Altering Politics, Contesting Gender

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Introduction

A few years ago, a leading analyst of politics in southern Africa loftily told a young scholar that his most recent book did not address women. He had 'left it for her' to add in the 'gender parts'. As this issue demonstrates, gender and women are central to any analysis of southern Africa in the post-apartheid era. In this introduction to the *Journal of Southern African Studies* Special Issue 'Women and the Politics of Gender in Southern Africa', we set out to investigate how women's broader political engagement has changed politics in Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia, and has intensified challenges to gender identities, social relations and public practices. The issue thus highlights women's victories as well as persistent problems, and suggests strategies for future advances.

Political transformation in southern Africa during the 1990s provided opportunities for greater autonomy in civil society, public communication and elected representation. Throughout the region, a broad range of women – urban and rural, elite and working class, and from across racial and ethnic boundaries – seized upon these opportunities to influence state policy-making, shape public opinion and renew civil society. Long engaged in neighbourhood organising, community organisations and political protest, women are also leading social movements and building coalitions. Moreover, binding, collective decision-making is no longer defined by women's absence: in unprecedented numbers women are running for political office, altering institutional practices, writing legislation and constitutional law and judging their applicability.[1] Women's greater presence in both informal and formal politics has created the potential to build linkages between state and civil society and end their practical exclusion from mainstream politics.

One result of southern African women's greater political engagement has been to intensify the pressure on traditional gender roles in both the public and private spheres. The naturalisation of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' that continues to justify men's domination and women's subordination is being challenged, not only by women's heightened visibility and activism in public life, but also by a wide range of issues, including the onslaught of HIV/AIDS and international and regional concerns with women's rights. Throughout southern Africa, the complex processes among individual women and men, institutions, structures and cultural norms that create and reproduce gender are in crisis, and are producing dramatic innovations, controversy, violence and resistance.[2] This crisis is one of the defining characteristics of transformation in the region. While we believe that an analysis of women's experiences and the workings of gender have always been critical for understanding the history and politics of southern Africa, women's energetic engagement in a wide range of political

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1 A.M. Tripp notes that from 1960 to 2000 Africa 'exhibited the world's fastest rate of growth in female representation'. Tripp, 'The New Political Activism in Africa', *Journal of Democracy*, 12, 3 (July 2001), p. 142. South Africa and Uganda have been particularly impressive. See A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds), *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making* (London, Zed Books, 2003).

2 For a discussion of gender as a process, see K. Beckwith, 'The Concept of Gender: Research Implications for Political Science', *Politics and Gender*, 1, 1 (March 2005), pp. 128–36.

activity and the tremendous pressures being exerted on gender norms today mean that scholarship on the region cannot ignore women and gender or wait for them to be added later.

To illustrate the decisive change in southern African politics that has occurred over the last decade, we begin with a brief discussion of women's more familiar role as symbols of backwardness and as mothers of the nation during the colonial era and in early liberation movements. Moving away from this inauspicious heritage, diverse groups of women participated in public life in the period following the Second World War, but all too often their inclusion was directed by men, and they rarely mobilised to express their needs and interests as women. With the political transformations of the early 1990s, however, a wide range of women in southern Africa quickly moved into all avenues of public life, claiming their political rights and using them to fight for changes in public policy and social norms. Their successes and failures, and the lessons we can draw from these experiences are the focus of this special issue.

Women as Symbols

As postcolonial feminists have pointed out, the indigenous woman's body became a crucial site of contestation during the colonial era. In places as diverse as Algeria and India, colonial regimes focused on women's bodies in order to justify colonial rule by proving the supposed barbarity of indigenous peoples. Thus, in Algeria, for example, the French colonising power focused on the veil as emblematic of a whole host of customs that purportedly kept women in a state of domestic slavery. Colonial rulers argued that these customs necessitated the intervention of Europeans to free women from the tyranny of men. Likewise in India, the British invoked a regional and quite limited practice of widow burning, or sati, as a national crime of shame perpetrated by men against all Indian women. The banning of sati in the mid-nineteenth century enabled the British to position themselves as champions of Indian women. In Spivak's wonderful formulation, the British were therefore able to position themselves as saving 'brown women from brown men'.[3]

On British imperial terrain, white suffragists deplored the moral decay of native women and deployed the language of European feminism to display the backwardness of local culture. In southern Africa, the notion that African women endured special burdens because of the egregious behaviour of African men had long permeated missionary accounts of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, British feminists again drew on notions of suffering, this time of Africans in general, to advance the imperial cause. During the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa, the British feminist Josephine Butler used descriptions of the terrible situation of Africans under Afrikaner rule to advocate for British imperialism and for women's suffrage. South African English-speaking feminists also argued that they needed the vote because their special maternal instincts allowed them to better understand the 'native question'. They positioned themselves as mothers to the supposed infancy of black South Africans.[4]

When European women attacked local practices and urged upon indigenous women a decidedly Victorian emancipation, they aligned themselves quite closely with their patriarchal foes at home.[5] Colonial feminism thus left a mixed legacy. Western feminist

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3 G.S. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana IL, University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

4 A. Burton, ' "States of Injury": Josephine Butler on Slavery, Citizenship and the Boer War', and P. Scully, 'White Maternity and Black Infancy: The Rhetoric of Race in the South African Women's Suffrage Movement', in C. Fletcher, L.E. Nym Mayhall and P. Levine (eds), *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race* (London, Routledge, 2000), pp. 68–84.

5 A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, NC, North Carolina University Press, 1994).

targets overlapped so closely with the agenda of imperial domination that feminism could be discredited by cultural resistance movements, which looked to women to uphold traditional values, practices and beliefs, and infuse the next generation with cultural loyalty. Early nationalist leaders perceived that reclaiming new meanings for the veil, and for indigenous women's bodies, offered dynamic potential for mobilisation against colonialism.[6]

Women, and women's bodies, thus remained symbols of imperial resistance. In the course of the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, women activists reclaimed the veil as a sign of a commitment to a postcolonial Islamic Algeria. In more recent years, women wearing the veil continue to 'bear responsibility for the nation's conflict'.[7] British opposition to clitoridectomy helped make female genital cutting a site of early nationalist mobilisation in Kenya.[8] Later liberation movements included women in the struggle – but as mothers, defending their children and families, projecting a romanticised vision of women's reproductive role in the private sphere.[9] In South Africa this role was personified by Winnie Mandela, who became known as the 'Mother of the Nation'. In general, anti-colonial nationalist movements were more successful at putting women on the agenda as symbolic of the need for radical change, than for incorporating gender analysis and gender equity into the discourse of liberation.

Women and Resistance

In the first half of the twentieth century, the colonial state continued to be antagonistic towards African women's diverse interests. Intent on sustaining social stability and securing a cheap source of labour, the colonial state relied upon women for reproductive labour and agricultural production.[10] To ensure women's labour in the home and on the land, colonial states restricted property rights to men. Women were also excluded, where possible, from forms of waged labour and legal residency in urban areas, and women's trading activities were controlled.[11] The transformation of pre-colonial society under colonial rule and the division of labour into gendered reproductive and productive roles did not immediately lead to entrenchment of male control, however, but to a gender crisis. As marriage restrictions imposed by community elders were deteriorating, one manifestation of the crisis was increasing adultery, divorce and remarkably fluid marriage practices that undermined the position of traditional power holders.[12] The colonial state and African patriarchs, however, collaborated to control women's burgeoning autonomy through a series of legal innovations that curtailed urban women's beer brewing and prostitution. While many women resisted,

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6 Male nationalists reinscribed sati in India as a long-standing tradition of Indian culture and invoked widow's self-immolation as a sign of both the fortitude of Indian women and as a symbol of the movement's commitment to 'traditional' values. On Algeria see F. Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York, Grove Press, 1965); on India, see L. Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1998). In the 1820s and 1830s, abolitionists concentrated on slave women's whipping at the hands of slaveholder men to call for the ending of slavery and the restoration of a 'proper' gender order in which freedmen would be heads of patriarchal nuclear families and thus protect their wives from the abuse of men not their husbands. P. Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann Press, 1997).

7 W. Woodhull, 'Unveiling Algeria', in R. Lewis and S. Mills (eds), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New York, Routledge, 2003), p. 571.

8 L. Thomas, *The Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2003).

9 C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1992).

10 M. Lovett, 'Gender Relations, Class Formation and the Colonial State in Africa', in J. Parpart and K. Staudt (eds), *Women and the State in Africa* (Boulder, CO, Lynn Reiner, 1989), p. 27.

11 C. Walker, 'Gender and the Development of the Migrant Labour System c.1850–1930', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), pp. 168–96.

12 Lovett, 'Gender Relations', pp. 26–31.

new marriage and travel regulations and their minimal access to education and paid employment inevitably took their toll.[13]

The collusion between the colonial state and elder men meant that both local and national forms of state power were patriarchal.[14] In West Africa, colonialism dampened what had formerly been very strong women's political organisations deriving in part from the dual sex system.[15] The Women's War in southern Nigeria, in which women used customary forms of resistance to express their dissatisfaction was ended brutally by British troops.[16] African women's access to state courts for divorce claims was ended with the establishment of Native Courts.[17] Women in a number of countries organised against male domination, drawing on pre-colonial methods and new forms of organisation, creating unions – and, in western Nigeria, a mass women's association – to advance their interests and promote political agendas. Most efforts were short-lived with limited success at best.[18] The colonial state was thus actively excluding women from political power and deepening their social and economic subordination to male elders and patriarchal kinship groups.

During the era following the Second World War, southern African women's impact on mainstream politics remained limited. While women continued to be enthusiastic members of church groups, burial societies and food co-operatives, these organisations were not politically oriented. Indeed, most independent women's organisations were small, loosely structured and pursued practical needs. Low rates of education, skills and patriarchal cultural norms coupled with the celebration of 'motherhood' discouraged African women from forming effective linkages among organisations and developing a politicised agenda.[19] Women's occasional protest activities and extensive participation in liberation movements that began in Africa in the 1960s was inspiring, and certainly challenged traditional male–female relations as small numbers of women even took up arms or as male revolutionaries

13 J.L. Parpart, 'Women and the State in Africa', in D. Rothchild and N. Chazan (eds), *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa*, (Boulder, CO, Westview, 1988) pp. 211–12; Lovett, 'Gender Relations' and M. Mbilinyi, '"This is an Unforgettable Business": Colonial State Intervention in Urban Tanzania', in Parpart and Staudt, pp. 111–29. For one example of the contradictory nature of colonial regulation of women see T. Barnes, 'The Fight for the Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17, 3 (1992), pp. 586–608.
14 Lovett, 'Gender Relations'; G. Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics* (Boulder, CO, Lynn Reiner, 1996); E. Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Colonial Zimbabwe* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1992); C. Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (London, Onnyx Press, 1982); I. Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry, 1900–1980* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1992).
15 K. Okonjo, 'The Dual Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria', in N.J. Hafkin and E.G. Bay (eds), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1976), pp. 45–58.
16 J. Van Allen '"Sitting on a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women', Canadian Journal of African Studies, 6, 2 (1972), pp. 165–81 and '"Aba Riots" or Igbo "Women's War"? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women', in Hafkin and Bay (eds), Women in Africa, pp. 100–106.
17 Those courts were the result of negotiations between indigenous male elders and colonial magistrates intent upon codifying customary law to their mutual advantage. M. Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985).
18 Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, pp. 63–5; Parpart, 'Women and the State in Africa', p. 213. For examples of popular resistance see Mbilinyi, 'This is an Unforgettable Business' and N. Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activities in Southern Nigeria, 1900–1950* (Berkeley, CA, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1982).
19 In his analysis of the African state, Fatton argued that women opted out of the state and mainstream politics to prevent co-optation by unconsolidated ruling classes. Waylen agrees that women 'disengaged' from the state, but that the vast majority of African women also lacked the capacity to effectively engage in politics. Tripp argues that the state excluded women or co-opted them, leaving the majority 'to their own organizations'. She claims those organisations were the foundation for women's dramatic entry into politics in the 1980s and 1990s. R. Fatton Jr., 'Gender, Class and State in Africa', in Parpart and Staudt, *Women and the State in Africa*, pp. 47–66; Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, p. 121; A.M. Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 7. See also Geisler in this issue.

became advocates of female supporters, as in Zimbabwe.[20] Although liberation movements undermined conventional gender practices, these movements were dominated by men. Thus, while the movements often mobilised, trained and politicised women, and promised women's liberation would be addressed with independence, they did little to address the 'woman question' once in power, and decidedly ignored patriarchal relations in the private sphere.[21]

There were rare exceptions, where women organised to advance their interests and needs during the liberation era. The Federation of South African Women (FSAW) that emerged in South Africa in 1954 to fight apartheid and bring women together across racial lines fought for women's rights and famously led an anti-pass campaign in which 20,000 women protested. But FSAW was unique.[22] All too often women's activism in male-dominated organisations was exploited and, with liberation, women's issues were subsumed under the drive for national unity.[23] When liberation movements came to power, generally women were restricted to being 'dressed in party colours singing and dancing praise songs for the male leadership, raising money and support'.[24] Not all women were opposed to this role, but many – particularly younger, urban, professional, educated women and those politicised by the struggle for liberation – chafed under the return to 'traditional' gender norms and their exclusion from political power.

Women's Activism

Beginning with the United Nations Women's Conference in 1975, the international women's movement successfully prompted international organisations, development agencies and wealthy nations to encourage countries around the globe to enhance women's role in development, improve women's legal standing and their presence in government structures. This movement for women's equality, initially dominated by the concerns of white western liberal feminists, could not entirely dispel the imperialist legacy of the nineteenth century but it did facilitate greater organising by African women.[25] A tremendous range in priorities and concerns was evident among diverse women's groups as they organised and vocally contested the dominance of 'western' feminism, imagining

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20 G. Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating Autonomy, Incorporation and Representation* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), p. 55.
21 For example, see S. Urdang, *Fighting Two Colonialisms: Women in Guinea-Bissau* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1979), and M.J. Arthur, 'Mozambique: Women in the Armed Struggle', in R. Meena (ed.), *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues* (Harare, Southern Africa Printing and Publishing House, 1992), pp. 67–82.
22 Too often, feminism was 'seen as a bourgeois diversion distracting from the class struggle', Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*, p. 79. See also R. Gaidzanwa, 'Bourgeois Theories of Gender and Feminism and Their Shortcomings with Reference to Southern African Countries', in Meena (ed.), *Gender in Southern Africa*, pp. 92–125. On women's movements in South Africa, see S. Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).
23 Accounts of women's role in liberation movements include Walker, *Women and Resistance*; D. Russell, *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (New York, Basic Books, 1989); I. Staunton, *Mothers of the Revolution* (Harare, Baobab Books, 1990) and M. Munachonga, 'Women and the State: Zambia's Development Policies and Their Impact on Women', in Parpart and Staudt, pp. 130–42; Parpart, 'Women and the State in Africa', and Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics*.
24 Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa*, p. 24.
25 Parpart, 'Women and the State', pp. 222–3. Geisler notes that despite the inadequacies of the national machinery advocated by the UN, it did provide a platform for women in and out of the state to build relationships. Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*, p. 27. For a critique of the western bias of the international women's movement see C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo, L. Torres (eds), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 51–80. For a critique of sisterhood from an African perspective see O. Oyewumi (ed.), *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Asmara Eritrea, Africa World Press, Inc., 2003).

and propagating new and highly distinct visions of gender justice, drawing on radical, Marxist, womanist and traditional ideals.[26] Throughout the period women across the globe – including African women – mobilised and attacked a wide range of issues, such as pollution, poverty, land rights, low wages and inequality between the sexes.[27] In southern Africa, women in Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and South Africa were also embroiled in violent struggles for liberation and national sovereignty. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, although women in southern Africa organised to capitalise on the worldwide attention to women's rights and move into politics, their efforts were hampered by intransigent colonial rule, violence, authoritarian states that strictly limited organisational autonomy, popular distrust of 'divisive' women's movements, the economic crisis in Africa and the usual obstacles to women's organisation, including the double burden.[28]

The turn towards multiparty democracy in the early 1990s lifted some of these obstacles, inspiring women across the Continent. In a number of countries, regime change led to an enormous expansion of women's involvement and interaction in mainstream politics that continues to the present.[29] In the 1990s, women were increasingly likely to be educated, and they used their new skills and support from international donors to organise in ever-larger numbers. Their agenda continued to be broad but now included the promotion of female candidates for national office and the infusion of women into the state. As the primary beneficiaries of these changes, elite women have accessed the state at the national level and continue to be the leaders of mass movements. Despite limited resources, a lack of experience and pervasive male harassment, their activism and entry into formal and informal avenues of public life directly challenged established gender norms and institutional practices at every level of governance and across civil society. Less privileged African women have only occasionally made gains.[30] Their marginalisation from both formal and informal politics persists, and their inclusion in the future will be critical if the advances noted here are to be more than a passing phase.

Fortunately, most studies of democratic transitions and consolidation in Africa are beginning to capture the dramatic impact of changing gender identities, relations and

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26 African women's divided political objectives have long been noted. For example, see S. Ranchod-Nilsson, '"This Too, Is a Way of Fighting", Rural Women's Participation in Zimbabwe's Liberation War', in M.A. Tetreault (ed.), *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World* (Columbia, SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 62–88. Amadiume notes the emergence of class conflicts and the competition that emerged among women's organisations in Nigeria during this period. I. Amadiume, *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism: African Women Struggle for Culture, Power and Democracy* (London, Zed Books, 2000). For a recent discussion on the problem by South African activists and scholars, see the special issue of *Agenda*, 'African Feminisms, Two', 54 (2002).

27 A. Basu, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1995); T. Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York, Routledge, 1997) and J.W. Scott, C. Kaplan, D. Keates, *Transitions, Environments, Translations* (New York, Routledge, 1997), pp. 226–49.

28 For a discussion of women's participation in and during liberation struggles during the 1970s and 1980s see Tetreault (ed.), *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*; R.E. Lapchick and S. Urdang (eds), *Oppression and Resistance: The Struggle of Women in Southern Africa* (Westport, C, Greenwood Press, 1982) and Arthur, 'Mozambique', pp. 67–82.

29 See G. Mikell, 'African Feminism: Towards a New Politics of Representation', *Feminist Studies*, 21, 2 (1995), pp. 405–24; Tripp, 'The New Political Activism in Africa'; Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*. In established democracies like Botswana, women were inspired to enter formal politics and to organise more vigorously in civil society during the 1990s.

30 In contrast to Geisler, who argues that conservative rural women lost the minimal political representation they had with the decline of women's wings and the rise of women MPs and national women's movements, we contend that better, if still limited opportunities for marginalised women's activism are now available. See Becker, Fish and Britton in this issue. Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*, p. 209.

practices on politics with democratisation.[31] Because the international women's movement surged in tandem with the 'third wave', women's local activism expanded and often contributed towards democratisation. Thus, analysts of democratisation cannot adequately assess what happens during transitions and early consolidation without acknowledging the increased presence of women in all facets of political life.[32]

This special issue demonstrates that the greater participation of women in public life has intensified challenges to gender identities, relations and practices and has altered politics in southern Africa. As Fareda Banda notes, the rise of international women's rights norms is increasing pressure to produce regional documents that link proclamations of gender equality to national reform. Shifting gender norms are also transforming institutions at the local level, such as chieftainship, which Heike Becker argues can be reconstituted in response to women's rights discourses and the visible presence of women in politics, both of which are undermining the common belief that women's role in public is silence. Thus, women's organisations and female politicians who have seized the opportunities of the 1990s are transforming not only the face of politics, but its content and procedures. Quotas and affirmative action that substantially increase the number of women in legislatures and bureaucracies are generating new legislative priorities, policy debates and sometimes even outcomes.[33] As the articles by Gisela Geisler and Denise Walsh illustrate, women's increased interest in national politics can alter constitutional principles, campaign strategies and political institutions. Activists not only publicly expose inequitable gender relations and practices in the state, civil society and at home, but also invigorate civil society by forging linkages among organisations, and they are at the forefront of the struggle to construct an effective relationship among state administrators, politicians and non-governmental actors, as both Jennifer Fish and Hannah Britton's articles clearly indicate.

However, while women altered the political landscape in the 1990s by entering public life, this does not suggest that their activism produced uniformly progressive results. In general, feminist scholars have found that democratic regimes are not significantly hospitable to women's participation in formal politics or to feminist policy objectives. Across all democracies, women's presence in politics remains consistently low and the work required to achieve that inadequate presence inordinately high.[34] Although democratic polities invite all citizens to be engaged in public life, women (and especially feminists) often find the reins of power remain firmly in the hands of others. Moreover, even when women do access power, they may not promote feminist policies.[35] Although women's increased participation in public life tends to advance democratisation, new governments rarely return the favour with a progressive gender agenda. Thus, while women in southern Africa during the 1990s became actively engaged in mainstream politics in dramatic ways that challenged gender assumptions and politics as usual, their involvement had negative consequences as well.

Women's expanding role in politics and the intensifying crisis in gender norms has increased their exposure to state repression and public violence. At the same time,

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31 S. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
32 J.S. Jacquette, 'Regional Differences and Contrasting Views', *Journal of Democracy*, 12, 3 (July 2001), p. 111.
33 For an overview of women's entry into politics in Africa during the 1990s, including a global comparison of the percentage of women in national parliaments, see Tripp, 'The New Political Activism in Africa'. For a discussion of women in national politics in southern Africa see Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*.
34 K. Beckwith, 'The Comparative Politics of Women's Movements', *Perspectives on Politics*, 3, 3 (September 2005), p. 587.
35 As Mala Htun notes, 'women's presence in decision making is no guarantee of liberal policy. Not all women are liberals'. M. Htun, *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family Under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 173.

inflexibility in traditional gender roles continues to threaten human survival in the region. Both problems ensure that women and men's roles, male power and the social structures that sustain them will remain contested. Sita Ranchod-Nilsson's discussion of Zimbabwe indicates that when leaders find it no longer in their interest to promote women's rights, women's citizenship can be reconstructed as a heavy burden, with the state demanding public sacrifice. Women may also lose access to state benefits and find themselves targets of male violence. Their greater activism suggests, however, that such losses will not be suffered quietly.

Women's entry into politics and public life can also have frightening domestic consequences. In the private sphere, Helen Moffett argues that women find male abuse increases and that violence on the streets intensifies, with gang rapes, kidnappings and murder. Attempts to sustain conventional gender roles in the home can lead not only to domestic violence but can cripple communities across the region as they struggle to survive under the horrific toll of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Stephanie Urdang passionately argues that families with AIDS victims find that the deadly and protracted nature of the disease means that women alone cannot be both primary care-givers and the providers of family food. If gender roles in the home do not change, the consequences for both women and men will be dire. Women's highly touted entry into all facets of political life and the current gender crisis are thus not without costs, as they can be deployed to women's disadvantage by recalcitrant or incompetent states and can be effectively resisted in the home. Whether that resistance increases or is eroded, there is no doubt that conventional gender norms, and the male–female relations and public practices that construct and sustain them, are once again being severely tested. For good or ill, women's broad participation in public life is reshaping politics and society in southern Africa.

Themes

From constitutional law-making to the AIDS crisis, the roles of men and women are shifting dramatically, altering who is in politics, how politics works, and what politics is about. Indeed, this special issue makes it clear that as women in southern Africa have organised to promote their needs and interests and to enter into representative democratic institutions, the scope of politics has broadened. Sexist hierarchies everywhere are being exposed and challenged: in bedrooms and rural power structures, domestic work and political party structures. While the outcomes are not always positive for women, challenges to gender norms are altering the rules of the game.

Many of the articles in this issue are attentive to how the international–national–local dynamic shapes gender. Banda addresses this matrix directly in her discussion of domestic, regional and international law. Reminding readers that the plural legal system found in much of the region owes its antecedents to negotiations between colonial and indigenous patriarchs, Banda focuses on a comparative analysis of customary, constitutional, regional and international legal declarations and their implementation. Her investigation reveals how governments struggle to balance an endorsement of women's equality while maintaining national and domestic power arrangements. The results are contradictory as resistant elites thwart implementation while progressively stronger regional and international declarations continue to be approved, with some linking ratification to social reform. The result is the exposure of women's rights hypocrisy. Banda's contribution makes abundantly clear that a large number of legal documents at all levels in the region now reject inequality between the sexes. Certainly negotiations over the documents and their public reiteration make

international, regional and constitutional declarations useful to local activists who are intent on demanding their rights.

The discourse of women's rights at the national level can have a positive impact on women's role and status even in rural areas, particularly when leaders find it easier to adapt to new gender practices than to resist. Becker's comparative analysis of traditional authorities and customary courts in four Namibian communities uncovers the multi-faceted ways in which rural leadership can respond to dominant discourses of women's rights, and why a range of outcomes result. According to Becker, gender practices have highly localised variations, which individual chiefs and rural residents construct according to their political interests and available discourses. If local chieftaincy is thus modern in its capacity to recreate itself, it is also an arena open to contestation over gender roles. While Becker delves into the important comparative discussion of how and why different gender regimes emerge in Namibia, it is worth noting that, in her hands, chieftaincy is no longer moulded as a closed and bounded traditional system sustaining women's most deeply entrenched oppression. Instead, traditional systems are revealed as flexible, their positions on gender varying according to their history, political allegiances, the extent of male migratory labour, leaders' personal interests and, most prominently, the dominant discourse of the state. Hence, in some 'traditional' strongholds we can find rural women in Namibia participating in and reshaping political life.

While the state is one actor among several in Banda's account of women's rights agreements, and has a strong influence on how local leadership takes up women's rights claims in Becker's analysis, Ranchod-Nilsson's article on Zimbabwe brings the state into sharp focus as a decidedly negative force. The authoritarian response of the government to a series of crises, including economic failure and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, has meant politics in Zimbabwe has been increasingly authoritarian. Nevertheless, Ranchod-Nilsson argues that in Zimbabwe women have not withdrawn from political engagement either in the state or civil society and, indeed, have found new spaces for action and influence. Even as persistent contestation over gender norms has undermined women's legal status and the capacity of gender machinery, women have avidly moved into non-governmental organisations and into opposition politics making concerted efforts to reshape collective decision-making. Despite the government's rejection of women's issues and its authoritarian turn, women in Zimbabwe are thus seeking political influence, altering how politics is done, refusing to cede power to men. Their energetic activism continues to directly and indirectly challenge conventional gender norms and will ensure that gender remains another area of crisis for the current government.

Politics in Zambia, Botswana and Namibia stand in decided contrast to the growing authoritarianism and highly unstable situation in Zimbabwe. Although the three countries have distinct political histories, Geisler nevertheless finds that the women in these countries who capitalised on the democratisation of the 1990s pursued similar strategies. In each, alliances between women in the state and in the women's movement were critical for putting more women into elected office. In all three cases, women with political aims were able to work through the state as well as civil society to successfully challenge exclusionary gender norms and 'containment' in the women's wings of political parties.[36] Thus, Geisler's study

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36 The limitations of women's wings on women's political activism has long been recognised. For early analyses of women's wings on the African continent, see G. Geisler, 'Sisters Under the Skin: Women and the Women's League in Zambia', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 25, 1 (1987), pp. 43–66; Parpart, 'Women and the State' and F. Steady, *Female Power in African Politics: The National Congress of Sierra Leone Women* (Pasadena, NM, Munger Africana Library, California Institute of Technology, 1975).

confirms not only the vitality of women's engagement in public life, but also points to the importance of dual activism in both formal and informal arenas.

Alliances between women across political arenas were also crucial to their success in South Africa, where the tremendous influx of women in the transition negotiations and in parliament, the constitutional guarantee to equality and the establishment of gender machinery were won through dynamic leadership that crossed racial and political boundaries. While South African women's successes have been widely and rightly celebrated, the articles on South Africa in this issue take a more critical stance, recognising that while the country possesses one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, translating the goal of gender justice into reality is a formidable endeavour indeed. Walsh questions the depth of the country's commitment to non-sexism, analysing the barriers to women's participation in public life during the heyday of the South African public sphere, from 1994–1996. Present in formal decision-making bodies and flush with success from their activism during the transition, South African women leaders moved into parliament with vigour. While the barriers to participation in parliament were steep, elsewhere in the public sphere women found themselves stymied by even greater obstacles. At the local level, and particularly in the media and political and civil society, Walsh finds persistent sexism and resistance to women's meaningful inclusion. While progress during this short two-year period was impressive, Walsh signals a cautionary note that even in the best of times, advances will be uneven and that women's inclusion requires attention to social and economic inequities if they are to truly 'remake' politics and participate in resolving the gender crisis.

While Walsh takes a decidedly macro-level point of view, surveying South African women's participation in public life across the public sphere, Fish focuses on women's activism at the micro-level, discussing how women in the paid domestic sector were able to organise and successfully draw on the gender machinery of the new South African state to win the right to unemployment insurance. Despite the tremendous hurdles against domestic workers, which Fish notes throughout the study, she finds – like Geisler – that mobilisation in the informal political arena, when effectively linked with women in the state, can produce substantial victory. While the inadequacy of South African gender machinery has been well-documented, the account by Fish reminds us that it still has the potential to effect change when linked with women's organisations that are well-organised.[37] Certainly the South African state remains decidedly patriarchal, and social and economic rights have been slow to improve. Yet Fish's article demonstrates that who is engaged in politics and how legislation is formulated is changing, showing us how domestic workers – some of the most marginalised women in South Africa – have made advances in their economic security.

Turning to the linkages between the public and the private sphere, the subject matter of the remaining three articles in the issue directly address the gender crisis in southern Africa. The articles by Moffett and Urdang are written by activists in the field. As this issue highlights how southern African women have moved full force into the political mainstream, we believe it is eminently appropriate that the insights, arguments and passion of women activists be integrated into our scholarly dialogue, and we hope that this conversation will foster stronger linkages between the two communities, much as activists have made effective linkages with women in the state.

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37 For two recent accounts on South African gender machinery see G.W. Seidman, 'Institutional Dilemmas: Representation versus Mobilization in the South African Gender Commission', *Feminist Studies*, 29, 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 541–63 and S. Hassim, 'The Gender Pact and Democratic Consolidation: Institutionalizing Gender Equality in the South African State', pp. 505–28 in the same issue.

A formidable example of how women are engaged with mainstream politics and are advocating change, Moffett draws on her substantial experience in the field to counter claims that rape in South Africa today is about race. Instead, Moffett takes the feminist position that rape is a gender crime and argues that the gender crisis in South Africa has become a gender war. The extraordinary vulnerability of female domestics to this most appalling form of gender violence substantiates Moffett's argument that rape in South Africa draws on the violent legacy of apartheid and sustains patriarchy, but is not a race-based phenomenon. Her clarity is a clarion call to all South African women to reject racism and demand their physical security in the 'new' South Africa.

The extreme nature of the violence against women in South Africa is most certainly generating a powerful reaction. Britton examines how women's organisations have responded to the rape epidemic in South Africa and how they have engaged with and been challenged by the difficulties inherent in negotiating a productive relationship with the state. If women inside and outside the state rely on one another for support, their relationship is nevertheless fraught with tensions, including concerns about autonomy and representation, unrealistic expectations about support and hence suspicion. Thus, the two themes of the special issue come together forcefully in Britton's analysis, as she provides us with insights into how women are using their access to the political mainstream to fight the gender war so vividly depicted by Moffett, and as she also details how that thicker engagement in politics has created divisions even among women who share the same political ideals and a common legacy in the struggle against apartheid. While Moffett persuasively argues that gender relations in the most publicly progressive country in the region are profoundly violent and that the price women pay for their political gains is high, Britton's analysis adds a further insight, reminding us that women's politicisation has required a steep learning curve and that women activists and politicians continue to face constraints that limit their capacity for productive engagement. While women's victories in South Africa thus remain inspiring, the assessment of the current situation in this special issue is sobering.

The most devastating transformation in southern Africa over the recent decades has been the spread of the HIV/AIDs virus. Urdang writes movingly about the ultimate price women pay as AIDS has swept across the region and devastated African families. Urdang argues that the sustainability of the African household is now so threatened that economic recognition of domestic care and its integration into AIDS prevention strategies is essential to stem the epidemic. Examining the international, national and local dynamic that has blocked effective policy formation and implementation, Urdang notes that the stories and voices of women affected by the disease have not been heard or incorporated into national and international policy. While women's exclusion is certainly no surprise, Urdang notes with some irony that the extraordinary destructiveness of the disease has created the possibility that attentiveness to the care economy and a revision of domestic gender norms may finally occur, not because justice demands it, but because few alternatives exist if families wish to survive. Thus, while the AIDS pandemic is not at root a political transformation, its threat to political and domestic stability ensure that the region will continue to face a gender crisis of immense proportions.

With women's entry into binding decision-making bodies, their activism in civil society and contestation over gender, the terrain of analysis for scholars (and the focal point for activists) of the region has been shifting over the past decade. A number of important studies on women's movements and their engagement in political transformation are now available and attention has increasingly turned to women's participation in electoral politics and parliament. Of particular value are regional and comparative cases that develop theoretical arguments about southern African women's movements and

women in politics.[38] This issue contributes to both the women's movement and women in politics literature, helping us to see how evolving political transformations have in many cases enabled women to make substantial legal and political gains, and that it is possible that these advances in the political arena can be leveraged into greater economic security for some of the most vulnerable. However, the issue also emphasises that social advances have been negligible and women's new role has been violently challenged.

While it is true that much work still remains to be done to fully theorise and understand women in politics in southern Africa, we would like to urge scholars also to attend to the gender crisis that is embroiling the region. That crisis calls for collaboration among women in southern Africa and a commitment to developing transnational linkages. Despite the Eurocentrism of the international women's movement that emerged in the 1980s, the linkages that were forged through those efforts facilitated tremendous ferment and activism that was essential for some of the successes analysed in this special issue. A transnational commitment to attacking power structures that perpetuate gender subordination can, we believe, find its roots in southern Africa, where women are increasingly organised and engaged in politics but nevertheless remain deeply marginalised. If women have for too long been disempowered, then it is here in southern Africa that feminists can 'access and make the workings of power visible – to read up the ladder of privilege' and expose inequities, while building the most inclusive basis for solidarity possible, empowering southern Africans to resist multiple forms of oppression and to imagine new ways of living.[39]

This special issue demonstrates that the intensifying gender crisis and women's activism in formal and informal politics are crucial for understanding the recent transformations in southern Africa. Although gender justice remains an elusive goal, as women struggle to claim their place in southern African public life and to resolve the gender crisis, the multiple, complex and contradictory forms of women's subordination become increasingly visible, presenting us with new challenges and the opportunity to create new forms of solidarity.

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38 Analyses of women's movements in Africa have been numerous and include H. Becker, *Namibian Women's Movement, 1980 to 1992: From Anti-Colonial Resistance to Reconstruction* (Frankfurt, IKO-Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1995); J. Cock, 'Women in South Africa's Transition to Democracy', in Scott *et al., Transitions, Environments, Translations*; A. Kemp, N. Madlala, A. Moodley and E. Salo, 'The Dawn of a New Day: Redefining South African Feminism', in Basu, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*; Tripp, *Women in Politics in Uganda*. For African women in the formal political sector see S. Tamale, *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1999) and H. Britton, *Women in the South African Parliament; From Resistance to Governance* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2005). For comparative studies see D. Connell, 'Strategies for Change: Women and Politics in Eritrea and South Africa', *Review of African Political Economy*, 25, 76 (1998), pp. 189–205; Hassim and Goetz, *No Shortcuts to Power* and Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics*.

39 C.T. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2003), p. 231.