Evaluating the Integration of the South African Women's Movement

Was the Institutionalization of the South African Women's Movement a Success?

Introduction

The 'success story' of the South African women's movement (SAWM) is by now familiar to most scholars (Hassim, 2002). Unlike in Zambia or Botswana (Geisler, 1995), democratization in South Africa did not lead to the marginalization of women from state politics, but to their inclusion (Hassim 2003). Starting from the transition period, the women's movement became increasingly institutionalized and integrated into the state. The two most important pillars of the institutionalization of the SAWM are the increased presence of women in parliament and the establishment of the so-called National Gender Machinery (NGM) (Kim & Kim, 2011). In this essay, I am concerned with the question of whether or not this new and cooperative relationship between the state and the SAWM, should be considered as a success.

I define 'success' in terms of being in women's interests, which I conceptualize in reference to Molyneux's distinction between strategic and practical gender interests. Throughout this essay, I ask the reader to keep in mind that women have multiple identities, which means that their experiences will differ significantly in terms of class, sexual orientation and ethnicity at the very least (Reingold, 2000; Squires, 1999; Sawer, 2002; Goetz, 1998; Rhode, 1994; Thomas, 1988). My argument is divided into four sections. In the first section I settle important conceptual issues. In section two, I discuss whether the first pillar of the institutionalization of the SAWM, namely the increased representation of women in parliament, should be considered a success. The third section analyses the second pillar of institutionalization, namely the NGM. I make concluding remarks in section four.

I – Conceptual Issues

There are several conceptual issues that need to be settled before I can turn to my main argument. Firstly, when I use the term 'women's movement', I refer to an organization that mobilizes women collectively 'on the basis of their gender identity' and that has reached a tipping point, in which individual acts of protest cascade into mass action (Hassim, 2006: p.8). Even though there were several women's movements in South Africa (Walker, 1979), in this essay I only discuss the institutionalization of the women's movement which emerged in the 1980s with the upswing of the national liberation movement (Patel, 1988).

Secondly, let me clarify my use of the term 'institutionalization'. Social movements become institutionalized once they establish a 'close and cooperative relationship with the state' (Kim & Kim, 2011: p. 391), and thereby become integrated into the state (Kriesi, 1996). In South Africa, this process started in the 1990s when the SAWM officially endorsed the ANC[1] Women's League (Hassim, 2006). The most important pillars of the institutionalization of the SAWM are the increased presence of women in parliament and the NGM. My analysis is limited to these two processes and I will not discuss other pillars of institutionalization (such as gender mainstreaming, for example). Some scholars consider institutionalization *tout court* as a measure of success of social movements (Gamson, 1975;

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Rodgers & Knight, 2011; Staggenborg, 1988; Zald & McCarthy, 1979). My analysis will however show that such claims are much too simplistic (Minkoff, 2002).

Finally, I would like to clarify my definition of women's interest, which is informed by Molyneux's (1985) distinction between 'strategic gender interests' (SGI) and 'practical gender interests' (PGI). SGI are 'those that women … may develop by virtue of their social positioning' (p. 232) and refer to women's shared interest to transform society. SGI include for example the abolition of the sexual division of labour or the achievement of political equality. PGI on the other hand respond to immediate needs and 'do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality' (p. 233). PGI refer to the need for economic necessities such as the provision of public welfare or other measures that ensure the health and wellbeing of women and their families[2]. Regardless of whether or not interests are strategic or practical, they are only served by tangible rather than symbolic gains. Having women hold positions of political power has several intangible benefits. It may, for example, ameliorate the way women are perceived by the media and society at large (Burnet, 2011). However, my analysis does not take any of these symbolic benefits into account. If the fact that women hold positions of political power does not have any tangible benefits for women, like increased welfare spending targeted at women, it would not be in women's interests as I have defined them here.

II – Representation

The ANC adopted a quota for women on their party list in 1993, which raised the number of women in parliament from 11 to 30 per cent (Vetten et al., 2011). Currently, almost 45 per cent of members of parliament are female (Hassim, 2011). The increased presence of women (who were previously active in the SAWM) in parliament is, what I call, the first pillar of institutionalization. My analysis is only going to consider the tangible benefits resulting from the increased presence of women in parliament. On my account, increased representation is only in women's interests if there are tangible benefits associated with it. Even though representation takes place on numerous sites, such as public administrations, local governments or NGOs (Banaszak et al., 2003; Chappell 2002; Lovenduski et al., 2005; Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Weldon, 2002), my discussion is limited to one set of actors (women who act as elected representatives) and one site of representation (the national parliament).

In order to connect the increased presence of women in parliament with material gains that are either in women's PGI or SGI, different 'links' need to be intact. Firstly, the increased presence of women in parliament needs to ensure that women's interests are represented: representation here entails 'speaking for' and on the behalf of women (Phillips 1995; Young 2000). Secondly, the fact that women in parliament are speaking up for women's interests needs to lead to material gains for women. This second link is by no means given because even if there are people speaking for women's interest and *trying* to improve their material condition, this does not mean that they will succeed at doing so (Baldez, 2001).

Critical mass theory (CMT) suggests that as soon as the ratio of women to men increases in political institutions, female representatives no longer have to accept the dominant culture and will automatically represent women's interests (Kanter, 1977). CMT therefore holds that the first link arises immediately once the ratio of women to men increases. I however believe that this first link, between women's presence and the representation of women's interests is much more difficult to establish. I hold that the mere presence of women's bodies in parliament (which is referred to as the descriptive representation of women (DRW)) does not necessarily ensure that women's interests will be represented (which is referred to as the substantive representation of women (SRW)) (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2007; Childs, 2006; Reingold, 2006). I will discuss two reasons why the DRW does not simply lead to the SRW.

Firstly, CMT makes the implausible assumption that the DRW will simply lead to the SRW because all women share the same experiences and interests (Childs, 2006; Celis, 2007). However, women are not a homogenous group and their experiences differ greatly (Phillips 1995; Mansbridge 1999; Dovi 2002). Many women in parliament come from elite groups (Hassim, 2011), and are unlikely to have comparable experiences to most women in South Africa. Furthermore, even though I believe that we can speak of women as having certain interests in common, these interests are by no means primary but are in fact frequently over-ridden by other interests based on class or race.

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This is illustrated by the fact that most women in parliament have been silent on some of the major issues affecting a majority of women in South Africa, such as HIV and gender-based violence (Hassim, 1999; Ballington, 1998; Bauer, 2008). Secondly, the party system complicates the issue of SRW even further. Most female members of parliament (who entered through the quota system) are accountable to the ruling party, which operates a controlled system of punishment and reward to ensure that members act along party lines (Ballington, 1998). Independent actors like Pregs Govender, find themselves attacked and isolated (Vetten et al., 2011). This significantly reduces the space in which female parliamentarians can represent women's interests (Considine and Deutchman, 1996; Dodson, 2001; Mackay, 2001).

Therefore, the increased presence of women in parliament does not guarantee that women's interests are represented. This means that we are unable to establish the first link required to connect the increased presence of women in parliament to material gains. Let us briefly consider the second link. Even if CMT would be correct and even if the first link would be intact, in order for the increased presence of women in parliament to be in women's interests, it would need to lead to material gains. Hassim (2011) has however shown that this has not been the case. Even though the number of women in parliament increased greatly since liberation, the position of poor women has worsened. Maternal mortality doubled between 1990 and 2008 and women's life expectancy dropped from 65 years in 1993 to 53 years in 2008 (Hassim, 2011).

I have therefore shown that the increased presence of women in parliament does not ensure that women's interests are represented and did not lead to material gains for women. The first pillar of institutionalization should therefore not be considered a success because it does not further women's interests. This is however not an argument *against* the presence of women in parliament, which surely has intangible benefits (Burnet, 2011). I have only shown that an increase in the number of women in parliament does not translate into material benefits for women.

III – The National Gender Machinery

The National Gender Machinery (NGM) in South Africa is considered to be one of the most integrated and advanced sets of such structures worldwide (Gouws, 2006) and constitutes the second pillar of institutionalization. In this section I discuss whether the NGM should be considered a success in terms of being in women's interests. As was the case in the previous section, in order for the NGM to be in women's interests we need to guarantee that two 'links' are intact. Firstly, the NGM needs to produce policy and legislation that has the potential to be in women's practical or strategic gender interests. Secondly, these policies need to be enforced in order to have a material impact. I will firstly discuss the ability of the NGM to produce the appropriate policy and legislation, by making reference to the Women's National Coalition (WNC) and the Joint Monitoring Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and Status of Women (JMC). I subsequently discuss the second link and investigate whether the policies produced by the NGM had an impact on women's lives.

There are several factors that have made it difficult for bodies in the NGM to produce policies that have the potential to be in women's interest. Firstly, large parts of the NGM are completely under-resourced (Vetten and Watson, 2009). This limits the ability of the NGM to produce policy only because members of staff do not have the necessary resources or expertise. Secondly, we cannot simply assume that members of the NGM are committed to acting upon women's interests. The NGM is formally accountable to the government (Hassim, 2001) and there is no strong women's movement to guide it. This lack of accountability and connection to grass-roots women's organizations further reduces the possibility and willingness of members of the NGM to act in women's interests (Hassim, 2003; Rai, 2003).

These two challenges noted above have been insurmountable for some bodies[3] but have been met by the WNC as well as the JMC. The WNC was launched in 1992 and was the first national representative structure of the SAWM that was *independent* of the ANC (Hassim, 2002). The WNC operated on a clear mandate to create a Women's Charter of Equality (Geisler, 2000), and held a successful campaign which ensured the inclusions of women as a 'distinct group of citizens in the new institutions of democracy' (Hassim, 2003: p.504). The WNC was successful for several reasons. Firstly, it operated in the unique time-period of transition in which resources and expertise could be made available (Hassim, 2009). Secondly, the WNC was independent of the state and was backed by a strong

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women's movement (Hassim, 2002).

The JMC was created in 1996, after democratization, but was nonetheless successful (Instraw, 2000). It was expected to monitor legislation in all government organs and had the authority to analyse departmental reports in terms of their impact on gender relations (Vetten et al., 2011). Under the first chairperson, Pregs Govender, the JMC obtained impressive results. It was pivotal in the drafting and adoption of extremely progressive pieces of legislation including the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) and the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (RCMA) (Vetten & Watson, 2007). The JMC's success can be attributed to the excellent leadership of Govender who ensured that the organization had enough funds and expertise. Govender also frequently asserted the independence of the JMC from the ANC (Gouws, 2006).

The WNC and the JMC show that the NGM has created policy and legislation, which have the potential to benefit women (first link). However, these policies need to be enforced in order to be in women's interests (second link). Let us, for example, consider the RCMA, which was adopted with the help of the JMC. The RCMA seeks to provide legal recognition, and consequently legal protection for women married under customary law. It contains a clause for equality between spouses and gives women the right to own and dispose of property. If the RCMA would be enforced, it would clearly be in women's strategic as well as practical gender interests. However, in order for women to access the rights provided to them by the RCMA, they need to register their marriages. In addition to the fact that the RCMA faces cultural resistance, there are numerous administrative hurdles in place that make it difficult for women to register their marriages (WLC, 2011). In fact, only 5% of customary marriages are registered (Statistics South Africa, 2009). Therefore, even though the RCMA provides women with important rights, very few are able to make use of them because their marriages are not registered. This lack of enforcement has also made other excellent pieces of legislation powerless. The DVA for example was unsuccessful in protecting women from abuse in their homes because the police, who played an integral part in the process, did not take the issue seriously (IPID, 2012).

Therefore, even though some bodies in the NGM have been successful at producing pieces of policy and legislation that are potentially in women's SGI or PGI, they have not been enforced. The NGM should therefore not be considered a success, because it did not improve women's material condition and hence, was not in women's interests.

IV – Conclusion

Due to constraints on space, my essay left several issues untouched. Firstly, I only considered two pillars of institutionalization. I did not consider other processes (like gender mainstreaming), which are also part of institutionalization. Secondly, my criterion for assessing the success of the institutionalization of the SAWM was, due to my definition of women's interests, limited to material benefits. It would however also be important to investigate the intangible gains associated with institutionalization and analyse whether it changed the way women are perceived by society. Lastly, I did not take into account the fact that the institutionalization of the SAWM has come at a high price. As soon as leaders from the women's movement made their way into parliament or the NGM, grass-roots organizations lost their leaders and many organizations were unable to reformulate their role in the new context of democracy (Geisler, 2000; Hassim, 2003). The institutionalization of the SAWM has therefore led to the demobilization and fragmentation of women's movement (Hassim, 2011). I did not discuss whether or not a civil society based strategy would have been more successful at promoting women's interests than a state based strategy.

The institutionalization of the SAWM has certainly changed the way the South African state looks. More women are members of parliament and the constitution, as well as policies and legislation, are very gender-sensitive. In this essay, I investigated whether the institutionalization of the SAWM has also changed the situation on the ground, and whether it should be considered a success in term of being in women's interests. Women's interests can, on my account, only be served by material rather than intangible gains. I analysed two pillars of institutionalization, namely the increased presence of women in parliament and the NGM. I show that the increased presence of women in parliament should not be considered a success. This is because their presence alone does not ensure that women's

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interests are represented and because it did not lead to an improvement in women's material condition. I also demonstrate that the NGM should not be considered a success. Even though some bodies produced pieces of policy and legislation that are potentially in women's interests, these were not enforced and did not improve women's material condition. I can therefore say that the institutionalization of the SAWM has not been a success because it had little effect on women's material condition.

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[1] Which stands for African National Congress.

[2] Molyneux 'interest paradigm' has been criticized on several grounds (Benton, 1982; Callinicos, 1987; Hindess, 1982; Scott, 1988). Wieringa (1994 &1995) for example opposes the distinction because it privileges one form of demand making over another. I however believe that Molyneux's distinction does not privilege SGI over PGI but simply points to the fact that PGI have transformatory potential, while SGI do not (Martinez, 1995).

[3] Such as the Women's Parliament for example (Vetten & Watson, 2007).

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