

Gender, Culture and Development: A South African Experience

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The context of this study is set by the process of political democratisation and social transformation now under way in South Africa. It focuses on the lives of a group of African women in Clermont township outside Durban. Its methodology seeks to break the artificial divide between political economy and cultural studies approaches to development. Its findings contradict a simplistic hierarchical distinction between practical and strategic needs. Attention is also paid to the particular dowry form of lobolo and its ostensibly traditional role in African society.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is now embarking on a process of political democratisation and social transformation. For critical observers, at home and abroad, a crucial litmus test for the ANC-dominated (African National Congress) Government of National Unity which came to power in 1994 is the position of African women. Government policies in this area will be closely scrutinised. It is this political context which frames our exploration of the lives of a group of African women in Clermont township outside Durban.

The theoretical context we operate within is the interrelation between gender and culture [*Gender and Development, 1995*] and the interaction between culture and development (see Tucker in this volume). Our purpose is to trace the discursive construction of reality by women in Clermont, emphasising the specific cultural processes shaping their daily lives. It is this process of agency which allows these women to engage with the structural constraints associated with their location and their subject positions as 'Third World' women living in conditions of under-development. This approach seeks to go beyond the artificial divide we see between 'political economy'

The authors were with the Department of Sociology, University of Durban-Westville, South Africa at the time research for this study was conducted. They would like to thank all the women involved in the research project and the two organisations which facilitated their work, the Clermont Child and Family Welfare Society and Crisis Care in Chatsworth, Durban

and 'cultural studies' approaches to women in/and development.

Whereas political economy directs us to the study of the structural conditions of women, cultural studies points us towards a politics of change and transformation. Following Tony Bennett, we adopt cultural studies as a label of convenience 'for a whole range of approaches which, however divergent they might be in other respects, share a commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within relations of power' [Bennett, 1992: 33]. This cultural approach is a necessary complement to a critical political economy as we see it, in so far as it leads to a practical engagement with, and within, the relations between culture and power.

The voices of African township women have been systematically silenced and devalued. As we explored the everyday lives of these women through their testimony we came to understand something of their subject positions and the construction of their identities. Our methodological commitment was to maintain a balance between our sociological understanding of their structural position ('political economy' for short) and a cultural understanding of the creative mechanisms of social agency as advocated by the cultural studies approach.

We were acutely aware of our own role in the ethnographic study we engaged in. One of us did liaison work with the communities but did not participate in the interviewing process on the basis of his gender. Of the remaining two authors, one of us is Irish, the other South African Indian. The cultural, racial, social and economic differences between ourselves and our respondents were tremendous. This can lead to the production of the other as object of research, and the unjustified seizing of the authority of authenticity, and the appropriation of the voice of the 'other'. We were also aware that the differences were so great that we could fall into a position that uncritically celebrated that difference, resulting in a focus on the homogeneity of the respondents. We were advised by the community workers to interview the women at centres rather than in their own homes so as not to put undue pressure on individuals, given the perceived power imbalance arising from our different subject positions. At all times we had a female interpreter from the community (likely to be trusted by the women) with us. Many of the women who talked to us chose to come in couples which perhaps reflected their insecurity with the process. Our approach stressed reflexivity about the research process and sought out further involvement and further inter-subjective knowledge rather than closure.

In a practical vein, we saw ourselves as 'paying something back' in the research bargain by producing research reports to assist those community groups, who had helped us to gain access, in their bids for funds for basic needs projects. The women interviewed, and the non-governmental

organisations we worked with, believed that the process of recording their stories, writing this up in report form, and submitting this to funding agencies would help them in their struggle for survival.

Our starting point was to trace the move from survival strategies towards empowerment by Clermont women. We developed our own open-ended questionnaires on the assumption that women organise around practical and strategic gender needs, with the latter being a qualitatively higher phase. Caroline Moser [1989], adapting categories developed by Maxine Molyneux [1987], distinguishes practical gender needs (such as sanitation, health care, higher income) from strategic gender needs which directly challenge women's subordination and existing gender relations (such as affirmative action programmes and equal gender rights legislation). The basic conclusion we drew from this ethnographic study is that this distinction is problematic, especially if translated into political strategy. We simply could not draw a clear line between a coping or survival strategy and an enabling or empowerment strategy. Survival for the women of Clermont is, itself, a demonstration of considerable power. It was interesting to note, after our research was completed, that a group of Mexican researchers and activists [Alberti *et al.*, 1995] had trouble 'translating' the word empowerment, linguistically and politically, from the NGO lexicon to practical conditions.

WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

Black working-class women in South Africa have lived under what has been termed the triple oppression of race, gender and class. This burden affects women in the workplace, in the community and in the home, all sites of patriarchal domination. As the South African report to the 1994 women's conference in Beijing put it:

Women continue to be discriminated against in the workplace. The labour law framework tends not to recognise the position of women workers, and in particular the double burden of work in the workplace and in the home. Women experience an enormous amount of direct and indirect discrimination in the workplace, including unequal pay and benefits, discrimination in tax, no guaranteed maternity benefits or job security and disparities in medical, pension and housing benefits, among other things. Women are also subject to a high degree of racial and sexual harassment [Beijing Conference Report, 1994: 18].

The same report records that women also suffer disproportionately from unemployment, which in 1993 affected 44 per cent of African women compared to 33 per cent of African men, not to mention the comparison with 5 per cent of white women and 30 per cent of white men.

As in other 'Third World' countries it is notoriously difficult to estimate the number of African women engaged in formal employment. Women employed in subsistence agriculture, for example, are not regarded as 'economically active', not to mention those engaged in unpaid domestic labour. However, it has been estimated that women account for over half of the extended labour force if the gender blindness of official statistics is corrected. Women still find it particularly difficult to obtain regular jobs in the formal economy, particularly in the rural areas where four-fifths of African women were found to have no income at all. We can see in Table 1 below the skewed distribution of income by gender in South Africa, bearing in mind that it deals with women of all races, therefore masking racial inequities.

TABLE 1
SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN AS PERCENTAGE OF INCOME BRACKETS - 1991

ANNUAL INCOME	PERCENTAGE WOMEN
Rands 300,000 plus	9.3
R100,000 - 299,999	6.4
R70,000 - 99,999	8.7
R50,000 - 69,999	12.8
R30,000 - 49,999	26.0
R10,000 - 29,999	35.2
R7,000 - 9,999	24.4
R5,000 - 6,999	31.7
R3,000 - 4,999	39.7
R2,000 - 2,999	50.2
R1 - 999	59.0
No Income	53.6

Source: Beijing Conference Report, 1994, *Country Report on the Status of South African Women*, p. 36.

The oppression of South African black women goes much further than these bare statistics suggest. A systematic and multi-faceted system of subjugation places African women outside the decision-making process, both in the public and private domain [*World University Service Women's Development Programme, 1992*]. Women are confined to the domestic arena and men are left in control of political power and social authority. It is only recently that women ceased being considered as minors under the law and thus subject to the guardianship of their husbands. The 1993 amendment to the marriage laws removed the marital power from all marriages but excluded those women married under customary law and those living in KwaZulu Natal (subject to the Natal Code) who remarried subject to marital power. It is not surprising that in this patriarchal society domestic violence is widespread and the incidence of rape in many townships is alarmingly high. With respect to reproductive rights, many rural women are simply sterilised or given Depo-

Provera as a matter of routine, and in urban areas a partner's permission is often required before contraceptive measures are prescribed.

After the ANC's historic victory in the April 1994 elections, there were great expectations that the triple burden of women would be lifted [*Work in Progress, 1994*]. In the first post-apartheid parliament one hundred of the four hundred deputies were women. However, there were only two women amongst the 27 ministers. There is, undoubtedly, a window of opportunity to advance gender issues. Yet, as the Beijing Conference report argues:

Whether the wonderful visions are translated into reality will depend on the strategies and machinery put into place, the resources allocated and the commitment to evaluating and measuring, within time frames, what real changes are being made to the most oppressed and exploited South African: black, working class women [*Beijing Conference Report, 1994: 51*].

While undoubtedly true, the emphasis on the state and state measures as the road to reform looks somewhat hollow at a grassroots level. The active civil society which might have forced these measures through is not much in evidence. The demobilisation of the once vibrant national civics movement is a token of this problem. The community organisations known as 'civics' were once the mainspring of resistance against the apartheid system at the community level. Today they are a pale reflection of their former selves and many of their one time enthusiastic proponents now advocate primacy of the parliamentary arena.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which was intended to launch the democratic development project to uplift black working class women, was bound to disappoint. Even those involved in its inception find the final policy document to be incoherent, lacking in vision and pandering too much to dominant free market ideologies [*Abelzadeh and Padayachee, 1994*]. The commitment to race and gender equality, and to a 'people driven' process now appear to be pious aspirations. From a gender perspective there are many problems with the RDP, not least in the way women are 'tacked on in the various sections' [*Agenda Collective, 1995*]. A recent survey on women and the economy shows that '[d]espite continual references to the RDP, the reallocation of government spending and the creation of employment remained unsystematic at best' [*Makgetla, 1995: 14*]. Put bluntly, for most black women democracy brought no immediate discernible economic changes to their daily lives. Whatever the merits of the RDP as a general development programme, it seems that the specific needs of women, and particularly rural women, will not be highlighted.

In South Africa the so-called 'traditional' aspects of women's oppression weigh heavily. This customary dimension being deep-rooted in African

society, multi-faceted and contradictory, will hardly be swept away by one election. Many women argue that customary law is oppressive and deprives them of basic rights. As Peliwe Lolwana [1993: 50] puts it '[t]he traditional values held by black society about women hurt black women in many ways'. Yet, given the heterogeneity amongst women, for some tradition, (sometimes translated simply into 'our culture') is cherished as a link between the past and the future and as a guarantee of particular 'traditional' rights they wish to hold on to. There is, indeed, considerable debate in ANC circles on the African form of dowry known as *lobolo*. On the question of polygamy, a major issue in rural society, the ANC argues that this is a complex issue not easily resolved by legislative measures. Others on the left are more categorical in their view that no traditional or customary practices should steal away the equality that the new constitution confers on women. We should be aware, finally, that there is a long history of 'tradition' being used by men to oppress women. As Terence Ranger [1983: 258] notes, men's dominance in African society was often expressed in colonial invented tradition. Customary practice usually means a male and colonial practice which silences women's indigenous beliefs.

WOMEN IN CLERMONT TOWNSHIP

Our concerns with women in the 'new' South Africa were focused on a small corner of KwaZulu Natal, namely, the township of Clermont on the outskirts of Durban [Todes and Posel, 1994]. Dating back to the 1930s, Clermont is unique in that it was constituted as an African freehold township. By the mid-1970s there were some 50,000 people living in Clermont, including 10,000 in a large hostel complex. There is a wide range of housing from formal housing to shack settlements. There is also a large tenant population attracted by the reasonable proximity to the Durban industrial suburb of Pinetown. Today, Clermont comprises a population of nearly 100,000 people of whom approximately one fifth are shack dwellers [Hindson and Byerley, 1993].

Until 1980, Inkatha was the dominant political presence in Clermont. This was not necessarily an anti-ANC stance as at that time many perceived Inkatha as a legal substitute for the banned ANC. However, in the early 1980s the conflict between Inkatha and the ANC-aligned UDF (United Democratic Front) rocked Clermont, as it did other areas in the KwaZulu Natal region. Militant youth spearheaded a campaign of resistance against the apartheid state and its local collaborators. The bus boycotts of the early 1980s, helped bring together communities and workplace resistance structures. The bus boycott was resisted by the mainly Inkatha-supporting hostel dwellers. Open clashes subsided in the late 1980s, although there was clandestine, more targeted, activity pitting Inkatha against the ANC. On the whole, Clermont today is an

ANC-supporting area. There is a 'civic' or community organisation, but it is not particularly strong.

A survey conducted in 1993 provides some general data on social needs in Clermont [*Hindson and Byerley, 1993: 22*]. About half of those surveyed had been born in rural areas which gives a strong indication of the extent of urban migration. In the more established part of Clermont (Old Clermont) Hindson and Byerley's survey found that the most important facilities people found lacking were, in order of importance, formal housing, toilets, better roads, transport, electricity and water taps. By contrast, in the shack settlement nearly half of the population surveyed placed water taps as their first priority, reflecting the order of developmental needs in these areas. One third of the population surveyed had seriously thought of leaving Clermont, citing poor accommodation and poor services as the main reasons.

An impressionistic view of Clermont would start with the overwhelming feeling of over-crowdedness. The area teems with people and there seems to be a plethora of small-scale economic activities. The ubiquitous mini-buses transport workers into Durban or the nearer industrial areas of Pinetown and New Germany. There is also a distinct air of official neglect, especially from the political establishment, including the ANC. Community workers (some with individual case loads of more than a thousand) exude an air of helplessness, even despair, given the magnitude of the social needs of Clermont and the patent lack of remedies after one year of the 'people's government'.

MAKING ENDS MEET

In an era of global restructuring, we are seeing many changes in the position of working women [*Aslanbeigui, Pressman and Summerfield, 1994*]. Women already bear the double burden of household responsibilities and other forms of work. In paid employment women are more vulnerable than men, being concentrated in low wage sectors and forming a disproportionate part of the informal sector. Even the World Bank acknowledges that 'their relative position has often deteriorated during structural readjustment' [*World Development Report, 1995: 107*]. Structural adjustment policies are usually generated in a way which is gender blind and ignores the specific position of women. In terms of its effects, more women are exposed to the market be it as wage-workers, petty-commodity producers or consumers. This process – known as the 'feminisation of work' – has affected South Africa as elsewhere. In 1991, 40 per cent of African women worked in community, social and personal services. Of these, 24 per cent were in domestic work, ten per cent were employed in agriculture, ten per cent in the retail trade, and 35 per cent worked in 'unspecified' occupations, covering a range of informal trades [*Makgetla, 1995: 11*].

The women of Clermont whom we interviewed worked in a range of occupations. A few had been involved in factory work but the most common areas of work by far were sewing, washing and ironing, and market or door to door selling. This spread of occupations seems to make our sample 'representative' in terms of the national statistics quoted above, as well as the available ethnographic information. Around a third of the women had partners living in and most of these worked in the light engineering plants of the nearby industrial estates. The issue of finding a job or moving to a better job was ever-present in our interviews. When asked what they wanted for their sons and daughters practically all the women stated simply 'a job'. The key to a stable occupation- something eminently lacking in their own lives - was seen to lie in higher education. For the women of Clermont, the world of work is one of long hours, poor pay and insecure conditions.

It is now accepted that conventional economics has failed to investigate or measure the unpaid work of women in the household [Bakker, 1994]. Doris, a mother of two, who has lived in Clermont since 1985, says that: 'The men tell themselves that they are high and yet everything in the house is done by the women from the darning of the socks to the cooking... everything is done by the women. The woman is the manager, managing everything, and the man doesn't like that.' For Doris, men think they are 'higher' than the women, even when the latter are better educated or earn more, and women tend to accept this for the sake of 'peace' in the household. A study of women living in Alexandra township outside Johannesburg found that nearly half the men did help with household chores, but these women belonged to a different social strata being mainly teachers and nurses [White: 1991]. None the less, while women in White's study were engaged in the 'double shift' in the home, the men were either down at the shebeen or sipping a beer in front of the television. Control over time is as important as control over income or food in terms of intra-household gender relations.

Although, the democratic South African government had promised major improvements in social wage and household infrastructure for the poor majority, the 1994-95 budget was not restructured to improve household infrastructure in poor communities. The women in Clermont did not feel, nearly a year after the elections, that much change had come to their lives. For Thokozane, the new government 'promised us they were going to change ... last year ... but still no jobs ... no change ... nothing'.

For Antonia, 'they made all these promises ... to build the schools we've got nothing happened'. The Clermont women have their own analysis of the new government and job creation as shown in the following composite quote.

My worry is that President Mandela is not here with us, we got the problem of jobs and he's promised to make us jobs this year ... But the

thing is Mandela's got no jobs ... the jobs are those from the white people ... we know that white people they don't like us... Still whites they own the factories ... we blacks we don't have work, so it is still hard for us to get work.

Caroline White's [1991: 85] finding in which women in Alexandra township 'painted a rather harmonious picture of their financial arrangements with their husbands' is certainly not replicated in Clermont. Thembi's account is typical:

When he comes home, like today its Friday, he has to come with the money to me but he never do it ... he go to town and buy something maybe we don't need ... without sitting down and discussing what we need ... that is my worry. We fight about it. We have to sit down and say this week we are going to pay this shop, and this one, like electricity, telephone, like that ... he never do that.

Consequently women spend long hours looking for work, doing washing for other people or selling wares door to door, on the street or at the market as well as carrying almost total responsibility for household management. They feel the oppression of race and class but this is always subsumed by the ever present, all embracing condition of gender. Kate Young [1993: 59] has written in this regard about 'the erroneous but widespread view..... that households are unproblematic units of pooling and sharing'. In fact, the intra-household distribution and control over resources is very uneven in terms of gender, and is a critical arena for the cultural production of social relations of gender.

TRADITION, *LOBOLO* AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER RELATIONS

Only one-third of the women we interviewed were 'married', either legally or living with a 'boyfriend'. Of the rest around half lived with other relatives (usually parents) and the other half lived on their own with children. The institution of marriage was integrally related to the custom or tradition of *lobolo*. This particular form of dowry traditionally consisted of cattle which passed from the groom to the bride's parents. Currently it is more common for *lobolo* to take a cash form, especially in urban areas. Some anthropologists have argued that *lobolo* is rooted in a web of kin relations which in the pre-colonial era offered some protection for women. Against this can be cited early reports of violence against women in rural areas. There was still an economic rationale to *lobolo* even amongst urban workers who pay bridewealth in order to stake a claim in the rural area. Today many women object precisely to the notion that they can be 'bought' with the equivalent of a few head of cattle. However, opinion on this matter is very divided as will be seen.

Two-thirds of our respondents spoke up in favour of *lobolo*. Agnes, who has lived in Clermont since 1948, has seven children, and four grandchildren, and worked in a supermarket for 18 years, thinks that *lobolo*:

is our custom, its not easy to change a custom. Because it is from the forefathers many people will still like to follow it. Maybe a few will say 'No, we don't like it now'. *Lobolo* they make it so that a person can learn to love his wife ... so that they can look after them nicely ... you can't expect somebody come and do anything to your wife because you know, its yours, you paid for her.

This sentiment was common if expressed in different ways. Most women simply said that *lobolo* was 'tradition' or 'culture'. A more prosaic view came from Tryphina. In her thirties, married, with no children, she thought *lobolo*: 'is good because with this money he pays ... My parents can take it and help me to buy some wedding gown and furniture ...'. Here *lobolo* appears just like an African version of a typical Western suburban marriage custom.

The minority of women who oppose *lobolo* hold strong views. Thandi's husband paid *lobolo* for her some years ago and they have three children. She believes whilst *lobolo* is part of 'our African culture ... it's not right because if somebody has paid for you he makes you a slave because he knows he has given your parents money, so you become a slave'. Patricia is 57 years old, has nine children and lives in a shack. For her *lobolo* is:

something that I hate in my life but it is a custom. I hate it because it is the main cause of this pregnancy of children. This *lobolo* is not very good because you have to pay a lot buying something ... I don't think a person should be sold. The man knows he is the boss of the house ... He bought her just like the furniture. And your furniture when you don't want it you shift it away, you give it out. That is what is happening to the women.

There are both young and old women who accept *lobolo* and young and old women who strenuously oppose *lobolo*.

A small-scale survey of students in Durban found similar attitudes [Walker, 1992]. One rural male interviewed was quite specific. 'A woman cannot dictate because she is in a very fragile position. I buy her and she has to obey because she is my property' [Walker, 1992: 5]. However, most rural women said they did not feel oppressed by the institution. Most objections to *lobolo* were pragmatic, namely that it had become too expensive. It was also felt that the move from cattle to cash had commercialised what was an otherwise valuable traditional custom. Cheryl Walker [1992: 58] concludes from this survey that 'the institution of *lobolo* is significant, valued by both men and women but probably for different reasons and not unanimously so, and the

attitudes towards it are complex, nuanced and not beyond self-scrutiny'.

Commodification certainly means that *lobolo* has lost its ritual character, and there is little evidence that it plays a protective role *vis-à-vis* women. It cannot be assumed that appeal to 'tradition' or 'custom' implies acceptance of *lobolo* as such. As one reviewer of our paper stated 'it could be a reiteration of what is expected, which does not necessarily express agreement, or indicate what they do, how they act with their own children'. A study of urban *lobolo* practice by Mary de Haas likewise found that when women said that it was 'a custom', this was an explanation 'given by those who did not know any other reason why it passed' [De Haas, 1987: 45]. In a sense this is the path of least resistance, maintaining conformity with the mores of the elders by not breaking with the continuity of any tradition. Yet, the cultural significance of *lobolo* for our respondents seems open-ended, and dependent to some extent on the bargaining powers of the personalities involved.

DOMESTIC RELATIONS

We need to go beyond *lobolo* to understand quite how basic life is for many of the women we interviewed. Protest came from the Transkei to live as a tenant in a small shack. She has three children and ekes out a living by selling mangoes and doing washing. She tells how:

After I completed school I didn't get any job ... so the time went on. I was looking for a job and this guy came to me ... No, I can help you, I can get a job for you ... but first be my girlfriend. So because I was helpless, I was desperate for a job I accept this guy but after that [she points to her stomach to indicate she became pregnant] he has vanished from thin air ... The next thing is coming another guy. If help doesn't come I'm not going to have the rent and the owner is going to throw me away ... The guy says 'Come and live with me, I'm going to feed those mouths and you' and then it's the same story going to continue.

Women like Protest demonstrate the crude nexus between food, survival and gender oppression. Given the material reality of patriarchal relations the only thing worse than a man seems to be the lack of a man. This is a point which is troubling to most orthodoxies and is reminiscent of Joan Robinson's remark that the one thing worse than capitalism was no capitalism. Neither remark is amenable to easy theorising or the drawing up of neat political conclusions.

Victoria has three children (the oldest daughter is 17) and has lived in Clermont since 1989. Her husband has a badly paid job in a local factory and he paid *lobolo* to Victoria's parents when they got married. She tells how:

I went to town for dress making lessons. I got a certificate when I

finished and he bought me a sewing machine. He said 'you must stay at home now' ... So I was staying at home ... sewing by myself ... so when I hear that the other women are here [at the Child Welfare Community Centre] I came and talked to them. I learned so many things here ... it is very nice. But this one doesn't like that I came here by myself. We were fighting and fighting about it. I made my own decision. Even now he doesn't want me to go. He wants me to go out with the hat. They say if you are a woman, if you are a married woman, you must put a hat on, but I don't do that every time. Sometimes I comb my hair and go. He used to get cross but I said 'No'.

A small 'domestic' incident, maybe, but indicative of the tension in gender relations in Clermont.

Rape is a regular feature in the lives of the women we interviewed. Almost all the women mentioned rape when we explored the different facets of daily living in Clermont. Gang rape was reported as a regular occurrence and many had heard of young children being raped in their vicinity. When we asked Doris (34) if Clermont was a safe place to walk around, she replied 'No, it's not safe ... a man rapes, kills her'. When asked if women could do anything about the frequency of rape, she said 'Yes, women can get together and complain and no one listens'. Surprisingly, Adelaide maintained that Clermont was a safe place to walk out in but we then discovered that, like many other women, she did not leave the house after 8 p.m.: 'You know, we as Africans, it is not our custom to ... a lady to go out at night. It's something our parents taught us. You can't go out after eight o' clock. It's not done ... we black people ... it's dangerous. Sometimes somebody who's walking can get hurt'. This might explain why Adelaide thought Clermont was 'quiet'.

In terms of reproductive rights almost all women interviewed used some form of contraception. Invariably the decision to take contraceptives was their own, although the type of contraceptive (most commonly Depo Provera) was outside their control. Often they did not tell their husbands of their decision, leading to serious disputes. Some feminist approaches to 'Third World' women have tended to focus on contraception (especially sterilisation) as something which is done to women through powerful development agencies, and there is an emerging understanding that the methods through which contraception is doled out have not always been woman friendly. Leaving this debate aside, contraception for the Clermont women was a means to gaining some control over their lives by limiting the number of children they would have. The women nearly always said that they advise their daughters to use contraception at an early age. Irene sums up the attitude of most women towards contraception: 'It's good ... because the cost of living is too high. Everything is so expensive. You won't be able to school them [children] ...

You won't be able to dress them, you won't be able to look after them. So now it is much better for a young woman to take a pill.'

In relation to gender conflict at the interpersonal level, most women we interviewed simply felt that men could not be trusted. Pinky is a self-employed dressmaker who lives with her two teenage boys. In her view, women's lives are difficult 'because the men cannot be trusted ... You never trust a man. Sometimes a man doesn't stay at home, sometimes he doesn't work'. Conversely, men could be relied upon to act oppressively towards women. Constance had direct experience of violence in the home and when asked if women in her position would go back to their homes, said: 'Some they go back ... some they run away ... but some of them they go back and stand that hard life because even if they can leave this one they'll go to the other one who will do the same'.

As researchers linked to the university, women often asked us for information or assistance regarding their children's education. But Pinky went one step further and asked us:

to go back to your university and tell them that we need our men to be educated ... (laughs heartily) ... We need our men to be taught how to treat women ... They're wild you see, wild ... even those who are educated. He goes to a shebeen where he drinks beer and all until he comes home. That's not good ... I think men need to be educated more than women.

This view highlights the shortcomings of the Women in Development approach, which focuses exclusively on women, as though they are mistresses of their own future. The Gender and Development approach, by contrast, focuses on the *relationship* between the two sexes, on the ways in which women's lives are shaped by men and on the changes which are required in men's attitudes and behaviour [Young, 1993: 129–35].

TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT

Following Molyneux [1981] and Moser [1989], it has become commonplace to distinguish between practical and strategic gender needs. Indeed, we began our research with this distinction in mind. Practical gender interests relate to women's position in the sexual division of labour and involve such interests as childcare facilities, better wages, sanitation, and healthcare. Strategic gender interests, by contrast, are defined as those which challenge women's subordination, such as changes in legislation to achieve gender equality. As will be seen below, we found it difficult to draw a hard and fast line between coping strategies and empowerment strategies in our research [cf. Elson, 1992]. We could, however, distinguish between gender-related issues (jobs,

health, transport, etc.) and gender-specific issues (contraception, rape, *lobolo*).

Janet has been a market trader in Clermont since 1966. She has six children and lives with relatives. When asked whether women or men were the leaders of the community she replied:

Women are very strong and powerful and willing if they want something to be done they try by all means ... I've noticed here at Sub 5 (shack area) women who have tried to get a place to stay and how they succeed! (laughs) They lift up dresses to the police men and everyone and said they are staying here. Women are strong because they *toyi-toyi* (protest dancing march).

Other forms of women's resistance include a 'togetherness', a topic which recurred frequently. For example, Lillian who has lived in Clermont for 25 years, has five children, and sells vegetables door to door, spoke of how: 'We do help each other, for example, if I sew something and I got money ... I buy milk for my children. If my neighbour comes and asks for the milk, I give her and she can cook for her children. And even if I haven't got something ... I can go to my neighbour and ask for this and she can give me.' Pinky, who said she did not understand what 'empowerment' meant, nonetheless told us of her wish 'to make some clubs ... like we stay together ... be a help to one another'.

Writing about Latin America, Gina Vargas argues that women are now speaking out:

In different forms, with different voices, shouting and whispering, in what already amounts to a historically significant rebellion, and after having felt confined for too long to private invisible spaces, women ... are now invading streets, town squares and other public spaces, demanding to be heard [Vargas, 1991: 1].

Vargas acknowledges that the 'private' voice whispering in defiance can also be considered a form of rebellion. Empowerment should not be exclusively confined to the public arena of the *plaza* or political party but include the ways in which women empower themselves in the daily acts of gaining control over their lives as shown above. Certainly, there is also empowerment through the macro- acts on the national scenes, such as the historic elections in South Africa in April 1994.

Survival itself, in Clermont, depends on diverse forms of individual initiative and group solidarity through enabling processes. As Hazel Johnson [1992: 172] puts it: 'Women's empowerment involves self-discovery and enablement as well as challenging structures of economic and political power.' That is the point we found as we disabused ourselves of the notion of a hierarchy of struggle, from the 'low-level' coping strategy to the 'higher level' empowerment, or that meeting strategic gender needs was more 'feminist' than

meeting practical gender needs. If we look at women working world-wide, we find fluidity and diversity in women's resistance to global rationalization and gender oppression [Rowbotham and Mitter, 1994].

At the forefront of women's solidarity in the township we studied is the Clermont Women's Organisation (CWO) launched in 1993 and with a current membership of one hundred and fifty. The poor schooling facilities and the use of Clermont as a dumping ground for local industry seemed to be the main motivating factors. For CWO Chairperson Hlengiwe Mgababela, the objectives include 'reconstructing the disoriented vision of a Black person ... of a Black woman ... instilling the sense of Pride, Confidence and Responsibility ...' [Clermont Women's Organisation, 1994: 2]. In practice, the CWO has campaigned energetically and successfully to reduce (if not prevent) the dumping of hazardous waste. Health education is also an area where the CWO, in alliance with other agencies, has made considerable progress. More frustrating were the candle-making and sewing projects launched in 1992 which had to be abandoned after equipment was burgled. What we were not able to establish was the scope of the CWO organising work and to what extent it reached the poorer women of Clermont.

There are few comparative studies of women and township politics which we could use as a benchmark for the Clermont case. In one survey Jeremy Seekings [1991: 87] points to an apparent 'demobilisation' of women in (the mid-1980s), and a remobilisation of some along different, more gender-structured lines. An example of the latter was the involvement of women in committees responding to the crisis in township education. Our own study hopefully fills a gap in exploring the diverse ways in which women's interests are articulated and the range of social and political activity. We would argue that perhaps one of the problems creating the gap in the literature has been an exclusive focus on traditional 'male' forms of political organisation. A study of two domestic servants in Tanzania bids us 'respect the ways in which, despite their poverty and limited scope for manoeuvre (they) have challenged their oppression, and recognise that their accounts of their lives give a personal meaning to these real, material, everyday struggles which could be built upon' [Bujra, 1993: 77]. We can only endorse this sentiment and hope that future studies of empowerment will understand this. This, again, is based on a research strategy which does not separate or counterpose the political economy/structural dimension and the culture/agency aspect by which people, even if constrained by structures, make and shape their own lives.

In terms of a broader analysis of gender, culture and development we would argue that the life stories we have approximated in our interviews provide a more nuanced and potentially progressive approach. A focus on empowerment allows us to rearticulate the relationship between structure and agency, between actors and their knowledge repertoires. As Norman Long and

Magdalena Villareal [1993: 161] put it in an important epistemological intervention, we need to highlight 'the central importance of strategic agency in the ways in which people ... deal with and manipulate certain constraining and enabling elements in their endeavours to enrol each other in their individual or group "projects"'. Clearly the women we spoke to were able to articulate their voice and make their agency felt. They dealt with constraining factors with fortitude and considerable ingenuity. They also understood enabling factors, such as the democratic developmentalism of the Reconstruction and Development Programme and have moved, albeit sporadically and unevenly, towards new forms of organisation.

The final word should go to one of our respondents, Constance, who has been married since 1958 and recently moved into the township, encapsulates many of the problems and prospects of the women we interviewed:

When I look back ... ja ... its difficult ... a woman has to look after their house ... not working as well ... when the man comes with nothing in the house the woman has to suffer ... The woman has to think what the children have to get to eat ... for food ... And it's not easy to be a woman. You try your best to keep these children living ... And these days we are not ploughing, not planting anything here, we have no place to plant. Before it was even better, because there were fields. You had to plant mealies, beans, potatoes, spinach and so forth. Now you have got to get it through strength, through money and money is a problem. We haven't got nice jobs to do to get the money, we haven't got education. These days I think it is much better to have higher education than getting more children, when we have got education we have got a job, no education no job.

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