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Nationalism Through a Gendered Lens: Women's Movements During the Anti-Colonial Struggle

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Abstract

Through this research, I seek to demonstrate that national liberation movements in Africa were patriarchal revolutions that perpetuated women's position as auxiliaries to men in the political and domestic sphere by observing the movement through a gendered lens with a case study of the interactions between nationalist and women's movements in South Africa during the anti-colonial struggle. I seek to use a gendered lens to observe and analyse revolutionary struggles. African women greatly participated in national struggles and the emancipation of African countries. They were promised equal rights and participation in democracy once independence was achieved. Yet their labour is obscured and they found themselves fighting for equal rights with men. I look at the tools of exploitation of women's work during and after the anti-Apartheid struggle—notably the use of mother politics and the feminization of the nation during the struggle and later Western feminism hegemony over African feminism.

Introduction

"No national movement can be successful unless the women volunteers come forwards and offer their services to the nation" Pixley Ka Isaka Seme president and one of the founders of the African National Congress in South Africa (McClintock 1991, 115). Despite a commitment from African leaders during the liberation struggles to include women and improve their rights, structural inequality persisted after independence. In many cases like South Africa during the anti-colonial struggles, leaders promised women more rights and liberties once the national revolution was over. Yet, rather than integrating them as citizens and their struggle to movement and tackling structural inequality, politicians paid them lip service (McClintock1991, 121). When examining the revolution and its outcome for women, I observe several sociological and political factors pointing towards the fact that the revolution undertaken by nationalist activists brought little change for women's rights as they pushed women's movements towards the sidelines, made shallow commitments towards gender equality and succeeded in their fight at their expense which would point towards nationalism being a patriarchal revolution.

While the emancipation of women is often time seen as a by-product of the nationalist struggles in Africa, nationalist movements obscured women's concerns and needs in ways that still affects women today and achieved their goals at the expense of African women because women's movements and their claims were denied legitimacy during the anti-colonial struggle and were exploited by nationalist movements in order for them to reach their objectives and nationalism obscures African women's activism and the structural roots of gender inequality on the continent. Through this research, I

seek to demonstrate that national liberation movements in Africa were patriarchal revolutions that perpetuated women's position as auxiliaries to men in the political and domestic sphere by observing the movement through a gendered lens with a case study of the interactions between nationalist and women's movements in South Africa during the anti-colonial struggle.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first part, I observe the exploitation of the organization capacity of women by nationalist movements and will dive into the way the need for national unity trumped women's rights. In the second part, I analyze how nationalism as a patriarchal revolution obscures the structural roots of gender inequality in Africa by observing the erasure of women's activism and black African women's identity dilemma.

Exploitation of Women's Organization Power

"*Mother Politics*": A Tool of Exploitation

Nationalist movements understood that they needed to draw the support, energy, and resources of as many people as possible in order to achieve their goals of independence during the anti-colonial struggle and therefore used tactics of social and political inclusion to yoke people into the movement (Geiger 1990, 227). As motherhood is considered the quintessence of women, nationalist movements used "Mother Politics" as a tactic geared towards women that consists in portraying women as the "Mothers" or "Bearers" of the nation (McClintock 1993, 74). By using mother politics, nationalists create and clearly define the roles, responsibilities that women have in the anti-colonial struggle but also the place that they will hold in society when the movement succeeds (McClintock 1993). Indeed, by defining women by their ability to bear children,

nationalists played on the patriarchal ideology of women as caregivers, upholders of traditions and "reservoirs of culture" (Chadya, 2003, 153).

Mother politics portrays women's relation to the nation in five different ways. First, they are the biological providers for national groups, which makes women the biological mothers of the people, they ensure the survival of the ethnic group (McClintock 1993, 101). Second, because women are the producers of children they are also symbols of national differences (McClintock 1991, 105). Moreover, mothers bear children and raise them which makes them producers and transmitters of cultural narratives, ideally perpetrating important values of nationhood to their children (McClintock 1991, 105). Additionally, through this discourse, women become the reproducers of the boundaries of the nation, they are in charge of the unity and purity of the nation by choosing to reproduce with the men of their nation (McClintock 1991, 105).

These responsibilities make mothers rather than women into active participants of the national movements, ensuring the continuity, the purity of the nation and its values (McClintock 1993, 69). However, by using this type of narrative, not only did nationalist movements restrict women's participation to the reproductive sphere but it also excluded women from the circle of citizenship and national identity (McClintock 1993, 65). Indeed, although nationalist movements included women into their struggle, by reducing them their ability to bear children, women are placed on the outside of the national identity border, they create and raise citizens with the nation's values and teaching, this discourse, however, doesn't allow them to hold that title themselves (McClintock 1991, 123). They have no political or social power, in the eyes of the nation, their power to help resides solely in their ability to bear and raise children. McClintock (1991, 117) contends

that with this narrative of Motherhood: “Women are seen not as independent members of the national community, but rather as wives responsible to the nation through their services to individual men, as one woman puts it, the prestige of motherhood becomes a ‘beast of burden indeed’.”

Women’s Rights Activism Sidelined by the Nationalist Movements

In addition to women being constrained to the reproductive sphere, the needs and concerns expressed by their movements during anti-colonial struggles were suppressed by the nationalist movements they fought along with (McClintock 1991, 115). Indeed, the nationalist movement’s goals took paramountcy over the women’s movements once they had joined forces. Women’s movement’s claims were denied legitimacy by the nationalist movements under the pretext of national unity as women’s issues were considered divisive (McClintock 1993, 78). Gender inequality was considered by nationalists to be caused by colonialism and/or capitalism. Thus in their minds, the liberation would bring more liberty and rights for women as well as for everyone else. Women’s movements’ efforts and claims were therefore dismissed and delegitimized as something that should be acknowledged only after the revolution, when spaces of participation would be free of oppressors, women needed to focus their energy on fighting for the collective nationalist cause rather than their individual rights. Women’s interests at the backdrop of nationalism gave the false impression that women’s rights were positively correlated to nationalist revolutions. However, history shows that no nationalist or socialist revolution has engendered a full feminist revolution (McClintock 1993, 78). As African nation states were still deeply patriarchal, politicians simply paid women lip service without actually tackling structural gender issues (McClintock 1993,

78). The act of binding women to hold their tongues until after the revolution and to insist on silence about gender conflict when it already exists obscures theses these conflicts and prevents women's empowerment which proves to be a strategic tool to deny women's request for more rights and acknowledgment of their labour, needs and concerns. Nationalism projects the denial of difference onto a conveniently abstracted collective will (McClintock 1991, 123). This superficial commitment to improving gender inequality after the revolution allowed nationalist movements to utilize the organization strength of women's movements without holding up their end of the bargain.

The African National Congress, Their Women's Section and Their Commitments to Gender Equality during the Anti-Colonial Struggle

Albeit the nationalist liberation movement led by the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa is considered to have gone further than most countries in terms of debates on gender equality, the measures and decisions implemented have rarely had an affect on the perceived position of women as auxiliaries to men and the structural barriers to women's emancipation (Hassim 2002, 700). Women in the ANC were organized from 1969 in a women's section headed by a women's secretariat with relative autonomy to the ANC (Hassim 2002, 695). Their responsibilities were mainly to mobilize women into active membership in the ANC and to mobilize political and material support internationally.

When the movement went into exile in the 1960s and for most of the 1970s, the role of the women's section changed into a more practical, day-to-day operation as women acted as "the movement's social workers." The women's section became more of a supportive social network rather than a political one (Hassim 2004, 435). The women's section took care of the establishment of child-care facilities and the processing of

donations of food and clothing to the exiled members. The nationalist movement relied on them through their maternal roles, many felt this was an opportunity for women to take their rightful place into the movements and enable their activism to flourish while others questioned the automatic equality that women would supposedly gain from independence (Hassim 2002, 698). Although the movement emphasized women's parental capabilities, strict rules surrounded pregnancies and marriages as women were prohibited from falling pregnant, marrying foreigners or men outside of the ANC: It was expected of women to follow their husband's home; South Africa would lose organizational strength and it would only "strengthen the man's struggle" (Hassim 2004, 437).

Furthermore, few resources were mobilized to encourage more women to join the liberation movement, initiatives such as the magazine *Voice of Women* meant to attract women were given unqualified staff, high turnover and outdated resources which was mainly due to a lack and impossibility of communication between the central power structures of the ANC where very few women held leadership positions. Women of the ANC described it as a "Chinese wall between the Women's section and the Politico/Military structures" (Hassim 2004, 437). The low priority placed over the mobilization of women and their maternal duties in the movement generated a divide between women and the rest of ANC soldiers part of the military branch of the ANC, Spear of the Nation (MK). In fact, women were often passed over for armed training (Hassim 2004, 451). They were disallowed to take sniper training courses, excluded from the traditional combat courses and were instead trained to be carriers, rarely sent back to be underground activists in South Africa, although they had greater chances of survival.

This was seen by the Women's section as undermining the commitment to equality, although these issues were ignored as MK was the slowest to respond to women's demands and needs and they undervalued political issues and women's presence was not entirely accepted, and constantly questioned which fostered ambiguity about their formal equal status (Hassim 2004, 442).

In the late 1980s, women questioned the direct linkage between the gender struggle and the national liberation movement as they feared going back to "normal after the revolution meant that they would go back to domestic, they therefore demanded to incorporate political education on the emancipation of women and women's political history and their roles in the liberation movement to provide for more effective leadership and develop a theoretical basis for women's struggle as well as a mobilizing framework specific to South African women." They were, however, ignored and accused of "not understanding, not being sufficiently committed to national liberation, diverting the movement, being difficult" (Hassim 2004, 444-45). Women felt the ANC was not respecting the knowledge, capacity, and motivation to mobilize provided by experiences of oppression by being unwilling to listen to women and their claims. Nonetheless, these demands led to discussions on women's participation in the movement. Ultimately, in 1988, the ANC initiated *The Constitutional Guidelines for a Democratic South Africa,* the document supporting the need for gender equality in the public and private sphere and the implementation of affirmative action (Hassim 2004, 452). However, despite many meetings with the Women's section, the wording reveals little appreciation of the ideological underpinning of gender oppression and provides little basis for substantive

gender equality as the document remains restricted by gendered assumptions of social roles which represented the existing hurdles inside the ANC (Hassim 2004, 452-53).

Nationalist movements sidelined women's movements and delegitimized their activism on the basis of national unity as well as confined them to the patriarchal ideal of women as mothers in the reproductive sphere. These actions perpetrated women's position as auxiliaries to men, with limited power in the productive sphere meaning little political power, sustaining a patriarchal relationship with the state. Women's movements' organizational power was instrumental in the fight against colonial forces, however, women enjoyed few benefits of this victory (Hassim 2004, 436). The case of the ANC's Women's section in South Africa demonstrates a theoretical commitment to improve gender equality but in practice an unwillingness to listen to women's claims and grievances in an attempt to contain and keep them in the reproductive sphere. Notwithstanding the many discussions and theoretical improvements in the articulation of gender inequality and hurdles by the Women's Section, the initiatives taken by the ANC's central political and military structures remained superficial. By adopting such tactics, claiming women's issues to be divisive at times where the nation needed to be united on the same front, and utilizing their organizational power, nationalist movements seek to silence gender conflicts when it already exists which ultimately is to concede to women's oppression and disempowerment and conceal the gendered construction of nationalism and the newly formed state.

Erasure of the Roots of Structural Inequality in Post-Colonial South Africa

Feminism As an Imperialist Force: An Enemy of the African Nation State

The unequal relations during the struggle laid the basis for post-independence gender inequality and discrimination which reinforces the idea that the nationalist revolution was a patriarchal revolution. The instrumental use of women's organizational power and the disavowal of their movements and claims during the anti-colonial struggle created a conundrum for African women: On the one hand, defending their rights as women and citizens, and on the other hand, fighting for the well-being of their nation. Indeed, African women were and are often accused of siding with the western oppressor when advocating for their rights McClintock 1993). Feminism is seen as an imperialist force, another way for the colonial powers to control their colonies and imposing their views of the world in an independent Africa. The affiliation of feminism with the western world causes many African women to deny any attachments to the feminist school of thought.

Moreover, women during the anti-colonial struggles amongst nationalist movements were already in a precarious situation, they could not afford to antagonize men who were already reluctant to give up the power that they had (McClintock 1993, 76). Women had to put the aspirations of the whole African continent and other oppressed people in their country before themselves (McClintock 1991, 118). Nonetheless, this type of discourse in nationalist movements implies that feminism was imposed on the African continent by the West, it depicts feminism as trans-historical, un-evolving, unchangeable, permanently excluding African women of feminist history (Hassim 2002, 119). This discourse gives a reason for nationalist movements to claim that feminism is divisive and should not be addressed until after the revolution (McClintock 1991, 122). McClintock (1991, 76) argues that accusing all types of

feminism to be imperialist has severe consequences for women. In fact, these discourses in national liberation movements erase the history of women's resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies, ignores any movement for women's emancipation that has emerged in non-European countries before Western Feminism emerged. This discourse of erasure creates an oppressive space of participation for women, once again preventing them from expressing their grievances which ultimately contributes to the patriarchal regime implemented by the nationalist revolutions.

Navigating Between Multiple Identities

However, feminism, the international reach of the movement and its mainstreaming towards liberal feminism does have an imperialist side. In fact, the rise of liberal and apolitical feminism caused a distrust of white feminism amongst black South African women, not every woman lived the apartheid in the same way and due to the highly political nature of black South African women's movements during the apartheid, feminism had little relevance at the time (McClintock 1991, 119). In the late 1980s, early 1990s, feminism became a more legitimate school of thought and black women wanted to ensure that they were able to build their own feminism, arguing that it should be tailored to local needs and concerns of women against the oppressive regime of the apartheid (McClintock 1991, 119). Nevertheless, this vision of a politicized, tailored feminism faced a backlash from liberal feminists in the western world. Indeed, at the Nairobi Conference of the United Nations decade for women in 1985, the delegation of the United State opposed to a resolution on the apartheid in South Africa, declaring that it was not a "genuine women's issue" (Hassim 2004, 448). In this case, the will of liberal feminists was to separate feminism from any political movements in order to avoid any

divisive issue and unite women. The fight remained the same for the women section of the ANC, fighting against apolitical feminism was also fighting for the inclusion of gender equality into the ANC's core principles (Hassim 2004, 449).

Indeed, black South African women were fighting for the acknowledgment of the underlying structural political forces that produced these unequal gender relations and were reinforced by the lack of systematic approach to "the women question" which allowed ideologies of women as auxiliaries to men to flourish (Hassim 2004, 449). Ultimately, this struggle between liberal feminists and black African feminists reveals the conflict between the multiple identities of black African women created by nationalism as the movement placed African women outside of the productive sphere, as non-political citizens, creators of national borders (McClintock 1991). Admittedly, black African women are trapped at the intersection between their femininity and their attachment to their nation in a case where all sides wanted them to abandon the other, never fully understanding the complexity of the situation and the structural factors that triggered these unequal relations.

By disassociating women's gender from their national identity, nationalist movements have actively obscured and ignored the structural reasons leading to gender inequality and proved the superficial nature of their commitment to the improvement of African women's conditions.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I demonstrated that analyzing nationalist revolutions and movements through a gendered lens allows to understand the way in which women's movements were instrumental to the formation of post-colonial nation states and how

they were sidelined for collective goals. Our work has led us to understand how nationalist movements have achieved their goals at the expense of women and the consequences that it had on women's rights and gender equality in a post-colonial Africa.

The case of South Africa's national liberation movement demonstrates that the "shallowness of the commitment to gender equality had consequences for the extent to which women's demands might be institutional in the new democracies," thereby enabling African politicians to make use of mother politics restricting women to their maternal roles and sidelining their claims in regards of the need for national unity, allowing discussion while making no attempts for deep structural change.

The tactics used by the nationalist movements had calamitous consequences on the perceived necessity of understanding women's rights and needs, the legitimacy of their claims and their spaces of participation in African societies. Albeit mother politics empowered women to participate in the revolution, it created a problematic, apolitical space of participation for women, as reproducers of national identity rather than nationality and citizenship holders themselves. Consequently, in the longer run, this had negative implications for black African women, whose identities were divided between being a woman and being a member of the national community of their newly independent nation. Ultimately, this separation between gender and national identity enables nationalist movements to utilize their fight against colonialism and imperialism in order to maintain a patriarchal regime, creating an unwillingness to acknowledge the structural barriers preventing gender equality.

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