kleinenberg*

“THERE is something disquietly undemocratic about the coming together of women,”<sup>1</sup> – a derisive statement made by Martin Williams, the managing editor of *The Natal Witness*, shortly after the formation of the Women’s National Coalition in 1992. Williams’ opinions on this topic revealed considerable ignorance: he appeared to lack the understanding that the reasons for women organising separately from men were based on experience. Oppressed groups, including women, have traditionally separated from their oppressors in order to develop their own strengths and independence. Furthermore, his assertion that such actions are undemocratic showed that he had a problem understanding

democracy. Sheila Meintjes highlighted the prevailing general attitude that “women’s concerns were considered to be in the realm of the ‘private’ while public matters were the concern of men; black women having been subjected to the triple oppression of class, race and sex,”<sup>2</sup> a view entrenched by comments like those of Williams.

The Women’s National Coalition (WNC), an initiative of African National Congress (ANC) women, was formed in April 1992 as a temporary body to develop, empower, and educate women, with a specific aim of developing and promoting a Women’s Charter. For this purpose it supported, informed and mobilized women’s organisations and carried out further research on women’s needs.<sup>3</sup>

The national WNC campaign was designed to

raise the general level of understanding of gender issues among women and men; to stimulate women of all backgrounds and interest groups to articulate their needs, concerns and demands for change, and to feed these into the constitutional processes; to identify the central issues for a charter of women's equality and to assist in the formulation of this charter; to empower women through these processes to begin transforming the conditions of their lives. It was envisaged that data would be collected from diverse sources, analysed, publicised in a number of forms, and widely disseminated, especially by report-backs to the women involved. Finally the women's charter would link to the overall constitution-making processes.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of the WNC happened at a time when the ANC and the National Party (NP) had begun serious negotiations at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) talks. These parties were led by two men, Cyril Ramaphosa from the ANC and Roelf Meyer from the NP. Among the teams of men discussing the future of South Africa there were two ANC women "advisers" with no speaking rights,<sup>5</sup> giving them little power to alter the course of discussions. In this patriarchal enclave it was assumed that women were not a necessary part of the negotiations, but many women, from all political parties, objected to this. It became very clear that if women wanted to be heard they had to make a concerted effort to organise, and the WNC gave them the opportunity to unite and articulate what they wanted to establish in a democratic South Africa. Frene Ginwala<sup>6</sup> expressed the problem clearly in her first speech as convener:

The exclusion of women from the CODESA process is both a symbol of our present society and a grim warning of the future. They will talk non-sexism, they will not practise it. The air around us is thick with talk of change, or the end of racism and apartheid, of a new era of democracy. Is the change we are all talking about going to mean simply adding some black men where white men sat before?<sup>7</sup>

On 19 September 1992 the Women's Coalition was launched in Pietermaritzburg as a subsidiary of the national group. A wide and diverse group of organisations was represented at this launch: the feminist journal *Agenda*, ANC Women's League, Black Sash, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Islamic Women's Organisation, Progressive Primary Health Care Network (PPHC),<sup>8</sup> South African Domestic Workers Union (SADWU),<sup>9</sup> South African Communist Party, and Women for Peaceful Change Now. The meeting was chaired by Miranda Ngculu, and minutes were taken by Bathabile Dlamini, a member of the ANC, currently the Minister of Social Development, and in 2015 elected chairperson of the ANC Women's League.

Before proceedings began Ngculu outlined the purpose of the Coalition, emphasising that it would attempt to unite women previously divided by their race, political affiliations, organisational beliefs, cultures and languages. She pointed out that as a constitutional document the Women's Charter would help to solve and remove some of the problems faced by women.<sup>10</sup>

It was agreed that the organisations present would consult as many women as possible to find out what women wanted to see in the Charter. Some themes for future meetings were put

forward. These included how law, the economy and violence currently affect women in the KwaZulu-Natal province. It was established that workshops would be arranged to attempt to educate women, induce tolerance, and unite and integrate different groups.<sup>11</sup>

A regional committee was elected: co-chairs: Emily Ntuli and Else Schreiner; secretary: Miranda Ngculu; treasurer: Penny Haswell; convener of workshops: Fiona Bulman, Nomusa Cembali, and Veronica Mesatywa. There was a general feeling of excitement and many offers were made to help with workshops.<sup>12</sup>

In April 1992 when the options of how to use and take forward a Women's Charter were discussed there was general consensus that its main purpose would be to push for changes to existing laws that were oppressive to women.<sup>13</sup> After a national workshop, attended by Else Schreiner, Mary Thrash and Miranda Ngculu from Pietermaritzburg, they brought back the following ideas which were received with great enthusiasm:

We need to deepen our level of tolerance for each other's different points of view, customs and beliefs, and to try to find out what makes us the same while acknowledging what makes us different, learning how each of us has grown up, our lives, what makes us laugh and cry. This is a process of learning and teaching – we all have something to learn and something to teach.

In our groups, we need to understand our needs, fears and hopes. How can we get a fair deal? Can this be done by drawing up a Women's Charter?

We need to go out and "work" in communities around us, making women and men aware of the problems that women face, making women and men aware of how women have been squashed and exploited, and create an

understanding of our rights as human beings. The Charter will not only draw up demands but change South Africa towards a non-racist, non-sexist democracy in which people's worth as people is paramount.

Workshops are meeting places at which we can talk openly and honestly about our problems, and decide what solutions we want. If we are able to be honest with each other, and patient, we will be adding valuable research from our region to the results of fieldworkers and the work of other regions.<sup>14</sup>

The October 1992 general meeting of the MWC, held at Tembalethu, recorded that COSATU had withdrawn from the Coalition nationally, which meant that one of the MWC conveners would have to be replaced. Bathabile Dlamini and Michelle Rall were suggested.<sup>15</sup>

An example of how the Midlands Women's Coalition worked is clear from the first workshop, which focussed on women in the economy with an emphasis on domestic service. This took place on 28 November 1992 at the Colenso Hall, Cathedral of the Holy Nativity. A group from the University of Natal presented a play, largely focussing on domestic work, after which there was some discussion on how the play made everyone feel. A talk on employment from the employers' perspective was given by the Federation of Women's Institutes followed by a domestic workers' perspective. Lastly, the AIDS Training Information and Counselling Centre (ATICC) presented their views on women in the home, and HIV Aids. The evaluation of the workshop by the 67 participants produced a range of responses showing that some women were politically experienced, while others were not. It was thought that there were too many inputs, and translation,

while valuable, was very time consuming. Some consideration was given to arranging shorter workshops with less material to cover. The request for the next workshop to focus on women and their rights in the law was accepted.<sup>16</sup>

The July 1993 Midlands Women's Coalition (MWC) minutes noted that the new Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) members would be valuable to the organisation.<sup>17</sup> By this time Rape Crisis, the Democratic Party Women's Forum, and the South African Students Congress (SASCO) Gender had joined, and it had been established that individuals, not representing any organisation, were welcome to become members in the Midlands.<sup>18</sup> Women joining as individuals felt that it helped them to put aside their political differences, which were often divisive, and work together on issues of common interest.

Bringing together women from the ANC and IFP was considered crucial because for the last eight years women in this region, who were not necessarily part of the on-going violence, had suffered through it. According to John Aitchison, who ran an Unrest Monitoring Project in the Centre for Adult Education at the University of Natal, the conflict between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front (UDF) started in Durban in 1983, and soon spread to the Midlands. "The UDF was formed in opposition to government proposals for a new tricameral parliament that would constitutionally enshrine the exclusion of Africans from the government of South Africa."<sup>19</sup> The MWC thought that more research was needed on the impact this violence had on women, and the results should be made public. It was hoped that it might be possible to define what disempowering factors prevented women from helping to end

the violence, although some of their attempts to encourage peace had proved ineffectual. Providing a space for women to talk to each other about their experiences was an important function of the Coalition. For example, Mildred Mdlala, a member of MWC, recounted at a national conference her experience of living through the violence with her family in Imbali.<sup>20</sup> Mdlala spoke about the enormous strain of being a UDF supporter and living with the continual expectation of Inkatha vigilantes setting fire to her house, or being caught in the crossfire. At night no lights were switched on so that it would appear that there was no one at home. When she heard shouting or gunfire on the street she bundled her children into cupboards to hide them. In 1989 concerned citizens of Pietermaritzburg formed the Imbali Support Group, and volunteers spent nights with threatened families in Imbali, hoping to deter the attacks. This was a courageous step evidenced by David Ntombela, an Inkatha warlord, warning whites and Indians squatting in Imbali to get out or he would be forced to take the law into his own hands.<sup>21</sup> The research conducted by Anne Truluck (Harley) for the Natal Midlands Black Sash, which culminated in the book *No Blood on our Hands*, provided empirical evidence of the fairly obvious, but before this undocumented, fact that Inkatha had been aided by the security forces, which made the government complicit in fuelling the violence.<sup>22</sup>

Numerous examples of the appeals to the police that women made during the political violence are recorded. In 1988 when the police engaged in a mass round-up of youths in Ashdown and Sobantu, women from Ashdown and Imbali appealed for police and kitskonstabels to be withdrawn from

the area. These kitskonstabels were South African Police special constables popularly nicknamed kitskonstabels (instant constables) who were thought to favour Inkatha. Then, during growing violence in Imbali a sixteen-women delegation approached the Progressive Federal Party to complain about the uncontrolled behaviour of the kitskonstabels, and to request the redeployment of the army. In Hammarsdale there were more protests against kitskonstabels and five hundred women signed a petition for their removal. Again, in May of that year women in Mpumalanga and Georgedale protested to police about kitskonstabels.<sup>23</sup> It was amazing that a thirty-strong delegation of women went to the Loop Street police station begging for protection the day before a large-scale Inkatha attack on Slangspruit.<sup>24</sup> On 29 March 1990, the women's march in Edendale to protest against police partisanship and violence ended when the riot squad blocked the road, threatened to use firearms and

tear gas, and demanded that the women disperse. At the same time some Black Sash women and supporters, who had been invited to participate in the march, were arrested and taken to Plessislaer Police Station, blamed for instigating the women's protest.<sup>25</sup>

Fidela Fouché, a member of the Natal Midlands Black Sash, argued that while there were women calling for peace, and there were many incidents of attacks on women, including rape, women were not only victims of the conflict but also agents of co-operation in the violence, using their significant power to further the dynamics of the tensions. Fouché believed that as well as protecting relatives in hiding and caring for the injured, some women had been seen cheering and ululating to encourage their men to join the battle.<sup>26</sup>

Some idea of the volume and diversity of MWC work can be gained from the July 1993 minutes where tasks were set out for the next few months. In July, Ann Skelton would set up a table at the



*Women's march 29 March 1990*

Capital Centre, outside Pick 'n Pay to publicise the legal status that the new constitution would give to women, and talk to women about their legal problems. In August Tessa Cousins and Mary Kleinenberg planned to facilitate a discussion on women and land resources. In September, in conjunction with the Peace Accord, women would be invited to submit names of all women and children who had been killed and these names would be read out alphabetically at a memorial meeting. In October, women and health would be a focus for a workshop, while in November the focus would be on sexual harassment. Jabu Bhengu continued to organise literacy training on Saturdays at Thembaletu, so popular and well attended that she asked for more volunteers to assist with this task.<sup>27</sup>

Along with the variety of workshops, it was considered a priority to conduct voter education, especially in rural areas, and two training workshops with the Independent Monitoring Programme for South Africa (IMPSA) were arranged for university students from rural areas on 7–8 August, and for Black Sash women, who would work in and around Pietermaritzburg, on 27–28 August. Both groups conducting voter education were encouraged to ask women what they considered to be important needs and problems.<sup>28</sup> Gaining access to rural women was a complex problem due to the violence and the restrictions placed on venues by political parties.

On 7 August 1993 a voter education workshop, among many others, was held in Pietermaritzburg.<sup>29</sup> To many this might sound like a simple process, but to these disadvantaged women who had never voted, who were suspicious of this new authority, and were used to

the control of patriarchal structures, it promised to be a very new and possibly extremely intimidating experience. They repeatedly told the organisers that their husbands, fathers, sons and chiefs would know how they had voted. One of the ways to convince them that their vote was secret was to hold a mock election. Everyone at the workshop voted for fictitious parties. This was followed by counting the votes. Having established who had won the “election” all participants were asked to identify their own vote. There was a great deal of merriment when it was found that this was impossible, and they became excited and more confident about the electoral process.

Significant work in the MWC was to explain the role of local government. At a general meeting in October 1994 Ann Grayson explained that under apartheid the Pietermaritzburg local government voters roll contained approximately 50 000 names which would increase to about 300 000 before the local elections could take place in October 1995. Lengthy discussions ensued where women pointed out that only urban areas had so far been considered, and tribal areas also needed to be more democratic. It was proposed that training on local government issues should take place to ensure that women could be elected, and potential candidates from the townships should be identified. Those identified for local government skills training were Anne Harley, Makhosi Khoza, Mildred Madlala, Nana Mnandi, Karuna Mohan, Nazeema Oboo, and Denyse Webstock.<sup>30</sup>

As well as the usual monthly meetings, usually held at Tembalethu, in Loop Street, and attended by a minimum of 20 women, visitors sometimes came to Pietermaritzburg to address

important issues. It was women from these meetings who were involved in arranging and conducting the large informative workshops. The first of two such meetings was in May 1993 when Pregs Govender,<sup>31</sup> from the Women's National Coalition, came to Pietermaritzburg to encourage members to continue the work on the issues that affect local women. She told the meeting that one of the purposes of the coalition was to ensure gender equality in the new South Africa, and went on to say that a key goal was to affect the process of change, and ensure that women's voices were not lost. Govender, full of charismatic energy, was warmly welcomed. She left the meeting with the thought that in November 1993 a decision would be taken about whether or not to close the Women's National Coalition once the Women's Charter had been agreed and launched in February 1994.<sup>32</sup>

The second such meeting, held late in 1993, was planned as a workshop to find out what the local group had achieved and what expectations there still were. Sheila Meintjes came to Pietermaritzburg when the current chairperson of the NWC, Jean Ngubane, was unable to attend. She reported that the research had been completed and a Charter, to which millions of women had contributed, now existed. The NWC and many regional coalitions, like Pietermaritzburg, had conducted research, by holding workshops in their areas, and had so contributed to what women wanted to see in the Charter. She went on to say that this would tell the world we are here, women are people, and there are a lot of us. It was planned that the Women's Charter would finally be accepted at a meeting in Johannesburg in February

1994. Midlands women were advised to choose a trusted representative who understood the issues, because there would be no time to report back to the group should a strong new argument be presented which persuaded delegates to make changes to a particular issue. Meintjes went on to say that it was likely that the National Women's Coalition would cease to exist in February after the launch. The question for Pietermaritzburg was how to maintain the strong bonds that had been formed in the Midlands. It was believed that this work had drawn women together, and broken through some of the apartheid-created and political barriers, enabling all women participants to express opinions.<sup>33</sup>

The Women's Charter was finally adopted at the national convention at Kempton Park convened by the Women's National Coalition from 25 to 27 February 1994. Mary Kleinenberg was there to witness large numbers of exuberant women, representing their coalitions, finally gathered to agree on the Charter and to launch it. The atmosphere was explosive with emotion and exhilaration. Women had done their work and now in the words of Amanda Botha reported in the WNC news, they "awaited the official acknowledgement and recognition that they would have full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist, democratic society. Loudly and clearly women were saying that they could no longer be sidelined. They claimed their rights – through the state and in civil society – to play a rightful role to the benefit of all."<sup>34</sup>

The preamble to this Women's Charter for Effective Equality is long and at times repetitious, but some of this is reproduced below. The most important

issue was that women were making it abundantly clear that they wished to control their own lives, both at home and in society:

As women, citizens of South Africa, we are here to claim our rights. We want recognition and respect for the work we do in the home, in the workplace and in the community. We claim full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist society.

We cannot march on one leg or clap with one hand. South Africa is poorer politically, economically, and socially for having prevented more than half of its people from fully contributing to its development.

Recognising our shared oppression, women are committed to seizing this historic moment to ensure effective equality in a new South Africa.

For decades, patriarchy, colonialism, racism and apartheid have subordinated and oppressed women within political, economic and social life.

At the heart of women's marginalisation is the patriarchal order that confines women to the domestic arena and reserves for men the arena where political power and authority reside. Conventionally, democracy and human rights have been defined and interpreted in terms of men's experiences. Society has been organised and its institutions structured for the primary benefit of men.

The Charter goes on to list 12 Articles which include: Equality; Law and the administration of justice; Economy; Education and training; Development, infrastructure and the environment; Social services; Political and civic life; Family and partnerships; Custom, culture and religion; Violence against women; Health; and Media.

In August 1994, forty-six women went to Durban, among whom were Mildred Madlala and Phumelele Ntombela, to present the Charter to the Premier, Frank Mdlalose.<sup>35</sup>

Some tension was articulated at a committee meeting when Madlala reported that she had attended an ANC Women's League meeting in Pietermaritzburg where Bathabile Dlamini and Ntombi Hlophe urged members to cut their ties with the local coalition because it was run by "whites" who had no real conception of the hardships experienced by black women. Phumelele Ntombela and Else Schreiner offered to discuss the issue with various people to help resolve the matter.<sup>36</sup> The friction was somewhat reduced, but Dlamini no longer took part in Midlands Women's Coalition activities. In an interview Govender agreed that while the coalition had been working to unite women, differences should not be "whitewashed". She went on to say, "Often we have been critical of each other, and debated until we have ended up in sterile situations. I think we must discuss our problems, but in a constructive way. We have got to do it in a way that does not destroy."<sup>37</sup>

With the launch of the Charter on 25 February 1994, the work of the Midlands Women's Coalition could no longer be justified. However, at a well-attended meeting in Pietermaritzburg it was agreed that the organisation should continue as the Midlands Women's Group (MWG), which women would be encouraged to join as individuals, not as representatives of organisations. The plan was to continue to show commitment to women's rights, and publicise the Women's Charter while providing a "forum" to support women in their endeavours. Anne Harley and

Phumelele Ntombela agreed to draw up a proposal to be presented at the next council meeting.<sup>38</sup>

The accepted proposal set out that the Midlands Women's Coalition would dissolve, and the new group of individual women forming the Midlands Women's Group would begin operating from November 1995. This MWG would be based in Pietermaritzburg, starting with their focus on the local government elections, encouraging women to register and vote; stand for election; monitor gender-awareness of candidates and demand that they commit themselves to the principles laid out in the Women's Charter. "The mission of the MWG was to facilitate women's development and ensure that their rights are upheld and their achievements and resources recognised".<sup>39</sup>

Staff were necessary to achieve the aims of the newly formed MWG, and the first appointed coordinator was Ntombifuthi Ndlovu, who was ably assisted by Thobekile Maphumulo,<sup>40</sup> who later became coordinator. A voluntary committee was set up to oversee the work of the organisation and to raise funds to keep it in operation. Two faithful donors were AusAid and the Mott Foundation.<sup>41</sup>

It was not long before the MWG became involved in a variety of issues, publicising the Women's Charter being of prime importance. Among many requests, women asked for talks on child abuse, drug abuse, adult education, domestic violence and HIV and Aids. These and many other issues were addressed over a period of twelve years by staff and volunteers, usually in the form of workshops.

A noteworthy and well-attended MWG meeting took place on 12 March 1999. The discussion centred

on virginity testing and was opened by a practising tester and promoter, Gugu Patience Ngobese, who claimed that it was a valid cultural practice and outlined what she saw as benefits. These were: prevention of pregnancy; early detection of STDs; minimising the effects of Aids by encouraging girls to refrain from sex; identifying problems that mothers are not aware of; empowering "maidens" to say no to sex. One of the concerned responders, Phumelele Ntombela, emphasised that she was not condemning virginity testing, but she wondered if it was relevant in today's society. She asked what was being done for girls who are not virgins, particularly those who have been raped or abused; because the testing is done in public it seemed that these girls were made vulnerable to men who believe HIV/Aids can be cured by having sex with a virgin. She asked whether girls were being humiliated by making the whole process public: does this conflict with constitutional rights to privacy, and is there pressure on parents to "volunteer" their daughters?<sup>42</sup>

Those attending the meeting recommended that the focus should be shifted from virginity testing to educating parents about the need for sex education and monitoring sexual abuse. If virginity testing continues it should be done by the mother in the privacy of the home. Boys and girls should be taught about sex and their responsibilities, also about AIDS and STDs. It was thought to be very important to articulate the objectives of this test: why is it done? The psychological factors should be taken into account, such as abused girls who have no choice and would feel haunted and discriminated against. Some concern was expressed that the test in itself is a form of abuse.

However, Ngobese continued to argue that it could educate and enable young women, and the response from parents was generally positive.<sup>43</sup>

It appears that the recommendations from this meeting were not taken seriously, since the increasingly controversial practice of virginity testing has grown enormously in KwaZulu-Natal and it has spread to other provinces. Ngobese is still a well-known and sought-after tester who is adamant that this is a necessary cultural practice.

Arguably the biggest, and best known, MWG project was its contribution to the production of *The Women's Handbook*. The Midlands Women's Group, the Commission on Gender Equality and the Centre for Adult Education produced a guide to legal rights and resources, written for women who live in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands and surrounding areas.<sup>44</sup> The project was the brainchild of, and coordinated by, Harley with a reference group made up of Phumelele Ntombela-Nzimande, who was now deputy chairperson of the Commission on Gender Equality; John Aitchison, director of the Centre for Adult Education; Ashnie Padarath, regional manager of the Pietermaritzburg Black Sash Advice Office; Makhosi Khoza, deputy mayor, and later chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Pietermaritzburg-Msunduzi Local Council; Buhle Ally, director of the Centre for Criminal Justice; and Sizani Ngubane, gender specialist at the Association for Rural Advancement. Harley was ably assisted by her team, Zamo Hlela and Lungisani Kunene from the Centre for Adult Education, and Thobekile Maphumulo, Ntombifuthi Luthuli and Nomusa Malanda from the Midlands Women's Group.<sup>45</sup>

The handbook was made available in

English, Zulu, Afrikaans and Xhosa, free of charge to women living in the iNdllovu Regional Council, also known as the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. Women were encouraged to use the book and were free to copy any part of it, but were asked to acknowledge the source. After a great deal of consultation in the form of workshops, the book was written in language that would be understood by those who had just a few years of schooling.<sup>46</sup> The result was a very informative, easy to read book that was bursting with the sort of information that women had said they needed. Some of the issues covered were marriage and divorce, government grants, death, police, courts and legal help, health, children and youth, transport, land and housing, consumer issues, violence, and women working together. All this was made possible by funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).<sup>47</sup>

The work of women in the Coalition resulted in a Women's Charter, an impressive document setting out not only what women want, but also recognising and explaining their human rights. Millions of women were consulted, and could now say "I was part of that," making the point that although the product was important, the inclusive process had been critical. Although the Charter is not a legal document, it helps to close the huge gap that often exists between those making laws and those people on the ground, by consulting such large numbers of women. Surely, this was democracy in action? Furthermore, the role of education in encouraging women to vote should not be underestimated. The Midlands Women's Group continued to talk to large groups of women about the things that they thought central to their lives,

making important connections. One of its significant contributions was the production of *The Women's Handbook*.<sup>48</sup>

The MWG closed down in March 2007, by which time there was only one employee, Nareshnee Maharaj. With the new democratic government in place, unfortunately both the supply of donor funds and the membership of the MWG were dwindling. Many non-profit organisations, large and small, suffered the same fate due to a lack of funds. Donors were altering the parameters of what they considered important, and a lot of funding was going directly to government.

In summary, it is interesting to examine various views on the much discussed topic of "sisterhood". *The Feminist Dictionary* offers a variety of quotes from various women to describe sisterhood. For example, Mary Daly, a feminist theologian, is quoted as saying in 1973 that "the word *sisterhood* no longer means a mini-brotherhood, but an authentic bonding of women on a wide scale for our own liberation".<sup>49</sup> However, other views are expressed in the dictionary, one by Sylvia Witts Vitale in 1982 pointing out that the word sisterhood "has different meanings for black and white women". She goes on



to say that at a recent women's conference she felt uncomfortable when white women kept using the term "sisterhood" because she only uses this term to describe women of African descent. When challenged she explained that her ancestors were stolen from Africa and brought to America as slaves, dividing families who never knew where to find each other when "freed". Therefore, to her, the term has very significant roots and she cannot call a white woman "sister".<sup>50</sup>

Opinions expressed by Fidela Fouché writing in the *Sash* magazine seem to agree with Vitale: "Although the concept of sisterhood continues to be invoked in women's organisations, shared gender does not, as a rule, transcend race and class divisions. Nor, in general, is sisterhood more seductive than patriarchal approval."<sup>51</sup> She went on to say, "To believe that women can find a common bond in their oppression as women is, therefore, to be seriously unrealistic. They are oppressed in very different ways."<sup>52</sup>

The question is how much difference these initiatives have made to the lives of women in KwaZulu-Natal. There was a great deal of idealism and hope that "the development of the potential of all our people, women and men, will enrich the whole of society".<sup>53</sup> Then there was the hope that women would "deepen their levels of tolerance for each other's different customs and beliefs".<sup>54</sup> Those women who were involved in this process certainly did this, but have men, in general, acknowledged that women's rights are essentially human rights and must be recognised in order to build a truly egalitarian society?

Judging by an odious snippet from the *Sunday Times* in July 2009, headed

"And he would know", many men still live in a very secure patriarchal enclave:

Next up in Equality Courts must surely be former Anglo American deputy chairman Graham Boustred, who told *Business Day* in an interview (that he had requested): "Do you know why it's difficult to find a female CEO? It's because most women are sexually frustrated. Men are not, because they can fall back on call girls, and go to erectile dysfunction clinics. If you have a CEO who's sexually frustrated, she can't act properly."<sup>55</sup>

Even after 21 years of this new democracy, the subjugation of women has unfortunately continued with very little change. This failure to improve the status of women is clearly expressed by Songezo Zibi when he wrote:

It is very common for politicians and other public figures to talk of South Africa's democratic founding vision as that of a "non-racial, non-sexist South Africa". One cannot argue with the nobility of the phrase and it remains an ideal all of us need to pursue with vigour.

However, it has been my observation that in many cases mere lip service is given to the ideal. Partly this is because we are not willing to confront the difficult questions that will arise out of a project that truly emancipates South Africa's women. We hang on to much of what keeps women in bondage, largely because we have such an intimate relationship with it through tradition or religion or both.<sup>56</sup>

There is however, some sense of positive and encouraging change evidenced by Dean Peacock, who is engaging men and boys in women's rights in a South African charity, Sonke Gender Justice Network, that tackles gender violence. Peacock describes the severity of violence against women in South Africa

as “off the charts”, and hopes that the work of his organisation will change this. He says that “men stand to gain an enormous amount by living in a world where gender roles are freer and less suffocating”.<sup>57</sup>

Although, through the years of its existence, women in the coalition experienced many difficulties, often exacerbated by differences of colour and class, these were confronted openly and resolution was sought, perhaps not always to everyone's satisfaction. Largely, the Women's Coalition, nationally and locally, and the Midlands Women's Group demonstrated that women from very different backgrounds are able to build a shared sisterhood, and work together for a better future. Although a great deal of the work was accomplished by volunteers, it was finally necessary to employ some paid staff. The sadness is that the work did not continue when it was no longer possible to motivate for grants to keep small non-governmental organisations afloat, and funding ran out. Many of those who were involved in Pietermaritzburg continue to meet informally, and still share a passionate common vision of a better future for all women, and men.

The gender power imbalance in South Africa's patriarchal society is almost certainly the most fundamental and all-inclusive source of injustice, so that unless more egalitarian structures can be created, our society cannot claim to be free, just and ethical. Clearly, it is not only religious conservatism that dictates women's subjugation, but also the political context where there is much posturing, but little action, even in observing existing laws pertaining to women and the Constitution. Educating men is important, but converting the ideas and vision envisaged by the sisters

in these organisations for this better future which will sustain justice and equality for women in South Africa will only be achieved by actively working on a shared sisterhood which includes women of different races and classes in one organisation. However, this ideal appears to be fast slipping away in our present, increasingly fractured society.

#### NOTES

- 1 *The Natal Witness*, 6 May 1992, Editor's column.
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