

# Women and apartheid

## Collective trauma and social reconstruction

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### *Apartheid – disdain for life*

CONNECTION – TO SELF, OTHERS AND THE WORLD – is basic to spirituality. This kind of connectedness implies a realization of the unity underlying outward manifestations of life, but requires a reverence for the autonomy of all living things. Women, by virtue of their socially constructed roles, are entwined in relationships and connections. The domestic roles, for which women are largely responsible, constitute connection in its most fundamental forms. Yet the very domestic institutions which attend to relationships and provide the possibilities for valuing life are at the heart of the social lack of respect for women and their autonomy.

Apartheid, perpetrated in the name of Christian nationalism, was the antithesis of respect for life. Under the apartheid regime black people suffered gross violations of their humanity. Racist attacks and physical assaults, detention without trial, torture and execution were typical methods of social control. The structural violence which deprived people of basic human rights – work, a place to live, education for their children and health care – on the grounds of race, subjected people to a chronic violation of their dignity. Social interactions and institutions which provide people with stability and security were disrupted both by particular instances of repression and by structural violence. For example, families were ruptured when members were killed, maimed or ‘disappeared’. But apartheid as a socio-economic system threatened the very notion of family by rupturing families on a mass scale, through forced removals and the migrant labour system.

The costs of apartheid in human life and suffering were not confined to South Africa. During the 1980s, South Africa fomented wars in the independent states of Mozambique and Angola, which, it has been argued, exacted a toll in human suffering which ‘rivalled if not surpassed the more publicised conflict in Nicaragua’.<sup>1</sup> In the

interests of maintaining apartheid, South African covert military operations sustained rebel movements in these countries which are notorious for the brutalities they committed against civilians. In Mozambique, for example, the special forces of the South African Defence Force supported Renamo rebels who are known for the terror they inspired, and the social havoc they created.

The trauma engendered by apartheid in South Africa and in the southern African region was extreme. In situations of political repression and war, extreme trauma is constituted by the interdependence of: discrete acts of repression – torture, assassination, rape, mutilation; social and cultural destruction – the disruption of social arrangements, activities and institutions which give people a sense of belonging and meaning; and structural violence – the chronic violation of dignity through the deprivation of basic human rights in daily life.

In such situations all social processes are subjected to violence and coercive control. The all-encompassing nature of the violence and repression results in individual psychic injury and collective social traumatization. Exposure to extreme trauma strikes at the core of being and life. Acts of violence and repression sever people from each other and from their social worlds. Martin-Baró argues that there occurs a ‘crystallisation or materialisation in individuals of the social relations of war’.<sup>2</sup>

### *Social context mediates the experience of violence*

But the damage done to people is shaped by their social background and the specific relation that groups and individuals have to particular events and processes.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of how people are affected implies two things. Firstly, social context mediates the experience of repressive social processes, and frames responses in the aftermath of the trauma. Secondly, individuals are active agents who interpret the world around them and act accordingly. In situations of extreme trauma people are involved in different ways with the social processes of violence and repression.

The notion that social context mediates the experience of violence is particularly important for understanding the impact of apartheid on women and the challenges they face in reconstructing their lives. An examination of women’s responses to the South African National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the survival tactics adopted by women war refugees from Mozambique, shows that the roles that women have in society, the beliefs held about women and

the historical experiences that women have, combine to influence the ways in which they were traumatized, and their efforts to master the traumatic experiences.

The unique relationship that women have to domestic institutions – ‘those constituting the very fabric of society and culture’<sup>4</sup> – plays a significant role in defining their experience of trauma and in providing them with the resilience with which to address the outcomes of violence and repression. But though these domestic institutions give women psychological strength, the relations of power embodied in the home and family perpetuate the continuing social subordination and vulnerability of women.

*Social destruction – women at the centre of the ‘battlefield’*

The association of women with domestic life and men with the public realm is an organizing principle of many societies. Although the relationship and boundaries between these social spheres vary across societies, the roles and activities associated with the domestic realm are generally ascribed lower status and give women less access to power in the public realms of society. It is these features of gender relations which contribute in large part to the subordination of women.

The private/public dichotomy mediated the way in which individual men and women experienced oppression under apartheid, and played a significant role in shaping the actions that they took to resist repression. In South Africa the subordinate social status of women intersected in complex ways with class exploitation and racial oppression to make black women particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse. Black women were discriminated against on the basis of race, class and gender.

A patriarchal system of gender relations dictated that women submit to the authority of men in the home, where they not only bore the major burden of domestic responsibilities but were also subjected regularly to domestic violence. Where women were incorporated into the labour market they were restricted to the lowest-paid work. For example, the largest market for the employment of black women was for domestic labour. Women who worked in the homes of white families had no protection against rampant exploitation. For the better part of the apartheid era, there were no legal minimum wage rates for domestic labour. Nor was there any legislation to regulate working conditions.

Women who were confined to the 'homelands' by the migrant labour system and the influx control laws which entrenched it, endured distorted relationships and family life. Their husbands left for long periods. It was common for men to form attachments with women in the urban areas where they worked, which usually meant the remittances they sent to their wives in the homelands were irregular, low and sometimes non-existent. Women in the homelands, who were expected to provide for the subsistence needs of the household in harsh economic conditions, bore impossible domestic and financial responsibilities.

A substantial number of women themselves entered the migrant labour system to supplement household incomes or as sole breadwinners. This essentially meant they had to leave children in the care of relatives. It was not unusual for female migrant workers to spend regular periods of up to a year away from the children, during their working lives. Many of these women lived alone in the backyards of their employers or in single-sex hostels in the townships adjoining white cities.

As a social system apartheid undermined the foundations of women's identity and dignity on a daily basis – it degraded them as individuals and damaged the integrity of family, home and community. The domestic sphere – family and home – became a direct target of attack during periods of political conflict. Women as community members were victims of the gross violations executed by the security forces and third force elements. Their homes were petrol bombed, and burnt. They lost husbands and children to detention, shootings, abduction and murder. As individuals they were harassed and assaulted for being the wives, sisters and daughters of political activists. The harassment and attacks they suffered sometimes took a sexual form. This was particularly evident in the low grade civil war in Natal and on the Guateng reef in the 1980s, during which sexual violence was used as a weapon of intimidation and punishment.<sup>5</sup>

### *Gender and political resistance*

But black women were victims of repressive actions not just as mothers, wives and daughters. Although women's political involvement usually centred around their socially defined roles, particularly their roles as mothers, some women took on new roles in political resistance. Women became involved in campaigns to resist repressive laws, to improve the conditions of workers and in the struggle for liberation. Ordinary women were at the forefront of the battle

against the migrant labour system and influx control legislation. Working women rose up in the ranks of trade unions to become leaders in the fight against repressive labour legislation. And women joined liberation forces in the struggle to overturn apartheid. As activists many of these women were arrested, tortured and some were killed. During the State of Emergency in 1986, over three thousand women were detained.<sup>6</sup>

The South African security forces were notorious for the torture they inflicted on detainees. Research with female detainees has provided evidence to show that torturers employed social constructions of masculinity and femininity to devise both physical and psychological methods of torture. Women political prisoners describe experiences of rape, vaginal examinations, strippings and 'body searches'.<sup>7</sup> Pregnant detainees report that they were beaten and given electric shocks. One woman was forced to give birth in front of a policeman who laughed at her labour pains. Psychological methods of torture exploited traditional notions of womanhood and maternal sentiments. The most well-known example of this kind of psychological torment is that suffered by the ANC activist Albertina Sisulu who, during her imprisonment, was fed false information that her son had died.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, however, black women were less prominent as activists. Gender not only mediated women's experiences of social, economic and political repression under apartheid, but also their political involvement. Historical and political research into the role of black women in political activity suggests that the subordinate social position of women acted as a barrier to their involvement in political organizations. The real isolation of women in the household combined with the social construction of women as primarily mothers and wives to restrict their political involvement. There is evidence to suggest that some men were actively intolerant toward women's involvement in politics.

Where women did become involved it was unusual for them to participate in politics on an equal basis with men. Women were mobilized as *mothers* of the nation. Their roles were conceived in passive terms – either as providing support to male *warriors* or as peacemakers. On the whole women did not have equal access to positions of power and authority in the political organizations that they did join. The absence of women from the public domain meant that issues of specific concern to women, such as child-care, sexual

violence and reproductive rights, did not become broad political concerns.<sup>9</sup>

Black women oppressed by apartheid experienced the impact of this system in particular ways, by virtue of the positions they occupied in society, the roles that they performed in the home and in the economy, and the cultural and socio-political values that conditioned women's relations with men. Women may not have played as prominent a role as men in political resistance and therefore fewer women were subjected to particular experiences of torture, detention and execution, but they bore a heavy burden of the chronic violation of human rights in day-to-day life. Gender discrimination, class exploitation and racial discrimination combined to marginalize women and put them in a very vulnerable position.

### *The South African National Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

One of the functions of the South African National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been to provide a mechanism for dealing with the negative effects of the apartheid system. It has been argued that the process of actively reconstructing the history of human rights abuses and publicly bearing witness to atrocities would serve to heal the psychological wounds of individual victims and to deal with collective social traumatization.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the process of recovering the truth about past human rights violations and offering reparation conveys a commitment on the part of the new government to establish a society based on accountability and respect for human rights.

The TRC was established as an independent body through an act of Parliament known as the National Unity and Reconciliation Act. This body started its work at the end of 1995 with the express purpose of reconstructing a history of the human rights violations that occurred between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994. The commission has three functions – to recover the truth about gross human rights violations, to make recommendations to government on reparation to survivors and families of victims, and to grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations.

All three functions of the TRC can be understood more clearly within the broader context of the negotiated political settlement in South Africa. On the one hand the need for truth, justice and reparation were to be satisfied through the work of the TRC committees on Human Rights Violations and Reparation and Rehabilitation, and the economic reforms contained in the Reconstruction and

Development Programme. On the other hand, in the interests of a peaceful settlement, the Amnesty Committee of the TRC trades full disclosure from perpetrators of politically motivated violations for amnesty against prosecutions.

*Women's responses to the TRC – a complex picture*

A preliminary analysis of submissions made to the Committee on Human Rights Violations presents a complex picture of women's responses to the TRC. A breakdown of the deponents by gender at national level shows that 50.5 per cent of the deponents were female and 49.5 per cent were male. These figures do not reflect regional variations, which show that except for the Durban office in Natal there were fewer females who made submissions than there were male deponents. At the hearings in the Durban office the number of submissions made by women was 20 per cent higher than those made by men. The civil war which existed in Natal during the 1980s, where women and their homes were on the forefront of the battlefield, provides an explanation for this regional difference.<sup>11</sup>

A significant finding in the analysis of the submissions made to the TRC Committee on Human Rights Violations is that 72 per cent of the female deponents described violations perpetrated against other people (their relatives) rather than directly against themselves. Even in Natal, where the number of women making submissions was highest and women were directly involved in the conflict during the 1980s, very few women, only 24 per cent, described violations against themselves. This is in contrast to submissions made by men, who on the whole report violations that they suffered.<sup>12</sup>

It has been argued that the tendency amongst female deponents not to report violations against themselves is a result of a failure to identify their own experiences of violence as valid. A more complex analysis of this finding requires reference to the position of women in society and their relationship to the domestic sphere. Those submissions made by women do not describe violations of their own physical integrity, but their reports begin to capture the wider social chaos created by apartheid, which they experienced in an intimate way. This was a system which fundamentally threatened the domestic realms of social life which are particularly important to women for some sense of dignity and for defining their sense of who they are – their identity.

If women's identity and dignity are embedded in their roles in the family,<sup>13</sup> then it can be argued that attacks on family members and

the integrity of the family is a threat to their identity – a threat to their ‘self’. In addition to the psychological trauma caused by losing loved ones, the death and ‘disappearance’ of family members had real material consequences for women, because in many cases it meant that they lost breadwinners and their financial vulnerability was increased. In this sense, then, the submissions made by ordinary women about gross violations of human rights against their relatives represent, at the symbolic, psychological and material levels, violations against themselves.

Although the analysis of submissions made by women is preliminary and more systematic research is required to interpret these, it is arguable that women’s submissions have highlighted the destructive impact of apartheid on society. By virtue of their roles in society, women’s reports have referred to the effects of repression and violence on the relationships – the most fundamental experience of connection.

There is, however, no doubt that women have made an ambiguous response to the TRC. There is evidence to suggest that many women did not regard the TRC as an appropriate space in which to describe personal violations. Research conducted with female political activists submits that socially constructed conceptions of women and their sexuality contributed to the reluctance of women to make submissions. Several women who were interviewed expressed the fear that publicly revealing experiences of assault and violence, in particular sexual violence, could result in their being stigmatized and devalued in their own communities.<sup>14</sup> Some women have reported anxieties about re-evoking painful events in their lives which they fear could overwhelm their adaptive capacities in a context where they still have little support.

This is a more worrying finding because it apparently reflects deeply entrenched views which ascribe value to women on the basis of sexual purity, and their confinement to the home. Essentially these conceptions serve to isolate women from public realms of power and decision-making and to control women and their sexuality – essentially to restrict their freedom and autonomy.

Of equal concern, however, is the fact that these attitudes and beliefs contribute to the silence surrounding violence against women and keep a crucial component of political violence hidden. How can a society develop a culture of human rights, transparency and accountability, if human rights abuses perpetrated against half the



population exist as a “‘public secret” – something everybody knows about but seldom speaks about’?<sup>15</sup>

***The ‘spirit is damaged’: Mozambican women victims of a war of destabilization***

It is a remarkable fact that in the face of extreme trauma and ongoing diversity, women as a social group do not give up. Their lives show an ability to hold on. They continue to sustain families and uphold social relationships by being available to assist others. They engage in community activities and actively seek economic survival. Research with women war refugees from Mozambique suggests that one of the ways in which women cope is by re-establishing normal life – the reconstruction of social functioning and the healing of internal fragmentation become inextricably linked.<sup>16</sup>

Women in Mozambique bore a major burden of a war which was essentially engendered to maintain apartheid. The war in Mozambique was a ‘dirty war’ – the kind of war in which soldiers and military installations were not the primary targets. Instead, land, homes and families constituted the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> A number of reports have likened Renamo’s human rights abuses to those of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. The insurgent army relied heavily on child recruits who were dragooned in extremely brutal ways into its ranks. Male children as young as ten years were abducted and initiated as soldiers by being forced to kill their relatives. It was common practice for Renamo rebels to mutilate live victims by chopping off their limbs, noses, ears and genitals.

Rural peasant women, the backbone of agricultural production and the real heads of households, were explicit targets of attack. Women and young girls who survived civilian massacres were abducted and used as slave labour or sex chattels in Renamo bases, especially in the south of the country. Rape and sexual mutilation became regular weapons of terror and intimidation used by a rebel force which had as its principal aim the destruction of society. Over four million people were internally displaced during the war, and over 1.5 million people became refugees in neighbouring countries. More than 250,000 Mozambicans fled across the border into South Africa. The major proportion of those that were dislocated from land and home were women.

The experiences that these women went through during the war struck at the very core of their being. They use the words *vavisa e moya* – ‘my spirit is damaged’ – to describe an injury to the life

force. Their narratives reveal that they link their pain to the breakdown of community structures, social bonds and cultural norms, which, especially in these women's cultures, are essential for individual well-being and the sustenance of the life force.

*Spirit of survival: social reconstruction and individual healing*

But these women also made remarkable efforts to survive and ensure the safety of their children and aged dependants both during and after the war. They re-created family bonds and social and community relationships. Under hostile socio-economic circumstances, they tried to generate the income to secure food and build shelters for themselves and those they were taking care of. By taking these actions to maintain existence and to restore some equilibrium in their external worlds, the women re-established the experience of themselves as dignified human beings and renewed meaning and internal coherence which were broken down by the abuse and humiliation that Renamo attackers inflicted on them.

The Mozambican women refugees identified three principal sources for their inner strength and their capacity for survival – God and the Church, mothering, and social relationships. They suggested that by going to church and mixing with people who had similar values, and with whom they felt a sense of acceptance, they renewed their connection to community. Their trust in the supreme knowledge of God and the hope that God would ensure a future for their children gave their suffering, for which they had no explanations, meaning.

They argued that social relationships – family ties, interactions with friends – provided them with a source of spiritual consolation. Relationships seemed to offer the women the basis for healing by re-establishing the feeling that there is some stability in the world and that there can once again be continuity in social relationships. The continuity of relationships provides meaning in people's lives – the meaning that Lifton<sup>18</sup> refers to when he describes the proximate meaning that people derive from everyday relationships, interactions and behaviour.

Finally, these women argued that mothering provided them with the skills to re-create homes, re-establish normal functioning and restore order in the external world – the ability to create and value life. Their definitions of mothering derive in large part from the experiences they have had as mothers and as children in specific historical contexts. These women came from a situation in which they

had experienced mothering during colonial occupation, a war of liberation and the Renamo war of destabilization. They were, in other words, not strangers to adversity.

Their definitions of mothering suggested that they could protect and care for others in the most trying circumstances, which provided them with a sense of strength. They also pointed out that as mothers, they had to care for others, which in itself was a source of strength. In other words the demands of their roles forced them to try to take some control over their lives. Perhaps people who are thrown into harsh circumstances are forced, more so than people who have relatively comfortable lives, to find ways of avoiding material hardship, starvation, and even death – and these survival tactics can enhance their resilience.

The survival tactics adopted by Mozambican women refugees highlight the important role that women play in reconstructing the most fundamental social institutions – family, home and community – in the aftermath of social destruction.

### *Conclusion*

This brief examination of women after apartheid suggests that the unique relationship women have to domestic institutions puts them at the centre of the battlefield, in situations of war and political repression, and gives them a pivotal role in social reconstruction in the aftermath of conflict. It is a paradox that the very institutions which play such a crucial role in the continuity of society and culture are a primary source of women's low status and power in society. More unfortunate is the resilience to change of these patriarchal gender relations.

The social changes that have taken place in South Africa have brought some hope for a real transformation of power relations, with the greater number of women represented in positions of decision-making, and the placing on the political agenda of issues of concern to women. However, ordinary women continue to occupy the marginal spaces of society, and suffer high levels of economic and social vulnerability. The vulnerability of women is starkly illustrated by the fact that violence against women is widespread and has become 'normative' in social relationships.

Much of this violence takes place in the 'private' realm – rape, battery and abuse behind closed doors in the home. But violence against women in the private sphere embodies deeply entrenched political relations of power. The culture of human rights which was

to be ushered in with the political transition to democracy, and was symbolized by the TRC process, has not substantially challenged the cultural and socio-political values which surround sexual violence. Violence as a means of social control is ever present in the lives of women. Although this violence takes place in a situation of peace and democracy it represents no less a gross violation of human rights.

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## NOTES

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