

Democracy and the People: Gender and Security in Post-Conflict South Africa

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Democracy is predicated on the participation of citizens in creating a structure of governance which can effectively deliver a vision of national unity. A fundamental component in achieving democracy is the maintenance of a stable security environment, which in turns facilitates development. This paper focuses on the gender dimension of the democracy-security link, drawing on the post-Cold War shift to the human security paradigm, and the undertaking of Security Sector Reform (SSR) processes in post-conflict states such as South Africa. The arguments put forth here form part of a larger research project examining how women have consolidated gender gains in post-conflict South African security structures, highlighting those elements which could be utilised by other post-conflict developing states.

Gender, Democracy and Security in South Africa

The historical legacy of militarisation in South African society has fundamentally impacted upon notions of identity and citizenship. Stretching back to pre-colonial times, military conquest has laid at the heart of nation-building and identity formation within a variety of sub-national factions. This trend accelerated with the arrival of the colonial powers, and newly formed ethnic societies, such as the Afrikaners, who assimilated the militaristic traditions into their developing cultures, further entrenching the centrality of organised militancy within South African society. The use of the national defence force within South Africa's borders further contributed to the militarisation of society¹, particularly in the enforcement of the National Party's policy of Apartheid (1948-1990), and in events such as the Sharpeville Massacre (1960) and the Soweto Uprising (1976) which saw a number of civilians being killed by the armed forces. The policy of "separate development" pursued by the National Party had devastating repercussions on social and cultural structures of society. Forced removals relocated (and often dispersed) family members, inferior education undermined development, and the system of pass laws² further eroded family and community structures as men were forced to reside in the urban centres while women and children remained in the homelands³ – effectively creating a matriarchal structure within a patriarchal system.

When considered together with the literature on women and conflict (and the role played by women in the South African armed struggle as combatants, organisers and leaders), a clear link can be established between this militarised past and the socialisation of women into militarised roles⁴. The juxtaposition of

¹ Cock (2009) and Clarke (2008), amongst others

² Pass laws required all people of colour to carry pass books in order to regulate their movements and restricted access to designated "white" areas.

³ Also known as "Bantustans", the homelands were designated areas set aside for Black and Coloured settlements, as a precursor to establishing "autonomous" states.

⁴ Clarke (2008); Cock (1991); Suttner (2007); Modise & Curnow (2000), and Gasa (2007)

these “atypical” gender roles with traditional gender roles associated with patriarchal societies has an immense impact on women’s demands of the state, and their envisioned roles within state structures, with no delineation between stereotypical “woman’s” roles and those situated within the masculine realm.

Women have attained substantive⁵ positions in the new democratic regime, including traditionally male-dominated posts such as the vice-presidency, security, and foreign affairs. Female combatants who had actively participated in the armed struggle for democracy entered formal state institutions in esteemed positions; a rarity in sub-Saharan Africa. South African women continue to head influential parliamentary committees and key ministries: following the 2009 elections, women comprise 43% of the Cabinet (including Ministers for portfolios such as Agriculture, Defence, Energy, International Relations, Mining and Public Enterprises) (Mbola, 2009). In addition, four of the nine provincial premiers are women, the official opposition is led by a woman, as are a number of other political parties (GenderLinks, 2009). The meteoric increase in women’s parliamentary representation in 1994 from 2.7% to 27% has continued, with the latest elections placing South Africa 4th globally with 43%, behind Rwanda (56%), Sweden (47%) and Cuba (43.3%) (GenderLinks, 2009). This firmly establishes South Africa as a regional leader in terms of achieving descriptive representation targets for women. It is argued that this is partially as a result of the redefinition of security in relation to society, and the opportunities which this has created for women.

Human Security Paradigm: Rethinking Security

Until the end of the Cold War (and the cessation of related third party interference in African conflicts), the concept of security had traditionally focused on the preservation of autonomy and the integrity of national borders through the prowess of military capability: an externally focused “might is right” approach (Tshitereke, 2009:2). The definition of security has necessarily evolved beyond the traditional militaristic notions of security against external threats, and now encompasses internal threats such as underdevelopment and inequality as well⁶. Just as Europe’s turbulent past demonstrates the dangers of naked state-on-state aggression, so too does Africa’s post-liberation experience illustrate the destructive and destabilising power of poverty, inequality and lack of development⁷.

The 1994 United Nations Development Report contains an argument by Mahbub Ul Haq for a people-centred approach to human security which represented a significant shift from a Northern scholarly discourse towards a re-valuation of local knowledge and expertise when defining security needs and concerns (Svensson, 2007:6). The broader conceptualisation of security as an integral link between democratisation and development has moved into the mainstream⁸, and the empowerment element of

⁵ There is a plethora of literature on descriptive and substantive representation, which essentially differentiates between “numbers” (in terms of women in government) and power (in terms of the ability to affect meaningful change), respectively (Subrahmanian, 2007; Celis & Childs, 2008; Daly, 2005; Lowe-Morna, 2003; Hassim, 2004; Heineken, 2002; Koen, 2006; Sorenson, 1998; Rai, 2004; and Waylen, 2008).

⁶ Stott (2002); Svensson (2007); Tiekou (2007); Makinana (2009); and Spears (2007)

⁷ Schoeman (1998); Gueli (2008); Hutton (2009); and Makinana (2009)

⁸ Hendricks (2007); Schoeman (1998); and Clarke (2008)

this linkage has been further emphasised, drawing on a more encompassing definition of security and measures for its attainment and preservation.

In essence, human security calls for socio-economic centred security thinking which aims to mitigate the conditions which give rise to insecurity, and in so doing “complements state security, enhances human rights and strengthens development” (Tshitereke, 2009:2). The Human Security Paradigm emphasises participation as a means of ensuring local ownership and sustainability⁹, and could be simplistically summed up as: security for all citizens, from poverty, instability and disease, through inclusive sustainable development.

A new conception of the prominence of the military in society must therefore be formulated. As part of this process, gender norms can be transformed as well, particularly in considering the values ascribed to both femininity and masculinity within the realm of security. This transformation is partly undertaken through processes such as Security Sector Reform, which is outlined in the next section, and shows how the culture of the military can be fundamentally reorganised, thereby altering the type of influence it exerts as a social institution within society.

Security Sector Reform: Opportunities for Change

Security Sector Reform is a wide-ranging endeavour aimed at the transformation of all security related mechanisms and actors within a society, including political and military actors and institutions such as ministries, departments, and parliament, and with particular focus on the armed forces¹⁰. While it is generally undertaken in post-conflict and transitional societies, developed states periodically perform SSR as well. The objective is to reformulate the system to ensure that it upholds democratic ideals, entrenches good governance practice, and takes cognisance of the complex relationships between security concerns and other issues such as development¹¹. The need for SSR surpasses militaristic or economic considerations; it is often an integral part of the post-conflict reconstruction of a society’s norms, and creates a space within which former enemies can seek reconciliation, and forge a new future (Stott, 2002).

Thus, it can be argued that SSR has a role to play in wider societal reconstruction, in that it can “present an opportunity to aim higher than merely recreating the pre-conflict situation” (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004:8). As the fundamental benchmarks for peace and development, such as participation, inclusivity, and broad-based empowerment¹² are the same as those required for achieving gender equality (Pillay, 2006:1; Svensson, 2007:9), the opportunities which arise during the period of democratisation following transitions from conflict must be capitalised upon in order to consolidate political and social transformations which occurred during the post-conflict stages¹³. In addition, the

⁹ Schoeman (1998); Svensson (2007); Tshitereke (2009); and Williams (2001)

¹⁰ Stott (2002); Bendix (2008); Gueli (2008); Hutton (2009); Jacob *et al* (2008); and Le Roux (2004)

¹¹ Valasek (2008:1); Williams (2001)

¹² Schoeman (1998); Gueli (2008); Hutton (2009); and Makinana (2009)

¹³ Koen (2006); Clarke (2008); Heinecken (2002); Pillay (2006); Sorenson (1998); and Vincent (2001)

increasing pressure of the international community through policies, declarations and other instruments, to transform the approach of developing states towards human rights (and gender rights in particular) through constitutional and legislative reform, allows the voices of marginalised groups to be heard¹⁴.

The challenges and opportunities of the post-conflict period lie in the reconfiguration of the roles and principles through which a society will be governed, and particularly in the redistribution of responsibilities and privileges amongst society (Koen, 2006:2). An equitable and inclusive system is essential to allow the restoration of order and security¹⁵, and prevent the resurgence of conflict. These opportunities and challenges of the post-conflict transitional period are “compounded when viewed through a gendered lens” (Koen, 2006:2), particularly as the nature of conflicts has changed to become centered around issues of “power, control, political loyalty and ethno-nationalism. These are all elements in the formation of political identities and these political identities are also gendered”¹⁶.

The opportunities presented to reconstitute gender roles during and after times of conflict are of particular interest, as noted by feminists from both the developed and developing world. As Clarke (2008:49) points out, SSR may “present an opportunity for engagement with these militarised masculinities in a way which would allow for the emergence of an alternative society”. Cock (1991:105) asserts that “in a civil war or struggle such as that waged in the eighties in South Africa, the landscape of combat is redrawn as the experience of war spreads among the general population. In this process, an important breach in the ideological constructions of gender is threatened”.

In other words, a reconfiguration of the military and the security sector in general is needed, not only in terms of structure and forces, but also in relation to its purpose in society and its relationship with society. This must necessarily be tempered by an understanding of how women were and are advancing within security structures both prior to, and post-conflict. This rethinking of security and its relationship to citizens would enable not only a re-evaluation of women’s contributions in the past, but the opening up of new spaces for the future. It is this consideration which underlies the link between gender and security: how the opportunities presented by the human security paradigm and SSR can increase women’s power and agency within the security arena, thereby strengthening democracy in post-conflict South Africa.

Regional Aspirations: Opportunities for Gender Gains

During the Apartheid era, the South African Government engaged in a sustained military and economic destabilisation campaign in the region. The activities undertaken by the armed forces included multiple military operations in Namibia¹⁷, Angola, Mozambique, Swaziland, and Lesotho (Stott, 2002). This aggressive interventionist stance led to the formation of the Frontline States (FLS) in 1975 – an

¹⁴ Hendricks & Hutton (2008); Valasek (2008); Koen (2006)

¹⁵ Albrecht & Barnes (2008); Svensson (2007); Zuckerman & Greenberg (2004); and Zwane (1995)

¹⁶ Jackson & Pearson (1998); Modise & Curnow (2000); Pillay (2006); and Nzomo (2002)

¹⁷ Formerly South West Africa

organisation of Southern African states¹⁸ which both aimed “to formulate and coordinate policies in support of national liberation movements, initially those in Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and later in South Africa, and also to counteract their dependence on and therefore the regional hegemony of South Africa” (Swart and Du Plessis, 2004:26-27).

Under the new democratic regime led by the ANC, South Africa continued to pursue a regional role¹⁹, although under very different auspices. South Africa aspired to reposition itself as a leading state with the moral authority to intervene in ailing states as a result of its own success story in averting a prolonged and bloody transition to democracy. Part of this regional repositioning strategy was the promotion of the “African Renaissance”. This philosophical and political movement aimed at fostering “African solutions to African problems”, with former president Thabo Mbeki at the forefront of the effort²⁰, lifted the South African profile within the continent. In the post-Apartheid era, South Africa has placed an emphasis on peacekeeping and mediation, reconceptualising the role of the military both within its own society and within the region. As part of this positive recasting of its defence forces, from oppressors of its own people to the mediators of its neighbours, South Africa has contributed to UN peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Sudan, as well as being involved with regional security mechanisms within the Southern African Development Community and the African Union.

This structural transformation has implications not only for national reconstruction, but for regional relations as well. One of the underlying factors for women’s increased representation within a range of state structures is the strategic repositioning of South Africa within the sub-continent – based on the State’s desire to be seen as a model of good governance. The emphasis on equality and broad-based empowerment has created further windows of opportunity for the consolidation of gender gains, largely as a by-product of the State drive for influence and standing amongst its regional peers.

Democracy and Gender

Gender equality broadly covers the equal treatment of men and women before the law, and equal opportunities for men and women in all spheres of society – economic, political and social²¹. The term further implies that “the interests, needs and priorities of both men and women are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men [and is] a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development” (Commonwealth, 2005:18).

A central concern is that equal rights and opportunities do not necessarily imply equal outcomes and benefits, particularly as prevailing structural dynamics may interfere. The Commonwealth suggests that the achievement of equality represents a “fundamental component in the democracy-building process” (Commonwealth, 2005:9). This is echoed by Kabeer (2003:3) who argues that in order to overcome

¹⁸ Members included Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

¹⁹ Tiekou (2007); Van Nieuwkerk (2001); Gueli (2008); and Murithi (2008)

²⁰ Gevisser (2007); Pottinger (2008); and Roberts (2007), amongst others.

²¹ See Commonwealth (2005) and Kabeer (2003)

structural inequality, substantive equality and equality of agency must be considered. The former refers to the diverse qualities and contexts of men and women which need to be balanced in the formulation of policy to avoid the perpetuation of imbalanced outcomes. The latter requires access to the structures which will enable women to “make strategic life choices for themselves (and help determine the conditions under which these choices are made)” (Kabeer, 2003:2). Vincent (2001) suggests that the inclusion of women in decision-making forums (particularly post-war reconstruction debates) necessarily goes beyond concepts of fairness, in that “women have a set of interests different to those of men which can only be defended by other women”. While this raises concerns with regards to homogenising women as a single entity with undifferentiated needs, it also points to the idea that women have an alternative perspective to offer, based on their position and roles within society.

However, the understanding of what constitutes gender equality goes beyond the equal treatment of men and women before the law. Gender inequality is created through deeply rooted societal practices, and is further entrenched in the imbalances in the structures which govern society. This refers to more than the lack of women in decision-making structures, and points to the under-valuing of women’s knowledge, experience and needs in the construction of public policies and programmes which directly affect women. This is particularly dominant in traditionally male spheres, such as security.

It is therefore understandable that the redefinition and reconceptualisation of women’s relationships to the state and their societies is a priority for women embroiled in nationalist movements (West, 1997: xiii; Vincent, 2001), as it will have a direct impact on their roles within the new democratic dispensation. This reformulation is possible because gender inequality is a societal construct which transcends formal laws and is maintained through the interactions of individuals and structures within society (Kabeer, 2003:2; Svensson, 2007:13). Thus when new structures of governance are created, opportunities for recasting gender roles are produced.

The historical subjugation and institutionalised exclusion of women from positions of authority is a universal predicament, and is an ongoing concern in developing states, particularly as gender inequality has been identified as a significant obstacle to the attainment of development goals²². Further, the role of women in shaping post-conflict developing world societies lends credence to the view that conflict presents an opportunity for the transformation of gender roles²³, particularly within a historically militarised state such as South Africa.

The stereotypical depictions of women in relation to security as weak, passive victims or inherently nurturing peacemakers have been disproved in conflicts across different historical, racial, and ideological contexts²⁴. What has proved to be a commonality in these varied situations however is the inability to solidify the gender gains made during periods of strife in the post-conflict period. As Waylen (2007: 521) explains, “the majority of transitions have been disappointing in gender terms,

²² Hendricks (2007); Schoeman (1998); Clarke (2008)

²³ Clarke (2008); Heineken (2002); Koen (2006); Pillay (2006); Sorenson (1998); Vincent (2001); Zuckerman & Greenberg (2004); and Nzomo (2002).

²⁴ Bernstein (1985); Fearnely & Chiwandamira (2006); Heineken (2002); Modise & Curnow (2000); Sorenson (1998); and Nzomo (2002)

bringing few positive gender outcomes in their immediate aftermaths. The South African case has been seen as an exception". The adoption of the human security paradigm, as well as the implementation of Security Sector Reform processes, entails an overhaul of both security structures, and the manner in which security is defined by the state. Within the mechanisms for participation created by democracy, this process creates an opportunity for women to partake in rebuilding these institutions into more equitable and responsive structures for achieving the goals of the state, and by extension, serving the diverse needs of all citizens.

Conclusion

South Africa has placed human rights and equality at the centre of its state-building philosophy, positioning egalitarianism as the engine driving development, security and stability in the state and the region. Through the use of the Security Sector Reform process, the State is demonstrably reconceptualising the manner in which the military relates to society by emphasising the peacekeeping dimension of the defence force, and the role of women within that new vision of security through the promotion and appointment of women to high-ranking decision-making positions.

While the descriptive representation of women outlined at the start of this paper is noteworthy, it does not automatically imply that substantive representation is faring equally well. However, the high number of women in prominent and powerful positions (including Security) alludes to the structural transformations occurring through both the democratic and SSR processes.

South Africa's demonstrable commitment to equality serves to both fulfil a requirement for participative and representative democracy, as well as to portray an image of a modern African state. Thus, the manner in which South Africa has utilised Security Sector Reform provides one reproducible "best practice" which may be of utility in other post-conflict developing states.

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