The Rising Tide of Women's National Coalition:

The Experience of South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa is a nation of people with diverse political, racial and cultural backgrounds and is ranked among the top five countries on the African continent that have a fairly high women's representation in national legislatures. As South Africa embarked on the reconstruction and development process of the new South Africa prior to its first democratic elections in 1994, among its major goals was to be a nonsexist and nonracist nation. Women wanted to be certain that the new South Africa also advanced gender equality. To work toward gender equality, a group of South African women activists formed the Women's National

Coalition (WNC). This paper investigates how women activists mobilized a women's national movement that paved way to bridge the deep division that existed among women of different races through the formation of a coalition through volunteerism. It also investigates how the coalition of the WNC helped to redefine feminism in South Africa.

Keywords: Coalitions, race, South Africa, women's national coalition

Introduction

In recent years, African women have gained power and visibility in political and corporate arenas. Inspired by this new phenomenon, attempts are being made to define feminism as practiced in Africa and there is a growing field that seeks to study and explain the intensity and extent of women's participation in political and corporate leadership, despite patriarchal implications of male dominated African societies. However, scholars such as Trinh T. Min-ha (1989) agree that "the challenge is to define feminism within the context of the ethnic culture and in so doing create a new version of it" (p. 84). Others suggest that what is primarily needed is a new conceptualization of feminism within indigenous contexts and new hybrids (Flynn, 2002). On the African continent, there is a steady increase in the proportion of women in positions that were traditionally dominated by men. African countries' rankings continue to go higher as compared to other countries like the United States (US) whose ranking continues to go down in terms of women in positions of political leadership (Coughlin, Wingard, & Hollihan, 2005; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2006). It is for reasons like these and others that show there is a need to explain the possible impact of women movements' politics within various national communities.

Non-western feminism has attracted extensive scholarship notice as a group under the umbrella of Third World feminism (Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1989), but specific countries' notions of feminism in the developing world has largely been ignored. Even where studies have been done, only a few are committed to the

discussion of organizing women with different cultural backgrounds and articulating their concerns about gender equity. South Africa (SA) is a nation of people with diverse political, racial and cultural backgrounds and it is ranked among the top five countries on the African continent that have a fairly high women's representation in national legislatures (Britton, 2006). Ranked 13th by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2006) on Women in National Parliament, SA embarked on the reconstruction and development process of the new SA prior to its first democratic elections in 1994. Among its major goals was to be a nonsexist and nonracist nation. South African transformation has been fundamentally about race, and about constructing a racially-inclusive democracy in place of apartheid's white supremacy (Seidman, 2001, p. 220). Britton (2006) adds that the new government was clearly going to benefit the entire nation and work to end the discrimination of apartheid. Women wanted to be certain that it also worked to advance gender equality (p. 63). Encouraged by an increasing participation in feminist debates and the politicians' demand for a "nonracial, democratic and nonsexist South Africa" (Seidman, 1999), women formed the Women's National Coalition (WNC). Inspired to fill these gaps, it seems reasonable to investigate how South Africa created a Women's National Coalition (WNC) to restructure feminism and define gender equality. Based on an extensive review of literature, this article will argue that women's formation of a coalition can be built across racial and ideological divisions. Various women's movements took part and contributed to the reconstruction process.

In this paper I will argue that the coalition of the WNC helped to redefine South Africa's feminism. This purpose will be achieved by first, describing a theoretical framework on how a coalition can be built, why it is so compelling to have a feminist coalition and what makes the dialogue between different groups possible. Second, the article will provide a brief historical background of South Africa to demonstrate political, racial and cultural differences within a society. Third, I also argue that international exposure is an important dimension that informs the collective options and offerings to women's interests during the

period of consolidation of a new democracy. Drawing from patterns, trends and attempts to create women's movements in international contexts, reference will be made to the experiences of other women's movements that came out of the national struggles for independence. More often than not, there is a question about whether or not women should build an independent organization or trust to leave women's issues until after independence. This paper will address the question of whether women should risk being left out as seen in a number of international arenas or take risks of being subsumed by the new government. Lastly, the paper will examine the South African notion of feminism as seen and constructed through the WNC lens. It will also indicate how the WNC became an agent that constructed SA's notion of feminism. I will argue that women's differences broaden the definition of feminism and women's interests because of the diversity of voices, ideas and needs. The paper will conclude that the WNC was truly a feminist institution that helped to harness women's differences, addressed common women's interest and regenerated feminism based on strategic promotion of women's issues.

Coalition building theory

Albreach and Brewer (1990) describe a coalition as a group of individuals that come together around a specific issue to achieve a specific goal. The authors clearly distinguish between the nature of the alliance and the coalition. They state that unlike alliances, most coalitions are temporary and they often dissolve upon completion of the goal and the groups or individuals go back to doing their own work. Watkins and Rosegrant (2001) consider coalition building as a primary mechanism through which disempowered parties can develop their power base and thereby better defend their interests. Furthermore, all these scholars agree that it is also true that groups of people who fight among themselves are less able to advance their interests than those who are able to work together.

Watkins and Rosegrant (2001) stress three central reasons for building a coalition and they all consist of human and financial resources. First, people who

combine their resources and work together are generally more powerful and more able to advance their interests than those who do not. Second, coalition members may be able to resist certain threats or even begin to make counter threats. Third, even the low-power groups are much more successful in defending their interests against the dominant group if they work together as a coalition. Referring to minority American women, Essed (1996) suggests that coalitions are helpful for women who find themselves in vulnerable situations. Coalitions shield individuals from hostilities and can provide places for people who are isolated. In addition, Watkins and Rosegrant (2001) emphasizes that coalitions in political settings can assist in forming relationships with people who have access to places others may want to go.

Interestingly, Essed (1996) argues one of the most valuable reasons to form a coalition is that it "can be empowering because it is a way of breaking the silence of lost hopes and frustrations. Together, women can voice wishes and discuss problems and needs that would otherwise remain unsaid" (p. 141). Writing from the perspective of a black woman in the US, Essed (1996) is of the opinion that coalitions of women of color and white women allow them to check their perceptions with each other. She concludes that they have often found that white women and women of color have empathy and understanding, and that together they experience that understanding as a gift and a validation. Contrary to some of the strengths mentioned above, some people are reluctant to form coalitions for a variety of reasons. Bunch (1990) believes that a major factor in preventing effective coalitions is fear of diversity. She suggests that "fear and distrust of differences are most often used to keep us in line. When we challenge the idea that differences must be threatening, we are also challenging the patriarchal assignment of power and privilege as birthrights" (p. 50).

Although some organizational behaviorists are of the opinion that compatible interests make coalitions formation easier, Bunch (1990) rejects the notion that shared interest is sufficient for the coalition to form. She is of the opinion that in order for that to happen, the goals of the coalition need to be made explicit.

Several authors stress the importance for women to discuss and understand the overlapping forms of dominance and oppression in its various forms such as race, age, heterosexism, class and disability rather than oversimplifying oppression using only one dimension (Bunch, 1990; WNC, 1994). In fact, lack of acknowledgement of one's own dominance and privilege is considered a factor that can destroy otherwise strong coalitions. Seemingly, one of the key aspects of forming a successful coalition is to see diversity as strength, and to honestly build an atmosphere of respect for one another. In accordance with Bunch (1990) a coalition "functions when groups or individuals are working together around something that each cares about" (p. 56). Of significant importance, the members of coalitions need to be clear about its bottom line, to "know what we need in order to survive in a coalition and how to communicate that to others" (Bunch, 1990, p. 56). I argue that women needed each other to survive and succeed in their feminist agenda in a male dominated society like South Africa. For that reason, the formation of the WNC was a crucial move that dealt with more concrete issues, which sustained their unity through the difficult paths they faced in SA during the transition.

Historical background of South Africa and perspectives on feminism

Prior to 1994, South Africa consisted of the Afrikaners, the English, and other smaller European groups who were considered part of the white group and were privileged (Seidman, 1999). It also consisted of the underprivileged group which included the Coloreds, the Indians and the Africans and this group was considered black (Mangaliso, 2000). Dubbed the *Rainbow Nation* for its diversity of races and ethnicities and cultures, Mangaliso (2000) uses an interesting analogy that describes the complexity of SA: "when one looks at the South African society, one sees its *mosaic character*…each with its own histories and political experiences, its own sense of nationalism and its own gender experiences" (p. 16, 67). As can be expected, the privilege based on race created class, favoritism and biases against the other groups and other inequalities that impacted the SA society. Researchers emphasize that such

divisive phenomena also complicated what nationalism has meant for the white group, which is different from the nationalism articulated by disadvantaged black groups (Mangaliso, 2000; Seidman, 1999; Seidman, 2001). There is no doubt that apartheid was a racial system which denied black people a right to vote until only in 1994. Given that history about South Africa, "it is not surprising that most discussions emphasize the racial dynamics of democratization" (Seidman, 1999, p. 289) as shall be seen in subsequent paragraphs in this paper.   The subsequent paragraphs will outline debates around the term feminism.

It is apparent from the literature that there are as many definitions of feminisms as there are cultures. Africa is a continent with diverse histories and cultures which make it impossible to assume that there can truly be what is called *African feminism*. Instead a specific country with its relevant history and context can help us understand its notion of feminism. Additionally, SA is a young democracy and Seidman (2001) argues that feminist theoretical discussions have tended to overlook some efforts by newer democracies to take proactive steps to reduce gender inequality. Agreeably, Pringle and Watson (1992) "increasingly recognize that the way women's interests are officially defined now may shape the way gender is understood in the future" (p. 221).

Several authors agree that because of the discrimination based on race, the validity of any new ideology in SA was challenged within the racial parameters (Britton, 2006; Mangaliso, 2000; Seidman, 1999). Similarly, the introduction of feminism in SA was debated through colonial and racial prisms. The feminist debates in SA were marked by hostility and did not indicate any reconcilable climate for gender issues. Most women in developing countries associate feminism with colonial stigma and the label feminism is highly contested and negatively viewed as hegemonic in nature.

Around the late 1980s, some South African women resisted the use of the term feminism for reasons well documented in literature. For instance, Wolpe (1998) and Seidman (1999) acknowledge a number of reasons that made it difficult to

present a feminist scholarship in SA, including the absence of coherent schools of thought. Secondly, feminism was debated from the perspective of its geographical origins and its proponents in SA. There was uncompromising hostility to feminist epistemology from the first world, which had not taken race into account (Seidman, 1999). Consequently, western feminism was derogatively labeled, by white and black feminists alike, as white, middle class and /or bourgeois (Wolfe, n.d.). According to Steyn (1998) most disadvantaged women were hesitant to own the label feminism even though they were working on a variety of women's issues and had been carrying out feminist agenda.

Due to skepticisms such as those, quite a number of SA scholars encouraged SA women to interrogate and question any foreign ideology that was foreign to them. In Lockett and Daymond's (1990) words there was a "need for women in this country to question every imported feminist argument and strategy, both for its validity and its probable local effect" (p. ii) because of the interface between politics and racism. In fact, there is consensus in the literature that it was partly that political experience that provided essential strategies that women used during the transition to democracy in SA (Britton 2006; Seidman, 2001). However, there is an acknowledgement by Seidman (1999) that there is no doubt that race complicates the question of gender in different social groups, but Wolpe's (n.d) work consistently advised that women should not overlook gender inequalities by focusing only on race and legitimizing women's subordination within familial relations because of political consideration located in male struggle against what is seen as white domination (p. 97).

Supporting that view, there is consensus in the literature that there was deep division in every aspect of South African lives, but it is also true that most black women had tended to subordinate the struggle for gender equality to the bigger struggle for racial equality (Seidman, 1999; Steyn, 1998; WNC, 1994). In actual fact, the WNC (1994) admits that throughout the SA's national liberation struggle, women's rights were actively subsumed by broader and what were considered "more relevant" political struggle (p. 19).

Although racism and colonialism became the main frames of reference, educated black middle class feminists were also criticized. Narayan (1998) cautions about the suspect location of the Third World feminists who live in western countries and write about their home countries. In South Africa, Steyn (1998) agrees that "exiles returning in the early 1990's, who were more aware of women's movements elsewhere, were sometimes accused of being out of touch with the grassroots needs of South African women who had participated in the struggle at home" (p. 43). Seemingly, feminism was often viewed as intellectual imperialism, divisive of the struggle and an assault on non-western cultures (Steyn, 1998). However, it is evident from literature that women's subordination and oppression had taken many forms under patriarchy, custom and tradition, colonialism, racism and apartheid (WNC, 1994). It is clear from various perspectives of the debates that SA women had differing concerns about women's issues and how each group wanted to have them addressed. This led to internal conflicts that isolated and kept apart various groups of women, thus deepening the mistrust between them. The section that follows will discuss other studies related to the restructuring of feminism in some selected parts of the world.

Patterns and trends of national women's struggles in international arenas

Because South Africa got its independence only in 1994, SA women learned from the experiences of other liberation movements and from countries that obtained their democracy earlier. Quite a number of studies indicate that after countries gain their independence women's interests seem as secondary and they are usually not taken care of (Turshen, 2002; Yang, 1999). Still others argue that even if women's interests are not served, feminists hardly become critics of the national policies because it would be seen as if women are no longer supporting the bigger national goals (Kampwirth, 2004; Randall, 1995, Turshen, 2002). Narayan (1989) argues that in non-western and less modernized countries, feminism has a relatively narrow social base, and that it almost only attracts women from educated, urban, middle class, 'westernized' backgrounds. Taking cue from this premise, a certain proportion of women is certainly left out

and is less participative in discussing women's issues that affect them. Some researchers emphasize the need to take better account of how citizens' different lived experiences shape their interaction with the state (Seidman, 2001). A few scholars have stressed the importance of building broad support base by involving various local groups.

Although Bunch (2001) was referring to global feminism in her statement that feminist discussions have often been rocky especially if they involve people with varying backgrounds, SA has similarly gone through important but contentious debates. Through that process women understood the concerns of various groups, built linkages across differences and were able to forge networks including coalitions to address issues of common interests and goals. Some researchers advocate for a movement for women's human rights violations from feminists outside the cultural context, as well as those within (Okin, 2000), or adoption of western feminism, but many have questioned the practicality and impact of such a movement (Molyneux, 2001; Randall, 1995). There is compelling evidence in literature that feminism can best be achieved through local organizations and advocacy than international involvement which is usually resisted for ignoring historical and cultural context (Seidman, 2001). It seems reasonable to ask whether the active participation of women from other sectors of society would not help to define women's interests and help set priorities.

South African Women's National Coalition

When the feminist debates that began in the 1980's in academic circles continued, it became apparent that the overall political climate in South Africa was changing. By the early 1990's multiparty negotiations for a new constitutional dispensation began in SA and a range of human rights issues were discussed. Women were excluded from the negotiation process and a wide range of women's organizations from political, advocacy and welfare organizations, trade unions, professional and religious bodies in SA were animated by that exclusion. Ironically, that unexpected "exclusion was an

important source of organizational coherence for an extremely heterogeneous grouping" (WNC, 1994, p. 19) of SA women as shall be discussed later.

More than seventy organizations spearheaded the formation of the Women's National Coalition (WNC) which was "chiefly motivated by the fear that women would again be excluded from key political processes that were taking place and which were determining the future of SA" (WNC, 1994, p.19). Learning from the problems and experiences of other nations that achieved liberation prior to SA, South African women did not wait until independence to deal with women's issues. According to Britton (2006) many leading SA women in exile learned that their only chance of ensuring that they would have a voice in national politics was to unify before the first elections, not after (p. 63). When it became apparent to women that gender concerns were remarkably important in the new democracy, Seidman (1999) agrees that activists drew on a visible women's movement that emerged during the anti-apartheid movement as well as from the experiences of other countries. Moreover, Steyn (1998) explicitly states that the "South African women were determined that the women's movement in South Africa should not meet the fate of so many other women's movements in nationalist struggles, namely, that once liberation had been won, women's issues would once again be relegated to a subordinate role" (p. 42). Such had been the case in Nicaragua (Randall, 1995), Mozambique, and Namibia (Britton, 2006). SA feminists did not risk being left out and subsumed by the state. This period is described by some as the redefinition of feminism in SA (Seidman, 2001; Steyn, 1998). The women seized the opportunity to place women's issues and gender relations high on the agendas in an attempt to redress the injustices in their lives. The formation of a coalition was therefore decided upon to allow individuals and autonomous organizations to convene for a specific common purpose and for a limited time-period (WNC, 1994). Steyn (1998) describes the South African WNC as a body that united women across racial, ethnic, political, religious and class differences in order to research and draw up a charter. These women's groups came from a wide spectrum of organizations and they found common ground agreement

about the subordination and oppression of women in SA society and the need for change.

In April 1991, the WNC was formed to contribute and write the *Women's Charter* which was meant to feed into the negotiations of the final constitution (Steyn, 1998, p. 41). In essence, that was the coalition's strategic goal. The charter had to be completed before the first SA democratic elections which were scheduled for April 1994. To resist the threat that was facing them, the formation of the coalition's purpose was negotiated and clarified from the outset for the members to understand what the coalition was expected to achieve. It clearly indicated that a feminist agenda that was authentically South African needed to be constructed (WNC, 1994). In addition, the WNC (1994) had two important short- term objectives that needed immediate attention to strategically position the women in the negotiations that were already ongoing: "first, to acquire and disseminate information about women's needs and aspirations; and second, to unify women in formulating and adopting a *Charter*" (p. 20). Given the timeframes of the coalition's existence, these objectives were ambitious. They involved strong social mobilization of women and required that women be unified by shared goals. The WNC was systematic and careful to implement its mandate. This was in line with their first short-term objective which required an urgent broad-based and inclusive campaign to raise consciousness among all women around gender issues as well as to generate enthusiasm for the project. Although the WNC (1994) was an umbrella organization, it encouraged the participating organizations to establish regional coalitions to reach women in their respective areas.

Given SA's separation policy and heated racial debates prior to 1990, it is crucial to establish how the coalition's membership which represented such a formidable range of divergent ideologies were able to have a meaningful dialogue to form a coalition. The WNC (1994) is of the opinion that

The coalition reflected SA women organized across the divides of race, class political affiliation, religion and historical experience…We recognize the diversity of our experiences and recognize also the commonalities of our subordination as women. As women, we have come together in a coalition organizations to engage in a campaign that enabled women to draw on their diverse experiences and define what changes are required within the new political, legal, economic and social system (p. 19, 10).

However, this statement does not imply that there were no disagreements among coalition members. The WNC is quick to admit that given the diversity of the coalition, many representatives took opposing positions but that did not stop them to debate issues of interest and the members were open to talk about them. Clearly, women in the coalition were faced by distinct challenges. There was already an indication of isolation that women experienced and all women were vulnerable in such environment (Seidman, 2003). For SA women, joining a coalition made more sense than when they acted alone in their racial groups. It was certainly more effective than fighting among themselves or fighting the dominant group (men in this case) alone. The struggle for gender equality was an integral part of the struggle to create a country in which social justice prevails (WNC, 1994). The WNC participants had to deal with questions such as "how does one begin to understand the problems faced by black, migrant, poor, women living in clandestinely in officially single-sex male labor compounds outside an integrated analysis?" (Steyn, 1998, p. 41). These were not easy questions as different group of women had varying life experiences which could not be left out in restructuring the women's concerns. Steyn (1998) stresses as a white academic that "having known only the enforced separation of apartheid, working together as equals on a project with women from other races was a new experience for many of the women present" (p. 41).

Coalition composition and mechanisms used to reach women

The coalition had to consult broadly in the collection of demands for the charter campaigns. The representatives from regional coalitions were responsible for ensuring that programs of action were communicated to their constituencies. Watkins and Rosegrant (2001) suggested that one of the central reasons for building a coalition was that people combine their resources, including human and financial to be able to advance their interests. The WNC consisted of paid staff members who were coordinating the activities of the coalition and volunteers from professional organizations, academics, legal personnel and people who already worked in the area of gender in their respective disciplines who undertook to do research for the coalition. This assisted the coalition with manpower to help in their scientific research and legal expertise to ensure that the *Women's Charter* used the appropriate technical language that would not work against them later on.

Seemingly, these were people who realized the importance of their contributions to defend and advance women's interests which were at stake at that volatile period. As a result of this cooperation and commitment, the coalition became as strong as its constituent organizations, and the relationship and sense of unity that existed between them. In fact the WNC (1994) adds that it was also the commitment of the local branches and regional organizations which lent strength to the WNC campaigns. It seems that the acknowledgements of multiplicity of identities and acceptance of women's experiences from various spheres and locations provided tools for SA women to work together as equals on a project.

Strategies to assess women's needs

The broad participation of women played a key role in charter campaigns. According to the WNC (1994), "the campaign had to be accessible to all women, so that they could in a real sense 'own' it" (p. 24). The coalition had to consult broadly in the collection of demands for the charter and run a campaign that would also empower women in the process. The process that the WNC followed to inform their *Women's Charter* provides a collaborative journey to speak to and

about women in SA. Their campaign was multi-faceted and used multi-media (from electronic to print) and a number of forums such as meetings, rallies, workshops, focus groups and entertainment evenings. The following are examples of the strategies used to obtain information from women and their suggested action plans. The coalition introduced the *Five-Issue Campaign*, where all regional coalitions and participating organizations were encouraged to submit a list of five issues which most affected their lives. The importance of this strategy was the creation of a baseline and a point of departure which described women's lives, their needs and the areas in which they experienced gender discrimination (WNC, 1994). The coalition acknowledges that admittedly, there were varying interests from diverse communities with different positions but the five issue list provided concrete examples of issues which unified because women had to compromise and agree on the most pressing issues at the time. From this preliminary data collection, the coalition identified five broad themes which became the areas of focus for intensive and targeted future campaigns for the five successive months. These areas were Women and Legal Status, Women and Land Resources (Urban and Rural), Women and Violence, Women and Health, and Women and Work.

Several other campaigns were used by the coalition to try and reach women at various levels including smaller-scale campaigns in shopping malls throughout the country and the '*manyano*' – which is the 'unity of women' in religious groupings. In other cases, the gay and lesbian organization chose to mobilize their constituencies to write and submit their own *Charter of Lesbian Rights* "which systematically addressed all the areas in which gay women saw their rights as women and as homosexuals being violated" (p. 29). In addition to the campaigns, participatory and action research methodologies and scientific methods were used to collect data and the *Women's Charter* was completed and launched in April 2004. In line with the mission of the WNC, the coalition was able to "develop a document that was both authentic and indigenous." It was a "document by and for all South African women. The coalition's mandate involved

the mobilization of women around issues identified by women, the popularization of a mass-based campaign and far-reaching investigation and research into women's lives" (WNC, 1994, p. 20).

This was not unusual for South Africans since "women who have been involved in organizational and coalition structures have most often done so with an acute sense of commitment to opposing injustice with a belief in the possibility for transformation and a resultant sense of empowerment" (WNC, 1994, p. 24). It is clear that the WNC was composed of women who were committed to the coalition's restructuring of feminism in SA and were able to do what they were set to do.

WNC's restructuring of feminism in South Africa

Many agree that the need for the document was heightened by the general awareness, expressed by many SA women at the time, that if they did not make an impact upon the process of change while the ground rules for the new society were being drawn up, it would be very difficult to alter the power dynamics within the country on a post hoc basis (Britton, 2006; Seidman, 1999; Steyn, 1998). The coalition realized the importance of various women's involvement to launch a campaign for the equality of women in a new dispensation. The WNC operated in such a way that many women were attracted to participate in the campaigns voluntarily, at their own initiatives as individuals or as organized groups. Several women were involved in mobilizing women from all sectors of SA, during the creation of the WNC. The leading activists within the anti-apartheid movement were able to unite women activists across political spectrum in demanding a greater voice for women within the negotiation process.

Given this relatively 'fresh start' under more diverse leadership, South African feminists had an opportunity to shape a feminist movement from the ground up (Steyn, 1998). Feminists and activists strategically promoted feminist issues

during the negotiations multiparty negotiations where the new SA was conceptualized; claiming to represent the grassroots constituency in township and rural women's groups (Seidman, 2001). Some of these women leaders came out of the liberation struggles and trade unions (Seidman, 2001).

The WNC set a practical agenda through debates about alternative understandings of women's interests and attempted to resolve potential conflicts between women from racial, socio-economic and political backgrounds through a coalition. Seidman (2001) is of the view that "choices about how to institutionalize new meanings of gender often play out on a much more local terrain, where concern about the broad acceptability of feminist intervention may lead feminists to restrain challenges to gender hierarchies" (p. 222). Several debates that took place within the coalition will help us understand how the dialogue developed between women who participated. The SA feminists realized the complexities of South African life and decided to address unequal power relations at all levels and pay attention to those needs that needed immediate attention (WNC, 1994). For instance, during the preliminary findings of their participatory research, the coalition found out that violence against women in SA was a common problem to women and the WNC immediately launched the *'Take Back the Night Matches'* which focused on women and violence. Because of huge prevalence of violence against women in SA, the success of this particular campaign "reflected its pertinence to women's lives and accounts for the enthusiasm with which the public embraced the issue (p. 28).

SA feminists wanted to avoid the mistakes made by other feminists who got their liberation before SA. They did not want to leave out the input of any group of women in the coalition. Okin (2000) and Bunch (2001) advocate for global networks, but Bunch (2001) acknowledges the importance and the role played by local women's organizations. She agrees that "most of what feminism has achieved in the last decades has been through fairly small, specific, local organizations or project of million different sorts" (p. 132). This situation was apparent and clearly recognized by SA women. For instance, Steyn (1999)

argues that "the emerging feminism is being claimed by many previously invisible women and differs fundamentally from the white, middle class, heterosexual profile for which Western feminism has been criticized" (p. 43). The composition of the delegates in the coalition reflected all those who had been most marginalized in the previous dispensation disenfranchised races and ethnic groups, disabled women and lesbians (Steyn, 1999). One of the WNC participants (cited in Raphele, 1990) is emphasized that whatever the coalition will be doing, "Feminists will have to be seen to be just as fervent in their opposition to racism, economic deprivation and exploitation, hierarchical and undemocratic practices, as they are in relation to sexism." She goes on to say "failure to do so will continue to paralyze the movement, by alienating those sectors of society who have to grapple with the impact of these other power differentials in their lives."

Some researchers have been perplexed that even though the apartheid system was extremely divisive along racial lines women unified around their gender identity to oppose the Pass Laws, which strictly governed African (black) women's movement from one area to another (Britton, 2006). In fact, Britton (2006) is one of the few authors who has persistently reminded her audience that even though 'apartheid' was a reification of colonial hierarchies of ethnicity and gender, SA women worked collectively to oppose the white-minority government often building coalitions across racial or ideological divisions (p. 59) from as far as the early 1950's. She argues that it is such political experiences that provided SA women with useful skills and practical strategies that would be useful for them during and after the transition to democracy. Their skills in "collaboration, networking and mass action were invaluable tools that women mastered during the resistance" (Britton, 2006, p. 63). Even after they gained their independence, Britton (2006) still remarks that "what is striking about the South African case, however, is that women from all ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds often found themselves in unified opposition to the apartheid system" (p. 62). She compliments the achievements of all the women who took part in the

reconstruction of feminism in SA. She suggests that some of the benefits of the movement have been to place women in strategic decision-making roles where they can influence policy. Comparing SA to parliamentarian with the West, Britton (2006) is of the view that "the gender and ethnic composition of the SA parliament is monumentally more progressive and representative than most traditional Western legislative bodies" (p. 60).

As in many other new democracies, the negotiated transition sometimes turns active women into passive feminists for fear of critiquing the national liberation movement or the women's issues take back seat. However, what was interesting about the WNC was that it actually went beyond what could be called government's rhetorical commitment to ending gender inequality by recommending having the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) that would monitor and stimulate gender transformation in SA society (WNC, 1994). In fact, Seidman's (2001) work which focuses on the CGE suggests that "what international bureaucrats generally refer to as 'the national machinery for women' in South Africa was particularly elaborate and ambitious" (p. 224). As a result, the new legislation gave the CGE remarkable visibility and unusual powers, such as the right to subpoena witnesses and evidence, and the right to intervene in both public and private sites which is a complete contrast to what the other nationalist movements have done even if they have women's ministries which are committed to improving women's ability to fulfill their domestic obligations. Given the scenario and activism of women in SA, it can be argued that women's differences broadened the conceptualized definition of feminism and women's interests because of the diversity of voices, ideas and needs.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that it was absolutely important to form a coalition because the women's existence was threatened in South Africa from the time they were left out in the negotiations of the new dispensation. That threat was so important because SA women had to find a common ground and lobby as

a group of women to articulate their gender interests. Despite their political, racial and cultural differences, the SA women utilized their diversity and differences to understand their varying needs and the overlapping forms of dominance and challenged the patriarchal assignment of power and privileges. It is also clear from this study that SA women were able to learn from the experiences of other women's movements in the international arena. They were able to draw from the latter's successes and did not trust to leave women's issues until after independence, and risk being left out. Finally, it can be concluded that the WNC truly became an agent that constructed present SA's notion of feminism. The coalition stimulated public awareness and became a platform that promoted constructive debates on women's issues. The WNC unified women on issues that affected their lives and that it constituted a unified women's movement in SA where none had existed before with such organizational coherence.

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Adele Mavuso Mda was born in South Africa. She has always liked communication technologies, women and children's issues. She was especially interested in education, communication and finance. Luckily, her family and teachers encouraged those interests. She graduated from National University of Lesotho and earned a degree in Education for Development. Soon after, she graduated from St Michaels College in Vermont and Rand Afrikaans University in South Africa with Masters Degrees. In 1995, Adele went back to South Africa and worked for the non-profit organization and later for government. Her biggest dream was to work with UNESCO and the South African Broadcasting Corporation in 13 African countries on media and children. She came back to the US to complete her PhD in Mass Communication at Ohio University in 2009. Her research interests are media policy and management,ICT, race and gender. She can be reached at: mm161703@ohio.edu