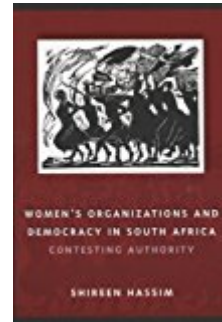


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Shireen Hassim.** *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007. xiv + 355 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-21380-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-21384-8.



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In this all important study of women's organizations and democracy in South Africa, Shireen Hassim delves deeply into the political processes that defined and affected the development of women's empowerment during and after the fall of apartheid. Part of the problem that South African women faced as Hassim argues, was how to distinguish women's issues from the liberation struggle. To underscore this important transition within the women's movements, Hassim illustrates in eight concise chapters how women's issues developed from gender-specific concerns to those issues that affected everyone regardless of sex.

Hassim uses archival documents, secondary sources, interviews and participant observer accounts to situate her examination of the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW), the United Women's Organisation (UWO), and the Federation of Transvaal Women (FTW). These organizations provide the intellectual landscape from which Hassim applies and expounds upon Maxine Molyneaux's conceptualization of "strategic gender interests," and "practical gender needs." According to Hassim, Molyneaux argues that "practical gender needs ... arise from the everyday responsibilities of women," while "strategic gender interests are those interests that women share in overthrowing power inequalities based on gender" (p. 5).

In using Molyneaux, Hassim analyzes the historical trajectory that governed feminist agendas. Women, as Hassim shows, created alternate and parallel communities that differed or were similar to mainstream society.[1] As much as Hassim shows the independent organizations that women established, she also examines how women worked within male-dominated institutions to carry out their objectives. Women's issues were not singular in their outlook or interpretation, instead their complexity warranted the different responses that emerged. Women protested, pushed through legislative changes, and mobilized to challenge gender oppression. Besides representing different provinces and regions in South Africa, NOW, UWO, and FTW highlight the diversity within the women's populace regarding age and socio-economic background. Within this heterogeneous social movement, women put forth an all-encompassing agenda that, for example, dealt with the integration of female exiles, the power dynamics within male-dominated institutions, and the constituencies that women garnered. These responses determined the configuration of their platforms.

As audible and conscious actors, women combated structural issues as well as political ones. On the one hand, women dealt with patriarchy and its constraints and then on the other hand they encountered apathy

within the male sphere which controlled the arenas in which they interacted and in which they negotiated space. Within these parameters, women established a political constituency that harnessed the reserves of its female members to effect change both within and outside government's operative realm. For example, the Women's League of the African National Congress challenged male authority when they intermarried, or had relationships, with members of the Pan Africanist Congress. Violators faced corporal punishment. "Some of the girls have been bitten [sic] on their back-sides and some bear scars" (p. 91). The reason for such a stringent policy is summed up with this sentence, "Women must be made to understand their allegiance to the country and our people" (p. 91). The implication that women were seen as having a moral responsibility to the black nation and the liberation struggle reminds us of the problems they endured as exiled activists, such as the intrusion into their private lives.

When it came to military campaigns against apartheid, only a small number of women infiltrated South Africa. Instead, men shouldered the responsibility of launching subversive attacks against military and electrical installations, railroad lines, or other soft and hard targets, while women organized recreational and cultural activities. Here Hassim's examination contributes to and complements other works on female exiled activists such as Robin Curnow's interview with Thandi Modise; the latter reveals the sexual abuse and disrespect that women endured. Furthermore, Modise conveys the fact that women needed to prove both their masculinity and femininity. As a result of digging ditches and performing other activities considered masculine, some women such as Modise earned the title of honorary man.[2] While Hassim shows the complexities of the un-

derground movement, often excluded from her narrative are the voices of the very women that she focuses upon, thus rendering somewhat inaudible women's voices and their interpretations of the histories they made.

In analyzing the broader debates governing the relationship between feminism and nationalism, Hassim uses key historical events to trace and distinguish between gender oppression and class. Race serves as a point of departure rather than as a feature in this work. Women are grouped together as a monolithic unit save for their political affiliations. This does not, however, detract from this well-researched study; instead it shows where Hassim left room for future interpretations and scholarly examinations. All in all, Hassim challenges readers to reconsider the framing of women's issues within a nationalist framework. She shows how women gained autonomy, redefined it, and manipulated its constraints to support their political agendas. Thus, with a probing lens, Hassim illustrates how women embraced democracy within the prism of patriarchy and gender discrimination.

#### Notes

[1]. See Kim D. Butler, *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won: Afro-Brazilians in Post-Abolition Sao Paulo and Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 62.

[2]. Robyn Curnow, "Interview: Thandi Modise: A Woman at War," *Agenda* 43 (2000): 36-40. Thandi Modise was called the "knitting needles guerrilla" because, "while she was operating underground as an MK cadre reconnoitering potential military targets, she tried to look as ordinary as possible, and carried a handbag from which a pair of knitting needles protruded." Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres: War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991), 150.

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