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Sisterhood of a sort:

The Women's National Coalition
and the role of gender identity
in South African civil society

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Introduction

The Women's National Coalition (WNC) was launched as South Africa moved from apartheid to a new society. During the first two years of its life, it had strong ties with a wide range of 'political, advocacy and welfare organisations, as well as trade union, professional, and religious bodies'.¹ It enjoyed a high profile as a national women's organisation, and its commitment to a supposedly united, non-partisan, approach was also hailed as particularly significant in the context of a country breaking free of the divisive shackles of apartheid.²

Today the WNC no longer enjoys the prominence of the early 1990s. Sustained by a few dedicated volunteers, it continues to claim the space of a national representative structure for women, but is no longer the vibrant organisation of former days. At its launch, Frene Ginwala, its first convenor and the current speaker of parliament, declared: 'Our battering ram must be the voices of the millions of women in our country - voices that no one dare deny.'³ This paper attempts to examine why the 'battering ram' of the coalition has gone silent.

In exploring this issue, it hopes to shed light on an issue of importance to the study to which this paper contributes, namely the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in promoting democracy. A precondition for the WNC's formation was the assumption that it is possible for South African women to co-operate across the familiar divides of race and class in pursuit of common interests. If this is true, women's CSOs are playing a crucial role in strengthening democracy, since they provide a vehicle in which citizens can pursue common goals as women even while they remain divided as bearers of a racial identity and supporters of particular parties. In principle, this should enhance the prospect of a vigorous attempt to advance women's interests, since it makes it less likely that women will suppress their gender concerns to express loyalty to their identity and party. It should ensure that government is made more accountable to women because, if women give priority to their gender identity, they are less open to pressure from politicians who may otherwise seek to dismiss gender issues as an unnecessary diversion from their party's agenda. It also makes political tolerance more possible: since citizens divided by race and politics are united as women, political conflict is softened by the knowledge that the opponent on one set of issues is the ally on another. The case of the WNC is therefore a test of the degree to which an important South African constituency is capable of uniting across the society's primary political cleavages to strengthen citizens' influence over government as well as the norms and values that underpin a democratic society.

This paper will thus examine the extent to which the WNC has been able to broaden and deepen democracy through its internal structures and processes, represent the inter-

¹ Women's National Coalition, *The origins, history and process of the Women's National Coalition*, Johannesburg: Women's National Coalition, October 1994, p 19.

² Carolyn Baker, Charting our future, *Agenda*, 21, 1994, p 97.

³ Frene Ginwala, *Non-racial democracy - soon; non-sexism - how?*, Women's National Coalition Workshop, 25-26 April, 1992.

ests of women to formal democratic institutions, and shape public policy or monitor its implementation and impact on its members. The paper uses a case study approach; semi-structured interviews have been conducted with individuals currently or formerly connected to the WNC.⁴ It will argue that the WNC made a significant contribution to democracy during its early years by contributing towards increasing the number of women participating in the multiparty negotiation process (MPNP) and developing a women's charter, which influenced the constitution agreed at the talks. Activist and scholar Sheila Meintjes notes that when 'National Party women and the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) sat together and debated the need for a coalition of women's interests, [it] was short of a miracle'.⁵

But it will also show that the coalition was unable to sustain this miracle and continue to make significant contributions to advancing the interests of women after the charter was completed in 1994. Strong leadership, the transition towards democracy, clear strategic vision, and the initial exclusion of women from the negotiation process created a unique set of circumstances in which a coalition across the divides was possible. Once its immediate goals had been achieved, a lack of consensus on other issues made the reason for continuing the coalition unclear. It will be argued that it was the former, rather than the lack of donor funding, that weakened the coalition.

Despite being divided by race, class, and ethnicity, South African women have been able to work together on specific issues. As a result, alliances such as the National Network of Violence against Women and the Reproductive Rights Alliance have emerged, evidence that women have continued to prioritise their identity as women despite the fact that they live in 'a society that had been predicated on racial identity'.⁶ The result is that stronger, focused, women's CSOs have emerged and taken over the work of advancing women's rights in South Africa. This suggests that there may be a role for the coalition if it focuses more on representing a section of the women's movement, and choosing the issues it champions. But, if its future is predicated on a sustained alliance between all women's organisations, it is likely to run up against reality and be forced to dissolve.

In sum, this study finds that, while attempts to mobilise the entire spectrum of women's organisations across the divides are not feasible, there is enough evidence of activists' willingness to express their identity as women rather than as members of a particular race or political camp. This suggests that a women's politics is possible despite the strength of the other identities and interests. If the dream of a gender politics in which race, class, and party have no role ignores reality, then so too does a view which insists that it is a helpless hostage to these other divisions.

⁴ See Appendix A for a list of interviews conducted.

⁵ Sheila Meintjes, The women's struggle for equality during SA's transition to democracy, *Transformation*, 30, 1996, p 49.

⁶ *ibid.* In their report *Engendering the political agenda*, Cathi Albertyn, Beth Goldblatt, Shireen Hassim, Likhapha Mbatha and Sheila Meintjes show that women's groups across class and racial divides were active in advocating the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act and Domestic Violence Act. Clearly not all women's groups rallied around support for a pro-choice bill that promoted access to abortion for women, but, with a clearly articulated purpose in mind, certain women's groups chose to co-operate on a specific issue across the divides.

The beginnings of the WNC

The idea of a national women's coalition emanated from the African National Congress (ANC) during the early 1990s when it became clear that the country was moving towards democracy. According to Dorothy Motubatse, a member of parliament, member of the ANCWL, and former anti-apartheid activist, it was the league that invited women to Amsterdam in January 1990 for the Malibongwe conference.⁷ Participants at this conference adopted a resolution noting 'an urgent need for united action towards the formation of a national women's structure'.⁸ This expressed a commitment to organise women from all walks of life to ensure that gender issues were taken seriously in a future South Africa.⁹

The meeting was attended by women in the ANC, which was still banned; women's groups affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF); trade union representatives; a rural women's delegation; several women's church groups; and women members of the South African Communist Party (SACP). According to Motubatse, most groups at the conference shared the same vision as the ANC in principle. But, while the key factor that unified them was their struggle against apartheid, the resolution involved a fundamental shift in priority. Women's groups at the conference shared an experience of politically resisting the state. With this collective identity in place, they were able to move forward to resolve to form a national women's structure which would build an alliance for prioritising women's issues.

In September 1991, almost a year and a half after the conference and the unbanning of the ANC in February 1990, the national executive committee (NEC) of the ANC called on the ANCWL to spearhead a campaign to involve women in articulating their rights to be enshrined in the new constitution. Shortly thereafter about 40 women's organisations met at the initiative of the league to discuss women's equality and the new South African constitution, and an interim steering committee, representing women from a variety of organisations, was formed.

The coalition was launched in April 1992. Despite its formal openness to a wide range of CSOs, the key players then were political parties and bigger CBOs rather than smaller grass-roots organisations. Nellie Mgenge, a community member who attended the early meetings of the Southern Natal Coalition, observes:

Those meetings were dominated by 'big' organisations like labour and political parties. Community-based organisations (cbos) were not the main players at these meetings. I happened to be a committee member of the National Association for Women's Empowerment (nawe) in Durban, and since they were informed of the wnc meetings I attended, but generally grass-roots women's groups were not attending.¹⁰

The exclusion of smaller organisations seems to fit the central aim of the coalition which, according to its constitution, was to develop a women's charter; this was later

⁷ Dorothy Motubatse, interview, 12 April 2001.

⁸ Malibongwe conference, Programme of action, www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/women.

⁹ Motubatse, interview.

¹⁰ Nellie Mgenge, interview, 20 March 2001.

translated into impacting on constitutional talks and the MPNP, rather than addressing women's basic needs and demands. Ginwala indicated, for example, that the process of hearing from women on developing the charter would include putting people in contact with organisations in their regions, to enable them to act on what they had learnt, but that this was not a priority of the research campaign.¹¹

At the launch of the coalition an emphatically democratic structure was agreed. It was decided that the national conference would be the highest decision-making body and the national council the highest body between conferences; the national council would consist of elected members of the steering committee, and representatives of each affiliate.¹² The steering committee that would provide leadership to the coalition would comprise ten elected members and four office-bearers and would also set up a working committee for day-to-day administration; these two committees could set up additional subcommittees. It was also decided that regional offices and affiliates would be allowed a fair amount of autonomy, and that the relationship between the national and regional offices and affiliates would be loose. Thereafter 14 regional coalition offices were set up and campaign co-ordinators hired for each region. A convenor, co-convenor, secretary-general and treasurer as well as members of the national committee were elected. Ginwala was elected as first convenor.

The aims of the coalition were clearly spelt out in its constitution:

The object of the coalition is to co-ordinate a national campaign for the development and education of women, which will acquire and disseminate information about women's needs and aspirations; unify women in formulating and adopting a charter or other document and entrench equality in the constitution of South Africa.

Formulating a charter that would feed into the constitution-making process was a priority for the coalition. A second goal that is not clearly stated in its constitution, but which became a concern, was ensuring that women were part of the MPNP, both as a presence and in their substantive contribution. The reason for a charter can be traced back to discussions within the ANC and ANCWL that had envisioned the development of a women's charter 'to identify and ensure that women's needs and aspirations were codified'.¹³ Ginwala proposed that a charter include the 'aspiration, demands and perspectives of all South African women',¹⁴ implying that participation across the party spectrum was both feasible and desirable. The charter, a specific time-bound goal, was an activity on which the diverse women's groups which comprised the coalition, with often divergent interests, were able to agree.

¹¹ wnc, Working committee minutes, strategising meeting, 9 January 1993. In Kristine Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA: The National Women's Coalition*, May 2000, history thesis, Oxford University, p 48.

¹² Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*, pp 27--8.

¹³ Thenjiwe Mtintso, Part 1: The Women's National Coalition, *Umrabulo*, 10, 2001.

¹⁴ Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*, pp 16-27.

One analysis notes that the WNC leadership clearly acknowledged that South African women were not homogenous, and asserted that they could not be united as ‘sisters’, but that there could be concerted action on particular issues that affected all women.¹⁵ One such issue was the desire to ensure enhanced women’s participation, both numerically and substantively, in the negotiations. This strategy seems to have been effective to the extent that the coalition was able to mobilise across party-political lines to increase the number of women in the multiparty negotiations and to formulate a charter. However it also had extensive limitations which have ultimately affected the sustainability of the coalition.

The charter and women’s inclusion in the negotiation process

On 8 March 1993 the coalition launched a women’s charter campaign aimed at hearing from women throughout South Africa on the preparation of a document of women’s rights for inclusion in the new constitution. The aim was to involve women in writing the charter, and empowering them to do so. Pregs Govender, former project manager of the coalition and currently an ANC member of parliament, noted: ‘Women need to know this campaign is about ... [them] seizing the opportunity to begin transforming society and their everyday lives.’¹⁶ To carry out the work, coalition regions were set up throughout South Africa, each staffed with a co-ordinator and an administrator.

A key element was a massive participatory research project involving women throughout South Africa. After contentious debate on the appropriate approach and methods that would ensure that the process was an empowering one, it was decided that research would proceed parallel with educational and media aspects of the campaign. Focus groups and questionnaires were the chosen tools for gathering information, and the coalition ran a facilitators’ training workshop for 65 delegates who represented 12 regional coalitions and 13 national organisations. Simultaneous media and public education events included press conferences and the production of an audio cassette on women and violence, which was widely circulated. Also, public education packages were produced and circulated on women’s legal status, women and land resources, women and violence, women and health, and women and work.¹⁷ According to one study, one example of the emphasis on participation was a decision that affiliates themselves, rather than an independent research company, would conduct focus groups.¹⁸

The charter for effective equality was adopted on 27 February 1994, at the coalition’s second conference. Its preamble outlines 12 articles that spell out the demands of South African women:

¹⁵ Fidela Fouche, Overcoming the sisterhood myth, *Transformation*, 23, 1994, p 79.

¹⁶ Pregs Govender, breaking the silence. wnc, *Agenda*, No. 16, 1993.

¹⁷ Abrams, Fighting for women’s liberation during the liberation of SA, p 55-8.

¹⁸ Abrams, Fighting for women’s liberation during the liberation of SA, p 58.

We hereby set out a programme for equality in all spheres of public and private life, including the law and the administration of justice; the economy; education and training; development infrastructures and the environment; social services; political and civic life; family life and partnerships; custom, culture and religion; violence against women; health; and the media.¹⁹

The findings of the research undertaken for the charter were not new, but the charter was hailed as unique in that women themselves had said what their needs were. But which women? Did it express the prevailing consensus among women's groups of all races and political allegiances? It is hard to see how some key demands could have been endorsed by the more conservative women's groups. Examples include its call for the decriminalisation of prostitution,²⁰ the recognition of the diversity of family types,²¹ and for women to enjoy 'the right to control over their bodies, which includes the right to make reproductive decisions'²² – or, indeed, its assertion that 'customary, cultural and religious practice frequently subordinate women'.²³ To be sure, many of these clauses are couched in oblique language, presumably in the hope that this would keep the conservatives in the fold. But it is open to question whether the consensus that enabled the charter to be adopted was strong enough to ensure support for it across the spectrum if a concerted campaign to promote the charter was run, in which case opposition may have been mounted to it, forcing the conservative groups to take a position on some clauses.

Discussions, which had began as early as December 1992 at a conference in Durban, continued on how to influence the structure of the formal democratic institutions that were expected to emerge by increasing awareness of women's issues and thus broadening democracy's scope.²⁴ Among the suggestions were the establishment of a ministry of women's affairs which would be backed by a women's desk or committee in each ministry to ensure that women's issues were addressed. Others included a full-time non-governmental standing committee on the status of women, mechanisms for consultation between the government and women's organisations, monitoring machinery, a litigation fund to ensure access to legal protection and redress for women whose rights were violated, and informal pressure on government institutions.²⁵ A key debate in the WNC was over whether the charter should be used as a legal or political tool. It was decided that a legal document would be inflexible, with little space to adapt to the changing needs of women. Therefore, a decision was taken that the charter be formulated as an aspirational and living document that could be used at a later date to inform the legal process.²⁶

¹⁹ *The women's charter for effective equality*, adopted at the national convention convened by the Women's National Coalition, 25-27 February 1994.

²⁰ *ibid*, article 3.

²¹ *ibid*, article 8.

²² *ibid*, article 11.

²³ *ibid*, article 10.

²⁴ Shireen Hassim, conversation, 29 May 2001.

²⁵ Pat Horn, Sisters are doing it for themselves, *Indicator SA*, 11(2), Autumn, 1994, pp 37-9.

²⁶ Carolyn Baker, Charting our future, *Agenda*, 21, 1994, p 98.

Nevertheless, the coalition was not very effective in popularising the charter – much of its potential democratising impact would have flowed from this key step. It was reported that attempts were made to popularise it by publishing it in comic book form translated into the 11 official languages. Demonstrations were also held and, after the 1994 election presentations were made to president Nelson Mandela and provincial premiers. But many activists believe that the charter was not extensively popularised since the coalition had lost momentum after it was launched. Analyst Cathi Albertyn and others have indicated that the charter has not been used effectively to lobby for policy changes for women.

Feminist researcher and analyst Debbie Budlender, however, still asserts that the charter campaign made a substantive contribution to ensuring a gender-friendly constitution.²⁷ She feels strongly that its provision for an independent commission on gender equality (CGE) to monitor, investigate, research, educate and advise government can largely be attributed to the ‘charter process’. Support for this view may be found in the estimate that the charter campaign reached more than 2 million women. It was also found that focus groups, the methods used to gather information, provided an effective vehicle for women to articulate their needs and demands.

But Budlender’s own experience may indicate limits to the coalition’s capacity to reach out to women at the grass roots. While she is viewed as a highly competent and talented researcher, she resigned during the initial stages of research for the charter. She says she was reacting to its decision-making processes which were ‘slow, inconclusive, lacking in openness, and undermining of staff’.²⁸ Several other interviewees who wished not to be identified indicated that a non-consultative leadership style in the coalition introduced numerous complications. In particular, the lack of democratic leadership delayed the initiation of the research and hence the timing of the charter, ensuring that it arrived too late to directly shape the constitution. Despite this, the campaign did stimulate discussion among women on their rights and needs, and significantly impacted on the constitutional negotiations. Researcher Kristine Abrams notes that through the charter women learnt that their voices were important and that they should be involved in determining the future of South Africa.²⁹

At the initial constitutional negotiations – entitled the Conference for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) – in 1992, there were only 23 women among more than 400 delegates.³⁰ Women had argued for a gender advisory committee (GAC), but found it largely unhelpful because it placed women in a ghetto and isolated their concerns.³¹ Therefore, when few women delegates were appointed to the next round of negotiations,

²⁷ Debbie Budlender, interview, 9 May 2001.

²⁸ Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*, p 50.

²⁹ Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*, p 55-8.

³⁰ *Natal Witness*, 7 March 1992, cited in Cathi Albertyn, *Women and the transition to democracy in SA*, in *Gender and the new South African legal order*, Johannesburg, 1994, p 54.

³¹ Albertyn, *Women and the transition to democracy in SA*, 54; Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*, p 61.

women in political parties suggested that all delegations be expanded to include one woman delegate who would have full voting rights. The WNC followed this up with an open letter to political leaders:

We have been concerned at the relative absence of women in the negotiations: in the various CODESA structures, the bilateral and other meetings and in the preparations for the multiparty talks ... The structure and function of the ... (GAC) ... served to place women in a ghetto and isolate their concerns. Regrettably some participating organisations used the establishment of the GAC as an excuse not to involve women in the delegations and in the management and other committee. We urge you to ensure that your own delegation includes a significant number of women. Further, we would ask that the structures of the multiparty negotiating forum facilitate the integration of gender issues at all stages.³²

Abrams relates that the WNC could not demonstrate on this issue due to a lack of consensus on protest-type activity among members. But this did not prohibit the ANCWL and IFP from responding independently and choosing to demonstrate.³³ On 30 March, at a meeting of the negotiating council, it was decided to expand delegations to include one woman delegate with full voting rights; 26 women ultimately became delegates. A similar battle ensued on the composition of technical committees; only after considerable protest was each required to include one woman.³⁴

Once it became clear that the charter would not feed directly into the constitution, the coalition set up a monitoring team to provide information and analysis on gender issues for women delegates. Bills and issues that arose were analysed from a gender perspective and responses forwarded to women in the political parties and the regional and national coalitions. The monitoring report dated 14 August 1993 noted that ‘the inclusion of women has been instrumental in the advancement made on women’s rights in a number of the technical committees’ such as the technical committee on the Independent Electoral Commission Act, the Fundamental Human Rights Committee and the Transitional Executive Council Technical Committee, yet it also highlighted that women’s issues needed to be advocated more strongly in the constitutional technical committee and the independent media commission.³⁵

Despite the quota, most women delegates at the negotiations were unable to contribute much to the talks from a gender perspective since they acceded to the expectation that they would represent their party positions rather than advance women’s interests. This evidence of the degree to which gender remained subordinate to other identities – such as party – does not, however, negate the fact that increasing the number of women delegates was an achievement since it enhanced the range of South Africans who participated in the MPNP, which a writer at the time labelled ‘the ultimate boys’ game in South Africa’.³⁶

³² Open letter from WNC to political leaders, 22 March 1993.

³³ Abrams, *Fighting for women's liberation during the liberation of SA*.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Multiparty Negotiations monitoring report to the Women's National Coalition steering committee, 14 August 1993.

³⁶ *The ultimate boys club*, *Negotiation News*, 11, 21 July 1993.

The formal representation of women in apartheid institutions had been very poor, and it was therefore important that in the attempt to create a new society this form of discrimination would be addressed. One consequence may have been a gender representation in the post-1994 government much nearer the population distribution than that in the previous administration.³⁷ And enhancing representation at the negotiating table was clearly an issue on which women could agree across the spectrum.

The WNC after the charter campaign

Once the charter was complete, the WNC had achieved its mandate and had to decide whether to continue on a new one. By this time, many of the women who had played key leadership roles in the coalition had moved to parliament or other government structures, leaving a leadership vacuum behind. Having achieved the women's charter it was formed to create, the WNC lacked a rationale. Subsequent efforts to try to use it to move forward on particular issues affecting women proved ineffective, mostly because the WNC was neither established nor structured with this purpose in mind. Writing in an ANC publication, Chief Twala recounted that 'some people within the WNC have argued that, since the coalition has fulfilled its mandate of drawing up the women's charter, it should disband, allowing a democratic government to put in place appropriate structures to take the issue further'.³⁸ Similarly, Thandi Marah, the WNC's current convenor, notes that the ANCWL wanted the league to close because it felt its work had been completed.³⁹

It was the coalition's affiliates and provincial offices, rather than the original leadership, who pushed for it to continue. For many of these groups, achieving a quota in parliament for women in no way addressed their more basic needs such as poverty alleviation, jobs, housing, and an end to violence against women. But the WNC had previously only managed to move forward on very broad issues that affected women; choosing to continue as a CSO working on specific issues would have threatened the superficial consensus that held the league together, and would have been a challenge even with strong leadership and vision, which the coalition clearly lacked after the 1994 elections. At a national council meeting in July 1994, representatives of 39 of 44 organisations and regional coalitions, including rural and marginalised women, COSATU, and the SACP, decided to support the continuation of WNC, and elected Jean Ngubane as convenor.

The ANCWL was clearly unhappy about this decision, as it had clearly expressed that it wanted the WNC to close. The ANCWL, which had initiated and subsequently dominated the coalition, which it had hailed as an independent structure, was now displeased that the latter seemed to be growing wings and claiming an independent voice to lobby the new government on issues affecting women, even though a democratic government, with substantial representation from women, was in place. Marah reports that 'The ... league

³⁷ Debbie Budlender, Tanya Goldman, Tanya Samuels, Piers Pigou and Nahla Valji, Participation of women in the Legislative process, Study to support South Africa's legislatures, Commissioned by the European Parliamentary Support Programme, South Africa, May 1999, p 17.

³⁸ Chief Twala, Women's coalition charters the way forward, *Mayibuye*, 5(4), May 1994, pp 45-6.

³⁹ Thandi Marah, interview, 26 March 2001.

wanted to shut [the coalition] down after the charter because they were suspicious that other parties would use it to gain access to rural constituencies in the election'.⁴⁰ Motubatse recalls that in October 1994 the ANCWL's NEC decided that the NWC should close, and forwarded a letter to the latter to this effect. Official league representatives were withdrawn from the coalition; yet some League members continued to be involved with it since they did not agree with this decision. Ultimately, however, these individuals were forced to withdraw as they were portrayed as disloyal ANC members at the 1996 ANCWL conference. Motubatse explains that 'political pressure was placed on us to distance ourselves from the coalition, and in addition I had no constituency to report back to on ... [its] activities, so I withdrew'.⁴¹

Ngubane, elected into the position of convenor in 1994, had an almost impossible task - to lead a CSO consisting of affiliated organisations which claimed to represent the interests of women, but could not agree on exactly what these were. The political context in which the coalition had been established had changed, and the issues that could unite women under one umbrella were few. The test for the coalition was to identify such issues. Ngubane envisaged 'a shift away from the role the WNC national office has played as "pied piper" towards a more facilitative one'.⁴² Many organisations felt the national office was becoming too powerful, and Ngubane wanted to encourage affiliates to develop their own strategies for promoting women's issues. Clearly women's groups saw the potential strength of a national CSO, but they were also battling to formulate a strategic vision for such a diverse range of women's groups. Ngubane realised that not all WNC affiliates supported every aspect of the charter, and therefore felt they should be able to choose the clauses they wished to support. The following areas of work were identified for the coalition in 1994:

- lobbying, advocacy, and monitoring;
- training and empowering women in a broad education campaign;
- taking the charter to the constitution-making body and to people at the grass roots for discussion;
- popularising the charter;
- further research;
- participating in the UN's fourth world conference on women in Beijing, with women leading the process;
- ensuring women's participation in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP);
- capacity-building and skills development of organisations; and
- linking with the Gender Commission and other bodies in government or parliament.⁴³

⁴⁰ Marah, interview.

⁴¹ Motubatse, interview.

⁴² Interview with Jean Ngubane, Dreams of mobilising mission, *Negotiation News*, 21 July 1994.

⁴³ Pat Horn, Whither the wnc?, *Agenda*, 23, 1994, pp 64-6.

These goals were broad and vague; they seem to have been very carefully phrased so as not to offend any group. But the lack of clarity also served to paralyse the coalition's ability to campaign on specific issues. Strong women's CSOs quickly realised this; groups such as the Women's Health Project knew that this was not the place to advocate legislation allowing women access to abortion. CSOs which wanted to move forward on particular issues were forced to form alliances with others on areas of common interest, since the WNC continued to cling to an apolitical and non-partisan position which stifled positive movement in any direction. Hassim and Gouws note that the women's movement fragmented into a new hierarchy of sectoral networks such as the National Network of Violence against Women (NNVAW), the Reproductive Rights Alliance (RRA), and the Anti-poverty Coalition, which were highly articulate and had relatively good access to the policy-making process.⁴⁴ Ngubane had said, 'if we can't take the charter forward in a vigorous way, we will not survive as an organisation'.⁴⁵ And it was not the coalition that took the charter forward, but individual CSOs and sectoral networks.

In 1995 Fayeeza Kathree wrote:

There has been a very disturbing silence in the months following the first democratic election. There were no shouts of joy when women were appointed to cabinet, parliament, and other government positions, and there was no protest when government was writing policy that did not integrate the concerns of women. What has become of that vibrant and critical women's voice that we heard so loudly and clearly in the months prior to the election? Why have we lost our voice?⁴⁶

Mahau Pheko, who became CEO of the WNC in 1996, explains:

When I came in there were a lot of problems. The idea was that we could use the charter to monitor advances, but there was no programmatic mandate. We did go through strategic planning and came up with various programmes, but these never got off the ground. This was because there was no shared vision, we had lost our regions and financially WNC was struggling. Originally there had been a national office with 13 regional offices with co-ordinators. In 1996 only KZN's office was functioning.⁴⁷

By 1996 the WNC had very little financial resources and had lost its connection with its affiliates largely because, where there were issues such as violence against women that had the potential to unify diverse women's groups, the coalition lacked the leadership and strategic vision to focus on these particular areas. Pheko talked to affiliates to try to understand the issues facing the coalition. She discovered that two Afrikaans women's organisations felt that they no longer fitted into the WNC. They found it very much an

⁴⁴ Shireen Hassim and Amanda Gouws Redefining the public space: women's organisations, gender consciousness and civil society, *Politikon*, 25(2), p 70.

⁴⁵ Interview, Ngubane.

⁴⁶ Fayeeza Kathree, Where have all the women gone? *Agenda*, 24, 1995, pp 21-6.

⁴⁷ Mahoe Pheko, interview, 5 November 2000.

African women's organisation, and felt it could not take on their issues.⁴⁸ Estelle Jordaan, former director of ATKV Dames, an Afrikaans women's group, explains that most women in this organisation would currently identify their key areas of concern as: 'our husbands are losing their jobs to affirmative action, crime is very serious, and the standard of our children's education is going down'.⁴⁹ This illustrates the limitations of a view which suggests that women in South Africa can easily find areas of commonality. Where they have been found (developing a charter, working on violence against women), strong strategic leadership and focus are needed to establish and sustain work in these areas, thus keeping women from divergent organisations on board and preventing race and class divides from causing tensions. Without a strong strategic focus, Meintjes notes, 'apart from the recognition of diversity' there has been little to hold the coalition together.⁵⁰

The WNC more recently

Today, the overwhelming support for the WNC manifested in the early 1990s is hard to find. Comments such as 'WNC has been terribly weakened - I don't see it as a key partner', 'nobody ever talks about WNC', and 'they are much ado about nothing', abound. Arabi Mocheke, who worked with the WNC in preparing for National Women's Day 2000, indicated in a report to it: 'the organisation needs to work on its profile and ... to be seen as custodians of women's rights ... and this will need a dedicated effort on the part of the leadership'.⁵¹ The coalition has been run by a dedicated acting CEO, Laura Kanyago, who has operated on a purely voluntary basis for the past year. She is helped by a volunteer administrative assistant. The organisation has minimal funds, and substantial debts. Unable to pay the rent for its offices in the Carlton Centre, the coalition now occupies donated space.

It has largely been silent, and has failed to speak in a critical voice to the current government. This can be attributed both to the coalition's initial close relationship with the ANC and to its inability to establish a clearer focus and political path. Prishani Naidoo, gender representative of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, notes that the WNC is generally uncritical of the ANC and of government policies and has failed to intersect with the government's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, which Naidoo argues does not act in the interests of poor, black, and unemployed women.⁵² Not only does the coalition seem to lack the ability to focus on a set of issues; it also has not clarified whether it is an implementing arm of the government or an independent advocacy CSO. Various interviewees spoke of the need for a coalition to act as a networking body among

⁴⁸ Pheko, interview.

⁴⁹ Estelle Jordaan, interview, 26 March 2001.

⁵⁰ Sheila Meintjes, The women's struggle for equality during SA's transition to democracy, *Transformation*, 30, 1996, p 61.

⁵¹ Arabi Mocheke, Report to WNC, Johannesburg concerts, August 1999.

⁵² Unpublished paper by Prishani Naidoo for an anthology of writing on the future of feminism. Also informal discussion with Prishani Naidoo.

women's organisations, but again it is unclear whether the WNC sees this as its role, as it has also taken on various projects rather than farming them out to an affiliates with relevant expertise.

Despite its inability to engage with the government on policies and laws that affect women, the WNC has remained a player at international women's events such as the international women's conference in Beijing, the five-year follow-up to this conference, and the world women's march in New York during 2000; the EU has provided funds to the coalition for a monitoring exercise meant to feed into the Beijing-plus-5 review conference. While the EU might argue that the WNC is South Africa's most broadly based women's organisation, the fact that the only significant funding it has received in the last few years has paid for a once-off high profile event indicates that funding such events are simpler and more attractive to donors than more long-term, locally based initiatives. Naidoo is critical of the coalition's engagement with events organised by the 'global women's movement', and indicates that the WNC claims to speak for the marginalised at these events when it does not represent the interests of most South African women. Naidoo is not alone in criticising the WNC's engagement with global processes: Nthabiseng Moghale, former director of People Opposed to Woman Abuse (POWA), adds: 'something is wrong if we are engaging with activities like Beijing but the local issues are not attended to'.⁵³

The planning in South Africa for the world global march, where women met in New York to deliver a message to the leaders of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, was described by one person as 'completely chaotic and disorganised'. Apparently, a month before the march, the coalition drafted a budget of R2 million and asked various individuals for assistance with fund-raising. An individual connected to a CSO focused on the rights of women was approached by the WNC for help raise funds for the world march, but declined: 'I considered whether this would benefit poor women at the end of the day, and I suspected not; I decided it was a waste of time.'

Another global women's movement activity is the 'girl-child' project. This UNICEF initiative, which emanated from the Beijing conference, has resulted in local research in South Africa on the situation of the 'girl-child'. This project is currently financially under-resourced due to some difficulties with UNICEF, which did not deliver funds it had promised. The project's current status is therefore unclear.

THE WNC has been largely inactive in lobbying the government for the 'public goods' that could address the situation of black African women who, in South Africa, 'have less income, are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to be educated, and have less access to facilities and services than other groups'.⁵⁴

Thus several key reasons for the current situation of the coalition have emerged, which will be discussed in the following sections. They include the loss of key leaders and strategic vision after the 1994 elections, problems with internal structure, the domi-

⁵³ Nthabiseng Moghale, interview, 24 January 2001.

⁵⁴ Cathi Albertyn, Beth Goldblatt, Shireen Hassim, Likhapha Mbatha and Sheila Meintjes, *Engendering the political agenda. An SA case study*, Study commissioned by the United Nations Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women Dominican Republic, July 1999, p 2.

nance of political parties in the coalition, the weakening of ties with member organisations and provinces, and an inability to continue to attract significant donor funding.

The WNC: victim of history, or a missed opportunity?

That the WNC has failed to rally women and their organisations behind the charter is widely agreed: far from leading the women's movement, it has been relegated to its fringes. Explanations for this differ, but most suggest that the coalition could have united women in action had one or other problem been overcome. Few endorse the view that the attempt to unite women across the South African divides was doomed by the extent of the society's divisions.

Leadership, strategic vision, and internal structure

Albertyn notes that, in the early 1990s, 'the WNC was blessed with astute political women, and unfortunately they lost this after 1994'.⁵⁵ During its early days, it was able to attract highly skilled and strong individuals into leadership positions, with Frene Ginwala as convenor (equivalent to chair) and Pregs Govender as project manager. Thenjiwe Mtintso, deputy secretary-general of the ANC, notes that 'the presence, commitment and courage of various women, feminists, gender activists with differing experiences and expertise ... was part of the cement that held the WNC together in its formative years'.⁵⁶ But, like many CSOs in South Africa, in and after 1994 many women, Govender and Ginwala included, moved to parliament or into senior government positions. A further complication for WNC is the allegation by some that Ginwala lacked consensus-building skills, and that this affected the coalition's internal democracy. Reliance on one individual to move the WNC along might not have created the kind of internal culture or processes that would enable it to engage and possibly influence government decision-making. The WNC began to lack vision and capacity, and, even after it had been given a new mandate in 1994, it continued to suffer from loss of direction. To prevent aligning it with the government, a decision was made to exclude women who had been elected to government office from the national committee, but to allow them to continue participating in the coalition's activities. In reality, they did not remain active in the WNC.⁵⁷ Kanyago reflects that, while the WNC was establishing a core leadership team, a second layer was not being built, and when the core team left there was a leadership vacuum.⁵⁸

Following the loss of leadership after 1994, annual general meetings required by the constitution were not regularly held, and the organisation has had the same leaders since 1996. At the national council meeting held in February 1994 a decision was made to slightly alter the coalition's structure; a national steering committee was elected to re-

⁵⁵ Cathi Albertyn, interview, 10 April 2001.

⁵⁶ Thenjiwe Mtintso, Part 1: The Women's National Coalition, *Umrabulo*, 10, 2001.

⁵⁷ Horn, *Whither the wnc?*, 64-6.

⁵⁸ Laura Kanyago, interview, January 2001.

place the steering committee. At the 1996 AGM a new national committee was elected, comprising a convenor, Marah; a secretary-general, Sandra Botha; a deputy secretary-general, Sinah Gwebu; a treasurer, Ann-Marie Nutt; and about 15 additional members from the nine provinces. This was the last time the coalition held an AGM where members of the steering committee were elected. At both subsequent AGMs, one in 1997 and one in 2000, problems were experienced, and key parties felt they could not hold an election. At the most recent AGM, in July 2000, there was no quorum, and a decision was taken to assess the coalition in order to evaluate its structure, programmes and objectives, and review its list of affiliates. Marah has thus been convenor since 1996, as there have been no subsequent elections. Instead, women have been nominated from the floor to supposedly 'strengthen' the coalition, and democratic voting procedures have not been followed. Nutt explains that the Coalition's reason for not having AGMs every year, as required by the constitution, is because holding a national AGM is costly and it is difficult to raise funds for such an event.

Links with members and regions

Evidence also suggests that the WNC has lost contact with many of its affiliates and has not had the capacity to update its list of members. Its *raison d'être* seems jeopardised by a lack of connection to affiliates, making it unclear on whose behalf the coalition speaks. WNC has not collected membership dues from affiliates for the past few years and is now in a predicament, as it realises that it needs to redefine its role before it can ask affiliates for fees. In trying to establish a new role for itself, the Coalition needs to take into account that many women's CSOs have already built alliances with issue-based organisations or networks.

Also, most WNC provincial offices have collapsed or are very weak, which means that it is not driven by the needs of regional structures but functions in a top-down manner in which decisions are made by a largely Gauteng-based committee. Even where provincial coalitions do exist, such as that in KwaZulu Natal, which was revived last year, they are not represented in the WNC leadership structure. This begs the question as to whether the coalition is really a national structure rather than a Gauteng-based one. Thus Nellie Mgenge of the KZN Women's Coalition had this to say about the WNC after attending its AGM last year: 'I don't like a structure that only has people from Johannesburg. They should be working with provinces, and people from the provinces should feed the national office. In that way they would have people knowledgeable about what is happening in each province.'⁵⁹

Representatives of only 26 WNC affiliates attended that AGM; since the constitution stipulates that a quorum constitutes one quarter of organisations listed in its register (31 of a total of 126), a quorum was not achieved and the meeting was postponed to a future date, deferring elections for leadership yet again. A staff member of the Planned Parenthood Association (PPASA) comments that, while it receives communication from the WNC, no one in their organisation has been involved with the coalition for some time.

⁵⁹ Mgenge, interview, 20 March 2001.

Moghale former Director of of People Opposed to Woman Abuse (POWA) notes that POWA does not receive regular correspondence from the coalition, and Barbara Klugman of the Women's Health Project indicates that 'at some point we realised that we were not on their membership list and that activities were happening that we didn't know about, even though we had never told the WNC that we did not want to be members'.⁶⁰ She notes that over time it appears that the WNC has become more and more office-bound, ceasing to function like a coalition that draws on the capacities of its members.

The National Council of Women, a small organisation which have been loosely affiliated to the coalition, indicates that it was not a paid-up member simply because it had not been asked to pay membership dues for the past three years, but was fully prepared to pay. While a willingness to pay fees is an obvious test of membership enthusiasm for a co-ordinating CSO, this suggests that the problem may be administrative failure rather than membership disaffection. Membership fees have never been increased since the inception of the coalition and, while Pheko indicates that there has been some discussion of an increase, she believes it would be unclear to members what privileges and benefits they would receive from being members, since the WNC has no focused programme.⁶¹

The ANCWL and the WNC

Another frequently offered explanation of the WNC's weakness links to the ANCWL. While the coalition was formed by the league, it drew in other political parties too. Moghale argues that this has been a large part of the problem:

THE WNC AGMS have always been a total disaster because the average participant is not POWA, whose core business is to end violence against women... [It] is the ANC Women's League in Phefeni, the PAC Women's League in Kallehong, and the IFP Women's Brigade in Ulundi. If you put these groups in one room and try to choose a leader from among them, there is bound to be a stalemate.⁶²

But it is the ANC's role that is crucial since, consistent with its status as by far the largest party, it is also the political home of most women's activists. Thus commitment to it may have impaired other women's organisation. For instance, continuing with the tradition of being loyal to the ANC, in the 1990s many independent women's organisations such as the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) dissolved in favour of being subsumed by the ANCWL. According to a former NOW leader, 'we thought we were the internal wing of the ANC and would just collapse into it ... this was naive, but we thought we would be betraying the ANC if we stayed independent'.⁶³ Jenny Schreiner, a member of the SACP, remarked in an interview published in 1998, that 'in hindsight this was a mistake, because these organisations had built up a particular tradition of organising, a very strong working-class perspective, and a real community involvement,

⁶⁰ Barbara Klugman, interview, January 2001.

⁶¹ Pheko, interview.

⁶² Moghale, interview.

⁶³ Dan Connell, Strategies for change: women and politics in Eritrea and South Africa, *Review of African Political Economy*, June 1998, 25(76), p 20.

strong working-class perspective, and a real community involvement, and this wasn't transferred to the league'.⁶⁴ According to a former NOW leader, a plan to organise a reunion of NOW activists in June 1995 had to be cancelled after the league accused the organisers of trying to take over the post-Beijing process.⁶⁵ Clearly the league was worried about opposition and the emergence of a strong civil society movement that might challenge them.

Nevertheless, the relationship between party and gender identity is more complicated than explanations that attribute the WNC's difficulties largely to the negative attitude of the League might imply. Thus in 1996 a decision was taken that the league should return to the coalition. This clearly indicated that the league had failed to shut down the WNC – largely, the evidence suggests, because many ANC-aligned women's groups placed the need for a women's voice above obedience to their party – and was forced to live with and in it. This point remains valid despite the fact that the league did not return to the WNC until about 1998, which meant it did not participate in it for three years.⁶⁶ Motubatse reflects: 'We tried to come back, but by then the damage to the coalition was too extensive.'⁶⁷

Some of the subtleties might be illustrated by events in KwaZulu-Natal, where a provincial women's coalition (the KZNWC) was re-launched on 25 February 2000. Women's organisations and political parties were invited. Mgenge, a member of the Bambithuba Women's Development Forum, reports that, in contrast to the early 1990s, numerous smaller women's groups were present.⁶⁸ But political parties were also invited because, as a member of the executive committee observed, 'you cannot exclude ... [them]. The IFP and ANC Women's League have a strong pull, and if we did not invite them to the launch there would have been havoc.'⁶⁹ Lindiwe Baloyi, organiser of the re-launch, reports that the league requested an interview with her to ask her to brief it on the KZNWC's intentions, and to explain the reason for a re-launch. Baloyi feels that once the league realised that the KZNWC did not have access to substantial funds, it left the latter to its own devices, and only a core group of interested and committed women remained. She adds that, at the re-launch, party representatives were clamouring to be elected to senior positions: 'Many people connected to political parties are eloquent and vibrant, and people will vote for them; however, once they are elected their political affiliations become pronounced, and this poses problems for the coalition.'⁷⁰ She asserts the need for the coalition to remain disengaged from political parties, and notes that many groups would in fact drop out if the KZNWC became embroiled in party politics.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Motubatse, interview.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Mgenge, interview.

⁶⁹ Lindiwe Baloyi, interview, 20 March 2001.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Political identities, then, are extremely important: this is why parties wield significant influence in the women's movement. A strategy to mobilise women which ignored this would probably run aground on the reality that women seem to pursue their interests as women within their broader political identity, not in opposition to it. But explanations that attribute overwhelming power to political loyalties fail to explain why many ANC women ignored the league's insistence that the WNC dissolve – and why their attitude was influential enough to prompt the league to return to the coalition. So gender identity and its expression in civil society are not simply captive to political identity, but nor do they override or cut across it.

This point's relevance stretches beyond the role of the ANCWL in shaping the fate of the WNC. It also raises the possibility that the WNC's failure to play a leading role after the charter's adoption was not primarily the consequence of poor or 'top-down' leadership or of the desire of political parties for control, but of the reality that a national coalition of women across other divides of identity and social class may be possible in a society such as South Africa only in unusual circumstances, such as key moments of a political transition, and then for specific purposes such as expanding the representation of women of all parties in a negotiating forum.

Donors and the WNC

When the WNC began, it was well funded by donors such as the Ford, W K Kellogg and Carnegie Foundations, the Royal Danish Embassy, the Dutch government, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the Independent Development Research Center (IDRC); much of its public relations work was performed *pro bono* by a local company. Pheko explains that 'at the time the WNC was very exciting and innovative to donors'.⁷¹

But when she was hired as WNC CEO in 1996, she quickly realised that it only had funds to continue for three months: 'The WNC had lost its rhythm in terms of briefing donors and negotiating with them.'⁷² Many individuals connected to the coalition have cited a lack of funding for gender activities as one key reason why it is in such a weak position. However, the evidence does not support a view that sees the coalition's weakness as a consequence of a lack of access to donor funding. If anything, it is administrative weakness, inappropriate choice of programmes, or lack of activity that explain the lack of resources; they are not explained by it.

Lotte Sylwander, former social and cultural adviser to SIDA (southern Africa) from 1996 to mid-1999, explains that it last disbursed funds to the coalition towards the end of 1996. The WNC then presented an annual activity plan to SIDA which proposed that it run small local support projects for women at the grass roots. 'We felt that if we were going to support a national women's coalition, we wanted to support it doing work like advocacy or co-ordinating the women's movement. We also felt that the coalition was not the

⁷¹ Pheko, interview.

⁷² *Ibid.*

right organisation to work with grass-roots women. It was apparent that they did not have a strong focus, and also that there was a problem with leadership.' Sylwander adds that SIDA decided to stop funding the coalition because 'it failed to reply to letters, the phone just rang, and in fact they were nowhere to be found'.⁷³ SIDA did continue to support many women's CSOs, and increased its support to gender programmes tenfold from 1995 to 1999. Sylwander recalled that the Ford Foundation also ceased WNC funding because it had not received proper reports from the coalition. In support of her view, a key individual involved in women's issues notes that at one stage 'a number of funders approached me to ask me what I thought of the WNC. My feeling was that they were in trouble. They needed a strong injection of strategic focus and thinking.' Albertyn notes that it was her sense that donors really wanted to help the coalition, but that it 'failed to develop sufficient strategic focus with implementation to enable it to continue to attract donor funding'.⁷⁴

The donor community continues to see the WNC as an unviable destination for funding. It is clear from interviews that donors such as SIDA, the Mott Foundation, Interfund, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and Oxfam Canada see it as a structure that lacks capacity. Klugman reports that, at a meeting organised by Oxfam Canada to bring together various people who work on gender issues, it was mentioned in a discussion document that the WNC was too weak to fund.⁷⁵ Myesha Jenkins of Interfund notes that 'the coalition doesn't even send funding proposals, but even if they did they don't have a good enough track record even to do something like information-sharing, and their impact would be minimal'. She notes that, in general, people have been disappointed with national structures, and she found that funding local structures and grass-roots organisations made more sense. This seems to suggest that Interfund, not unlike SIDA, is not interested in directing funds to large national structures as there is no assurance that they will filter down to affiliates.⁷⁶ Christa Kuljian of the Mott Foundation also notes that it would not consider funding the WNC because the it has lost its focus. She added that 'sometimes donors are really guilty of pumping life into a corpse; this could also be damaging to the sector'.⁷⁷ Sigrid Thompson of Heinrich Böll Foundation and Thomas Kjellson of SIDA also notes that the coalition was a weak structure and not one they would think of funding currently.⁷⁸ Oxfam Canada, Mott, Ford, the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Betrekkingen (Novib), and Interfund are all part of the Donor Network on Women (DNW) which sees its mandate as increasing funding to women's issues. Penny Plowman, former programme manager for Oxfam and later Novib, who co-ordinates the DNW, says it is a forum for informal discussions on applications from CSOs. She sees it as an important forum for ensuring that women's issues remain on

⁷³ Lotte Sylwander, interview, 23 May 2001.

⁷⁴ Albertyn, interview.

⁷⁵ Klugman, interview.

⁷⁶ Myesha Jenkins, interview, 27 March 2001.

⁷⁷ Christa Kuljian, interview, 4 April 2001.

⁷⁸ Sigrid Thomsen, interview, 23 February 2001; Thomas Kjellson, interview, February 2001.

the donors' agenda.⁷⁹ But even 'gender-friendly' donors which see funding to women's organisations as a priority are not eager to fund the coalition.

Certainly, women's action was affected by a change in the funding climate that negatively affected CSOs. A recent report on donor funding outlines that foreign aid to South Africa accelerated with the transition to democratic rule: 'In most cases the principal objective ... was to provide funding and technical resources that would assist political parties in the negotiation processes and in preparation for the first democratic election.'⁸⁰ After the 1994 election a large proportion of aid was shifted from civil society to the government in recognition of the fact that the latter was now the principal development engine in the country. Klugman notes that after 1994 many donors directed their money towards the government. Donors have directed much of their funds to state gender structures, known as the 'gender machinery', such as the Office on the Status of Women (OSW), the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), and the Women's Empowerment Unit (WEU). The WEU has been entirely funded by SIDA, and donors have heavily supplemented the state budgets for the CGE and OSW.⁸¹ Donors also shifted from core to project funding, and where groups could not make this shift, they battled.⁸² NGOs that were adversely affected include the Agisanang Domestic Abuse Prevention and Training (ADAPT), the Rural Women's Movement, the Women's Resource Centre, POWA, and the Women's Lobby.

Plowman notes too that post-1994 donors were more interested in funding organisations that took up issues, such as violence against women.⁸³ This shift was mirrored within the women's movement. Thus Lisa Vetten, head of the gender unit at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, notes that there are more women's organisations now than there were prior to 1994. She cites as examples the Reproductive Rights Alliance, the Women's Legal Centre, the National Network of Violence against Women, and Community Policing Forums.⁸⁴ While there is no evidence that their formation is a response to donor preferences, networks with a clearly defined mission are likely to be more successful at attracting resources than the broad and often vague goals of the WNC.

It is hard to see the failure of donors to support the WNC under current circumstances as evidence of a weakness in their attitudes or strategies. On the contrary, a continued interest in devoting resources to the WNC on the strength of past glories would have been more open to criticism. The decision of one major donor to engage the WNC in preparation for an international conference when it was clearly unable to play a substantial role on the domestic stage provides evidence of donor ineptitude. The insistence of many

⁷⁹ Penny Plowman, interview, 11 May 2001.

⁸⁰ Synthesis report, Development Co-operation Report II for SA 1994-9, International Organisation Development, Birmingham, August 2000, pp 48-9.

⁸¹ Albertyn, Goldblatt, Hassim, Mbatha and Meintjes, *Engendering the political agenda – an SA case study*, 31-7.

⁸² Klugman, interview.

⁸³ Plowman, interview.

⁸⁴ Lisa Vetten, interview, 7 November 2000.

'gender friendly' donors to fund concrete activities rather than grand-sounding concepts such as a national coalition should no be viewed as irresponsible. Given a general countertrend in southern Africa among both key actors and donors towards preferring the grandiose to the workable, this is of some interest; it may well be that the widespread scepticism about the WNC among gender activists has played an important role in shaping these responses. Whatever the reason, funding women's' activism appears to be more thoughtful and strategically considered than it is in many other areas of South African public life.

But, if the WNC currently does little to warrant funding, does that also mean that a national women's' coalition is doomed in principle? Or is there scope for a coalition based on firmer foundations than the present one?

Conclusion

The WNC was able to play a democratising role during the MPNP, since it lobbied to increase the number of women at the negotiations and conducted extensive participatory research on a women's' charter. Since 1994–5 there has been an attempt by immensely dedicated women to keep the coalition together. Women have been prepared to place their identities as women before those of political party affiliation to sustain the WNC.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the initial rhetoric claiming that the coalition could bring together women across the traditional divides in a sustained campaign for gender equality was exaggerated: given South Africa's particular political history, there are constraints that prevent women from working together on all women's' issues since there are strong divisions along the lines of race, class and culture. While they did not prevent an alliance to win a larger presence at the negotiating table, or even the drafting of a charter, they were perhaps too great to allow for a sustained campaign for the charter's implementation, and 'the index of difference among women was too great to organise them primarily as women'.⁸⁵ This has prompted more than one feminist strategist to agree, albeit for different reasons within the ANCWL, that, having completed its task, the coalition ought to have dissolved, leaving gender activity to the many issue-based networks and alliances that have filled the vacuum.

But that view may be itself exaggerated. While it is clearly unrealistic to base a coalition on the assumption that women can unite in civil society across all the barriers, this does not preclude a national coalition of those parts of the women's' movement that subscribe to the charter. It is worth noting that this was probably more apparent to the WNC's founders than their rhetoric might suggest: despite its attempts at compromise, the charter is written in a particular political idiom: that of the mass democratic movement. The real question, then, may not be why the WNC has failed to mobilise women across the spectrum behind the charter, but why it has not galvanised those who subscribe to its values.

Part of the problem may therefore indeed be strategic – that the WNC is a victim of a strategy which is so concerned with maintaining unity that it proposes allowing affiliates to choose which parts of the charter to endorse. In a society in which a cross-cutting iden-

⁸⁵ Gerald Kraak, interview, 17 April 2001.

tity such as gender is not strong enough to persuade its bearers to abandon their political identities, but in which women activists are prepared seriously to pursue women's issues within the parameters of their political identities, a strategy that seeks to build a strong women's movement around a set of values espoused by the country's dominant political tradition seems most appropriate to current realities.

But, while this strategy might be the most appropriate in current conditions, considerable leadership and vision will be needed to realise it. Women's organisations vary in their perspective on the future of the WNC. Some feel strongly that the coalition should close; others believe a major revamp will get it back on its feet. But most imply or state explicitly that a coalition (not necessarily the WNC) would significantly expand the capacity of the women's movement's. Nevertheless, the fact that little effort has been made to revive a coalition suggests that women's CSOs do not see this as an urgent need. Attempts to revive the coalition or replace it with a similar organisation will therefore almost certainly require energetic motivation of potential participants. It will also require significant strategic insight: the emergence of networks committed to working on some of the key items of the women's agenda, such as combating violence against women or campaigning for reproductive rights, may have both narrowed and broadened a potential coalition's scope and constituency base: narrowed, because it reduces the range of issues it could tackle; broadened, because some of the issues that tend to divide women's organisations need not be tackled by the coalition since they are being dealt with elsewhere. Precisely what scope is available for a coalition focused enough to attract only those who have a sufficient degree of like-mindedness to be able to frame a meaningful agenda, but broad enough to ensure that it adds to rather than merely duplicates current activity, is a question whose answer requires substantial strategic effort.

The challenge for the WNC or any other national women's CSO will be how to interface with the largely disaggregated and issue-based women's movement that has emerged today. Currently, the WNC does not appear to be the appropriate structure to take forward women's issues. Both the gender summit, due to take place in August 2001, and the coalition's forthcoming AGM are events that will have an important bearing on its future. It is possible that at these events women's groups will provide a strong vision and purpose for the coalition, such as acting as a national networking body or taking on specific issues, rather than acting as a vague representative of 'women's concerns'. Vetten argues that 'currently women's organisations tend to function in silos - focused on issues such as violence, land reform, HIV and that increased linkages between the sectors is needed'.⁸⁶ While she appears to be referring primarily to NGOs rather than membership-based organisations, there may well be a more general need for co-ordination and joint campaigning within that spectrum of the women's movement concerned to take forward all the charter's demands. Clearly, if members of the women's movement cannot provide direction to the coalition and find a clear use for it, it may need seriously to consider the suggestion offered by many women – many of who asked to remain anonymous – that it

⁸⁶ Vetten, interview.

should close. But, even if the WNC were to dissolve, its experience may well show that there is considerable unexplored room for co-operation among women's organisations either in a sporadic, issue-based, manner – such as the lobby to enhance representation at the MPNP – or in a more sustained alliance of the like-minded.

In sum, the role of the women's movement in providing a platform for the expression of identities other than race, and of breaking a pattern in which issues in civil society and the public realm more generally are settled purely by the division of racial minority and majority, is more complex than some traditional treatments of civil society might allow. The classic notion that would judge prospects by whether women can ignore their racial and other identities in pursuit of the issues raised by their identity as women is clearly unrealistic under South African conditions. But the WNC's experience also shows that there is more scope than many might believe for women to place enough priority on their gender identity to ensure that women's concerns do not recede into the background in the name of loyalty within a political camp. That opens considerable space for independent gender activity in civil society, even as it limits the alliances that are possible.

APPENDIX A

Interviews and focus group sessions

- Annemarie Nutt, WNC treasurer, 24 April 2001; 25 May 2001.
- Barbara Klugman, director, Women's Health Project, February 2001.
- Dorothy Motubatse, ANC member of parliament, 12 April 2001.
- Cathy Albertyn, head of the Gender Research Project, Centre for Applied Studies, 10 April 2001.
- Christa Kuljian, director of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Southern Africa, 4 April 2001.
- Estelle Jordaan, former director of ATKV-Dames, 26 March 2001.
- Gerald Kraak, former director of Development Update and deputy director of Interfund, 17 April 2001.
- Irene Khumalo, director of ADAPT, 26 January 2001.
- Janine Hicks, programme manager, provincial parliamentary programme, 20 March 2001.
- Kim Segel, former research co-ordinator for the WNC, November 2000.
- KwaZulu-Natal Women's Coalition, focus group session with nine members, 19 March 2001.
- Laura Kanyago, acting CEO, Women's National Coalition, 4 January 2001.
- Lindiwe Baloyi, chairperson, KwaZulu-Natal Women's Coalition, 20 March 2001.
- Lisa Vetten, Gender Unit, Centre for Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 7 November 2000.
- Lotte Sylwander, Swedish International Development Aid (SIDA), 23 May 2001.
- Lungi Dlamini, director, Masifundisane Community Services, Ulundi, 20 March 2001.
- Mohau Pheko, former CEO of the Women's National Coalition, 5 November 2000.
- Maretha de Waal, director, Centre for Gender Studies. 22 January 2001.
- Marg Jobson, 17 January 2001.
- Mihloti Mathye, head of policy and research, Commission for Gender Equality, 22 November 2000.
- Mmbatho Ramagobi, director, National Network of Violence Against Women, 30 January 2001.
- Myesha Jenkins, senior programme officer, Interfund, 27 March 2001.
- Nellie Mgege, member of Bambithuba Women's Development Project in KZN, 20 March 2001.
- Nomfundo Mayosi and Premi Appalraju, Women's Development Forum, November 2000.
- Nthabiseng Moghale, former director of People Opposed to Woman Abuse, 24 January 2001.
- Penny Plowman, gender consultant, 11 May 2001.
- Samantha Hargreaves, National Land Committee, December 2000

Sheila Camerer, member of parliament, Democratic Alliance, 28 November 2000.

Sigrid Thomsen, representative, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 23 February 2001.

Thandi Murah, Convenor of Women's National Coalition, 3 November 2000; 26 March 2001.

Thomas Kjellson, Swedish Independent Development Agency (SIDA), February 2001.