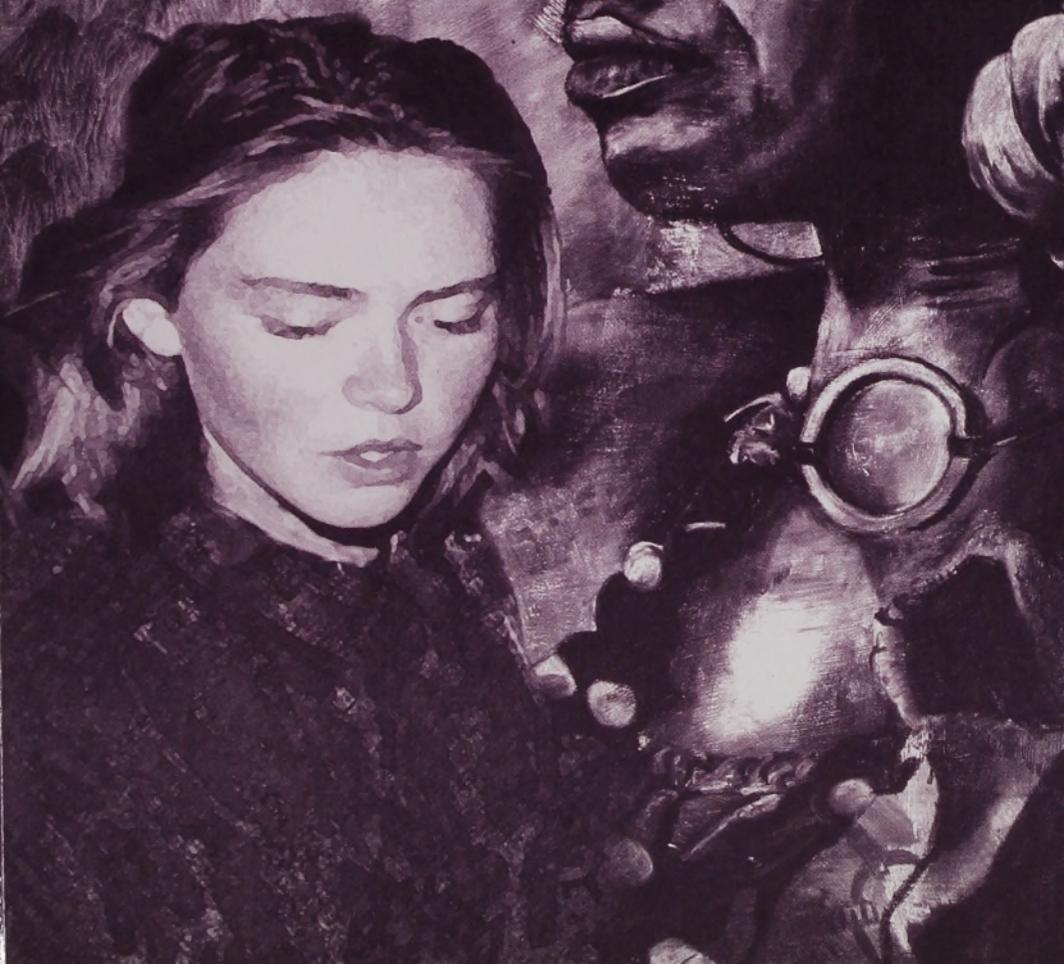


WOMEN, SOCIETY AND CONSTRAINTS

*A Collection of Contemporary
South African Gender Studies*



WOMEN, SOCIETY
AND
CONSTRAINTS

A collection of essays
South African Women Studies
**WOMEN, SOCIETY
AND
CONSTRAINTS**

Edited by
JEANETTE PALMER, MARC KLEINERT
AND
LIZ KORN

Institute for Gender Studies, Stellenbosch

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*A collection of contemporary
South African gender studies*

Edited by
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AND
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Institute for Gender Studies, Unisa

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INTRODUCTION

Jeanette Malherbe

The aim of this first, introductory essay is to provide a framework within which the other papers here may be read, understood and assessed. They are all papers on gender, and they express the thinking of individuals in contemporary South Africa who are concerned with gender issues, that is, with the constraints on women's freedom, with equitable treatment for women and men, and with women's empowerment. The different authors therefore have in common, a unifying interest in the marginalization of women in patriarchal societies and how this may be overcome. However, as we might expect from a multicultural society like ours, the individual contributors also have a wide variety of viewpoints, cultural contexts, individual interests, discursive traditions, and concepts of gender. This collection is therefore like a patchwork quilt: each contributor follows the same theme, but interprets it in an individual way, choosing her or his own colours, fabrics and shapes.

This variety has a valuable consequence. We are presented with many different perspectives on the one thing, gender, and come to perceive many different aspects of it. It is a hidden object in our society, whose presence was not clearly realized and described in its current form, until about forty years ago, and whose existence is still denied by many of those people who are happy with the status quo in our patriarchal society. So a sampler of gender issues is helpful in providing the reader with many different examples of the same thing. There is solidarity in this situation, of many different contributors all with the same aim of dismantling patriarchy, and solidarity is the strength of any political movement.

Nicholson (1990: Introduction) refers to the oppression of women 'in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity'. The common thread in gender issues, and the similarity in all discussions of gender, is the fact that male / female relations are unjust and oppressive of women. This means that gender studies are essentially politically motivated. The aim of those who write about gender issues is to change the power relations that currently structure society along the lines of sex. A collection of papers such

as this one therefore has a transformative potential. Its positive value lies not just in contributing to an ethos of gender sensitivity and equity, but in providing the motivation for concrete action and in showing what direction that action should take.

We live in a society where sexism has been put on a par with racism by the government of the day as an evil to be eradicated, and where public initiatives to this end are constantly being launched. However it is change that cannot be brought about solely by legislation and public action. It calls for a change of attitude in every member of society. 'While the ANC accords women equal status, it is highly improbable that under an ANC government, women will, in fact, enjoy equality of status with men, for equal relations emanate from a state of mind and not from laws' wrote Winnie Mandela nearly ten years ago, before the ANC had even been officially unbanned. 'Presently, neither sex sees the other as equal ... both men and women in our society see women as subordinate to men. Until these status differences are redefined, and the redefinition becomes a reality in the hearts and minds of our two genders, women will continue to be subordinated' (Mandela, 1990:9).

THE OBSCURE AND ELUSIVE SOCIAL OBJECT OF GENDER

It's important to note at the start that although gender studies looks into the unfair relations between men and women in society, and opposes the marginalization and domination of women by men, gender studies are not the sole preserve of women nor are those who promote and support the patriarchy always males. Men can be feminists, just as much as women can be patriarchs. Taking up the 'feminist standpoint' is a matter of being sensitive to gender injustice and oppression, and wishing to eradicate them. The criterion for gender sensitivity is therefore having a certain kind of consciousness or mindset. It is not a matter of biological sex.

Gender is elusive in the first place because it is a pervasive and powerful background condition of our existence. It is hard to form a clear idea of, or even to think about, the large features and the overall shape of our own society. People are unconsciously governed in their everyday behaviours and thinking by social mechanisms. They are conditioned by customary practices, attitudes and expectations which they are usually not even aware of, like those that determine gender relations. Doing gender studies

is a deliberate attempt to get clear on the nature of the mechanisms and practices governing relations between men and women in a particular social and cultural context. The basic premise of gender studies is that the different characters of men and women, as widely accepted in society, are a product of socialization and not a biological given. Girls and boys are brought up to act and think the way they do, and if they were conditioned differently, then the character of the two sexes, and gender relations would be different too. For example, if little boys were given dolls from an early age, taught how to hold and feed and cuddle and dress them, they would be more nurturing and caring in character. Nurturing is presently seen as a result of women's biology, and a characteristic which men do not possess.

It takes a trained eye to notice how gender is constructed and to be able to pick out the small nuances that bear evidence to the underlying power relations between the sexes. Such an eye is acquired by gaining familiarity with the literature on gender issues, immersing oneself in the discourses surrounding them, and contributing to the debates. The stronger and more substantial the literature on gender issues is, and the more lively the discussion of it, the stronger and more vital the opposition to patriarchal forces, and the better the chances of women's empowerment and liberation.

An important reason for the obscurity of gender, is that the patriarchy routinely and steadfastly denies its existence. For those on the up-side of the power relation to admit the existence of domination and oppression, and of all the means there are for maintaining it, would be for them to admit guilt and be committed to undoing it. Women are all conditioned in a patriarchal society to be fearful of authority and supportive of the status quo, so that to engage in gender studies is to undertake an act of rebellion that requires some moral courage. The whole field of gender studies is dismissed by the establishment as politically motivated propaganda without the necessary 'objective evidence' to support it. The claim is that feminism and gender studies seek to overthrow the existing institutions for knowledge production, which are dedicated to disinterested, value-free enquiry. Women's studies, say the leaders of our social institutions, present partial and distorted views of society and gender relations in an effort to gain political power for women.

Here are some typical statements of this kind of criticism of gender studies in the university:

'... the academic community should not support academic feminism as a separate program of studies in higher education because it is primarily a political ideology. As such, it seeks to transform the university curriculum and community into an uncritical advocate of an unexamined political ideology of radical egalitarianism. In so doing, it undermines a sacred and central role of the university which is to provide both the critical resources and the setting for an honest evaluation of the merits of various political and moral ideologies rather than to promote actively any particular moral or political ideology in an atmosphere hostile to the possibility of honest critical evaluation of competing ideologies' (Almeder, 94: 301).

By implication, the writer believes that the university is at present, at least outside the area of academic feminism, an impartial adjudicator between competing ideologies. The assumption is that academic institutions do not promote any one particular identifiable ideology, nor are they hostile to any.

In another statement of this criticism, of the undesirable politicization of gender studies, Susan Haack has written:

'The label ('feminist epistemology') is designed to convey the idea that inquiry should be politicized. And that is not only mistaken, but dangerously so ... Inquiry aims at the truth ... [and] this should remind us that those who despair of honest inquiry cannot be in the truth-seeking business ... they are in the propaganda business. [It] is dangerously mistaken, also, from a political point of view, because of the potential for tyranny of calls for "politically adequate research and scholarship"' (Haack, 93:37-38).

Again, the assumption behind this criticism of feminist studies as politicized, is that university studies in their present institutionalized form are apolitical; that scientists and scholars are perfectly impartial and disinterested in the results of their projects; that there is at present no preferred 'establishment' view of what constitutes 'politically adequate research and scholarship'. This is a myth that feminist critique has long since exposed¹. The results of establishment research programmes are usually androcentric (taking the male as the norm for all people) and sexist (assuming

women are of lesser interest and importance and value than men). That these results are claimed to be universally valid, does not make them so. Gender studies does not deny the charge of politicization. It responds to the 'accusation' by pointing out that any enquiry takes place within a context of the enquirers' history, culture, sex, class, race, etc. If enquiry is inevitably context-driven, surely it is better to be honest about one's context, rather than denying it?

What makes a gender studies paper different from a mainstream paper then, is its specialized focus on women as an oppressed or marginalized group. It is quite possible to produce studies of women as a group which are not gender studies. A paper which 'objectively' describes the condition of rural women, or gives data on the economic indicators for women under a certain age, need not be a gender studies paper. The term 'gender' is a politically loaded one. It is a term that refers to imbalances of power in society and to the righting of these. It always has connotations of oppression; any use of it must include some reference to the injustice and marginalization which women in general suffer in patriarchal societies.

To conceive of gender in this way is to understand the word as signifying the whole set of social mechanisms by means of which members of the male sex are empowered and those of the female sex are disempowered. It includes such things as the masculine and feminine stereotypes as they exist in the media, literature and the popular imagination, and the expectations which people consequently have of men and of women; socialization devices for training and maintaining men and women in their 'proper' roles and character; the masculinization of public spaces, reason and intellectual activity and the feminization of private places, emotionality and nurturing activity; compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia and the thousands of ways in which society enforces these; taking the model of the nuclear family as the incontestable basis of a 'healthy' society; and much more besides.

In the light of this understanding of what 'gender' means, the political charge of the term becomes obvious. Any work in gender studies is bound to reveal the injustices and oppressive practices of the patriarchy, and in so doing, it cannot but condemn them and suggest revisions and improvements. This understanding of the term 'gender' also provides the

answer to the question which may be asked of the papers in this collection: 'There are at least two genders, masculine and feminine. If these are gender studies, why are they only about women? Where are the men?'

There are two parts to an answer. Firstly, to study gender is to be engaged in exposing oppressive power relations. To call something 'oppressive' is to condemn or at least to pass a negative judgement on that thing, and to be committed in some degree to opposing it. It is natural therefore that feminists, men or women, should take the perspective of the oppressed, viz., women. The disadvantages which men may suffer as a result of their gender are not socially disempowering or marginalizing. An analysis of the masculine stereotype for instance (assertive, physically strong, self-willed, rational and logical, authoritative, etc) shows that to be a man in our society is to be in a very privileged position. As a result, it is not unfair that 'gender studies' are identified with 'women's studies' or 'feminist studies'. Nor is this a move which totally excludes men, for the following reason.

The feminine condition is determined in large part by the masculine condition. Women broadly speaking can be self-sacrificing and subservient only if men are self-willed and dominating. That is, the masculine gender is the complement of the feminine; to understand or change the one involves understanding and changing the other. So in the second part of an answer to the question: 'Where are the men in gender studies?', it must be pointed out that the male sex and the masculine gender (the two are not the same) do in fact feature in any discussion of gender. Men are always present by implication, as those whom women are to serve and nurture, heed and obey; they are present as the background to the feminine condition.

GENDER STUDIES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

We have said that it is the purpose of gender studies to promote an awareness of the power relations between men and women in some particular social context. Our contemporary context is South Africa on the threshold of the second millenium, the so-called 'New South Africa' of the 'Rainbow Nation'.

The new South Africa is usually taken to have begun in April 1994, the date of the first fully democratic election of a government in this country.

It is therefore sharply distinguishable in time from the old SA. It is sharply distinguishable in character also from the old SA, which had been marked by a universally deplored neglect of basic individual rights and denial of civil liberties and in which sexism was as entrenched as racism. It was not a climate in which gender studies could easily be undertaken, or done on a significant scale, or widely disseminated, or was likely to enjoy institutionalized support. The present climate is different, and we are experiencing a flourishing of gender studies in consequence.

It is fair to say that the new SA self-consciously sets itself to be a state which protects human rights, and that means women's rights as well². The twin bases of the ANC government's platform are non-racism and non-sexism, with equal weight given to both. The SA Constitution protects women's rights in that it guarantees the rights of individuals, and it protects homosexuals against discrimination. The freedom of sexual orientation clause will go a long way towards dissolving one present basis of sexual relations in our society, viz., compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. Since it is these sexual relations from which the patriarchy draws much of its strength and blind obedience, any new freedom of sexual orientation will work against gender injustice at a very deep level. It is one thing to have rights in the law, but they mean little until they are implemented in society. There are encouraging signs that the rights of women in the Constitution are being put into practice, witness the test cases being brought almost daily to the courts³.

South Africa has ratified CEDAW (a convention to end discrimination against women) and has submitted the first of its scheduled report-backs to the United Nations Commission charged with monitoring the implementation of CEDAW in signatory countries⁴. The government-appointed Commission for Gender Equality (mandated by clauses 119 and 120 of the Constitution) i.a. surveys the implementation of gender rights programmes within state departments and the public and private sectors, develops and conducts educational programmes on gender, investigates abuses of gender rights and makes recommendations to Parliament on gender issues. The Office on the Status of Women, located in the Office of the Deputy President, has the responsibility of co-ordinating the national gender programme by liaising with all ministries, the nine provinces, local government, civil society and international organizations. On a smaller scale, there are

several Parliamentary structures aimed at making Parliament more gender sensitive, at monitoring implementation of the Government's commitments made at Beijing and in CEDAW, and at helping women to participate fully in the law-making process (Moolman, 1997:94).

All these organizations and projects are the concrete expression of the Government's commitment to gender rights and women's empowerment. They are all initiatives of the new SA; there were no state or para-statal gender organizations, offices or women-friendly structures pre-1994. What women's organizations there were, were usually formed by groups in opposition to the government, e.g. the early Bantu Women's League (founded, among others, by Charlotte Manye Maxeke, the subject of an essay in this book), which later became the African National Congress Women's League; the Natal Organization of Women, founded when the ANC had been banned, as an offshoot of the UDF. The visible support given by Government to women's rights has resulted in a climate favourable to the pursuit of gender studies in every sphere. Where it was unheard of ten years ago, it is now not uncommon to find women's studies programmes being offered in the universities, and it is far easier today to get a gender institute established, even in conservative universities, than it was before 1994⁵.

In this way, gender sensitization and the process of women's empowerment is finding an institutional space in our society. It has the effect of encouraging work in the area of gender studies and of producing the research, the theoretical analyses, comments and observations that are needed to focus and motivate further gender transformation in society. Thus, the articles here have been produced in the more gender-friendly environment of the new SA, and they highlight ways in which still-existing gender inequities and disempowering inequalities need to be addressed. Patriarchal defence mechanisms typically refuse to accept the facts of gender relations as oppressive, or as unjust in any way. The essays in this volume however are very persuasive and it would take a diehard masculinist to remain unconvinced, having read them, of the disempowering conditions at work in society. To describe current gender relations as unjust and disempowering of women, and to read of women's oppression and recognize it as such, is to find yourself automatically committed to opposing the injustice and resisting the oppression.

NOTES

1. See Harding, 1990 and Rose, 1994, for the standard feminist critique of so-called 'objective' or 'scientific knowledge'. There is an extensive body of literature, not only feminist in orientation but sociological and post-modern too, which shows how there is no such thing as absolutely universal, context-free knowledge.
2. Extract from an ANC gender policy discussion document – July 97, quoting from a speech of Samora Machel's: 'The emancipation of women is not an act of charity, the result of a humanitarian or compassionate attitude. The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the Revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the precondition for its victory. The main objective of the Revolution is to destroy the system of exploitation and build a new society which releases the potentialities of human beings ... This is the context within which women's emancipation arises'.
3. For instance, the case of Anne Prior (Applicant) and Charles Donald Battle (Respondent) was brought before the Umtata Magistrate's Court in Oct 1995, and is pending. Because the Applicant had been married within the Umtata Magisterial District, she and her spouse were bound by customary law which meant that she was under the marital power of her husband with all the usual defects of that legal status. It was argued that under the new Constitution, this was a breach of human rights and an offence against individual dignity. The case is pending, having been opposed by CONTRALESA, the Council of Traditional Leaders of SA. Another recent case, one which tested the freedom of sexual orientation clause, was that of a lesbian police officer who claimed medical benefits for her partner. Justice JP Roux in the Pretoria High Court found that the stability and commitment of the relationship warranted it the same protection under the law as a heterosexual marriage. *Star*, Fri 6 Feb, 1998: 16.
4. 'The report establishes a baseline of information on women, assesses progress made by Government to date in meeting the Convention's 16 articles, and identifies areas for further action. An updated version of the report is available on the web at: <http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/reports/cedaw1/html>'. Moolman, 1997:95.
5. Cf. the history of the Institute for Gender Studies at the University of

South Africa. Begun in the 1980's as the Centre for Women's Studies, staffed by unpaid volunteers who usually worked in the academic departments of the university, in Jan 1998 it was promoted to the status of an Institute, with two salaried positions, offices, computers, and all the perks normally accorded an institutional structure of the university.

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