

Hannah E. Britton. *Women in the South African Parliament: From Resistance to Governance.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xxii + 198 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03013-0.



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Hannah Britton's *Women in the South African Parliament* joins a growing body of literature that evaluates change in post-apartheid South Africa in terms of the limitations on transforming this society. Britton focuses exclusively on the experiences of women parliamentarians from all major political parties who were elected in the 1994 and 1999 elections, and she examines their potential for transforming gender relations both within parliament and throughout the country during the formative early years following the transition from apartheid. Her work is written particularly with a women's studies or activist audience in mind and keeps the question of women's empowerment at the center of analysis.

The book begins with an account of the ethical concerns of feminists conducting ethnographic research, and Britton takes care to describe her own position as an anti-apartheid activist and how she negotiated the class inequalities between herself and her research subjects. She also recounts her efforts to share living conditions similar to those of many of her interviewees by taking

up residence in former townships in Pretoria and Cape Town during her research.

Britton's historical overview and literature review in the first chapter seem a bit sparse, and do not include a few key authors on gender in South Africa. Issues that have been at the forefront of gender studies in Southern Africa, primarily related to the interaction between colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, are mentioned briefly in this section and then not dealt with again in the book. However Britton does engage more closely with issues raised by the literature on women in politics, such as the "critical mass" literature, which suggests that a sufficient number of women in political office will reduce gender inequality in political institutions and in society.

The strength of Britton's work lies in her detailed and focused descriptions of the challenges faced by women engaging with the parliamentary process. During the transitional period, she describes how women activists and party members from across the political spectrum created coalitions and engaged in international networking through meetings and conferences to learn about

and critically examine ways to increase women's political participation. This process led to the adoption of a system of quotas by the dominant political party, the African National Congress (ANC), and enabled politically engaged women to resist arguments that they should return to their domestic roles after the end of the struggle against apartheid. Despite these gains, however, Britton notes that political parties frequently resisted women's efforts. For example, even the ANC had a tendency to put gender activists low on their delegate lists, preferring the election of women who were more likely to campaign for party issues unrelated to gender.

Perhaps the most interesting section of this book describes the integration of women into parliament directly following the first elections. Britton vividly portrays the atmosphere of confusion and the personal struggles of many women who were obliged to rapidly transform themselves from revolutionaries to parliamentarians with few mechanisms or resources in place to facilitate the adjustment or provide them with the necessary skills. In addition to the obvious social divisions of race, the new members of parliament also had to overcome divisions internal to parties, such as those between exiles and locals, across gender lines, between prisoners and those who remained outside prison, and between leaders and rank and file. Britton also describes the use of reading circles to work through parliamentary bills and to help the new women parliamentarians learn institutional processes and procedures, and how this allowed staffers and consultants, most of whom were young college-educated women who described themselves as feminists, to influence members in drafting policies and speeches. This section provides interesting insight into the way in which certain formations, such as the reading circles, probably influenced and contributed to the language of human rights that was evident in much of the legislation that came out of the early days of the post-apartheid government.

Britton also clearly delineates the divisions among women parliamentarians, primarily of class and race, and how these divisions influenced the issues taken up by the women and the extent of their integration into parliament. Britton suggests that women parliamentarians can be divided into those that took a rights-based approach to issues and those that were more focused on socioeconomic development. She argues that the more affluent and educated women often took up rights issues such as abortion and pornography that were highly divisive and not of primary importance to the majority of women in the country. In the period under study, women from middle-class backgrounds frequently fought for a "women-friendly" environment within parliament, such as access to day care, and also took up community development issues. Among those who came from the poorest backgrounds, whom Britton notes were representative of the majority of South Africans, local issues were of primary importance, such as access to land and the provision of social services. It is these women from disadvantaged backgrounds who felt the most overwhelmed by the expectations of their new roles as members of parliament and who felt that their voices and skills are underutilized. Britton finds that these women have the highest attrition rates and are the most likely to be underrepresented in future parliaments. Britton sees a trend towards the "professionalization" of parliamentarians, as what she refers to as a "second generation" of women entered parliament in 1999 already trained and educated for the role, rather than coming from a background of activism and struggle. These second generation women were also more steeped in party ideology and less likely to be independent in their views and in their relationship with their constituencies.

Indeed, over the course of the book Britton argues that while there have been some changes implemented to improve gender equity within the political process, parties continue to resist these changes, and inertia is slowly taking over. Despite

efforts to provide day care in parliament, she notes that not enough has been done to relieve the women serving in parliament of the burden of domestic obligations. In addition, women in parliament struggle between loyalty to their party and to their alliances with other women, and have to fend off accusations of disloyalty from men in their own parties. As parliamentarians increasingly become professionalized, Britton feels that party loyalty will likely trump women's coalitions, slowing down many of the early moves towards greater equality. From the beginning, this book suggests that the atmosphere of change and possibility provided by the transition enabled the implementation of policies that have, in the long run, been difficult to sustain.

Perhaps the biggest weakness of this work lies in the lack of integration of a broader historical and political context into the discussion of gender. The ability of women parliamentarians to negotiate equality within party and governmental structures, and to impact the lives of women more broadly, has also been profoundly influenced by key political issues that are not ostensibly about gender. Current debates over ethnic nationalism, "tradition," and the future of customary leaders, arguably have been as crucial to women's political participation as the institutional culture of parliament that was inherited from the apartheid period. Britton tentatively mentions aspects of these debates in passing, such as the question of the relationship between the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the apartheid state. However, she seems unwilling to tackle any of the major political issues associated with the conflict between more liberal views of governance and the influence of "tradition," a conflict that is central to the status of women and is deeply rooted in South Africa's history of colonialism and capitalist development.

A part of Britton's reluctance to address issues such as ethnic nationalism seems to stem from her concern with showing solidarity with her in-

terviewees, and not appearing to challenge their political beliefs or to criticize their struggle against apartheid. Britton also seems to feel obliged to defend South African women against possible charges by Western feminists that they are not militant or feminist enough. In the end, however, these concerns lead the book to focus more on issues that reflect back onto important debates within women's studies in the United States, such as critical mass theory or the filtering of resistance through women's domestic roles, at the expense of addressing some of the key issues that seem central to women's political participation in South Africa, such as recent debates about the role of "tradition" in South African society.

Women in the South African Parliament nonetheless provides an interesting and detailed look at many of the challenges facing women who took up political office in 1994 and 1999. The detailed interviews conducted by the author provide insight into the personal struggles of these women as they went from being political activists to parliamentarians. It is in these details that the reader gains a clear sense of the strength, intelligence, and determination that was required of these women who were the first to enter parliament in the post-apartheid period.

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