

Concept note - Agenda building a platform for feminist dialogues

Background and motivation:

Agenda was formed in 1986 and as a feminist media project is in its 25th year, seeks to empower women to overcome gender inequality and oppression against women in all its forms. Agenda's founding collective recognised the enormous significance of feminism as an international movement that challenged sexism, and opposed the gender inequality of women. Black feminists have contributed seminal debate and understandings to feminist theory including race, class and other dimensions of oppression.

As a basic departure point for publishing the journal, Agenda's founders sought to ensure that women's organisation informed women's research, and at the same time that women's research informed women's organisation. In the 80's and 90's (pre-1994 democracy) at a time when women's formations and structures were struggling for women's emancipation and universal suffrage, feminism itself was not widely accepted. Gender equality therefore has not automatically always been the most important direction for women's organisation in the context of the wider struggles against apartheid's race and class exclusion of women from power and representation.

It is important to note that the collective and individual task that has been at the heart of the building of a women's movement has been often around the day-to day oppressions which we confront in relation to unequal power and unequal access to resources. It acknowledges the many different political and geographic contexts in which these take place, reflecting our diversity, both in the private (home) and in the public spheres (in women's representation in structures and in government).

Gains are made by women when they are able to identify and name their problems and identify how these are best overcome - equally research needs to reflect on and understand the problems, question and also seek to map, chart and seek answers.

In 2011, we live in a world where the local and global interface with how women respond to the effects of the financial crisis and global climate change. We have also seen how enshrining gender equality in the Constitution has led to its institutionalisation in gender machinery (including the Commission for Gender Equality, and the new Ministry for Women, Children and People with Disabilities), constituted to ensure women's equal participation in all facets of life and equality under the country's laws.

Further, there are numerous international instruments which, like the Beijing Platform of Action, are a result of women's activism internationally, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Government must report on the country's progress in compliance to the United Nations. By 2015 the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) targets will ostensibly have assisted the world's women to reduce poverty and gender inequality.

This array of machinery, international instruments and the Constitutional provision for equality itself however have not rolled away nor dissolved the more intractable

problems that the majority of women confront. We have named our problems and they reflect worse dimensions and statistical proportions than before the onset of democracy - women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, gender violence against women and children, and deep structural poverty and inequality with particular gendered impacts for women and women-headed households, to name but a few.

Women do not have a single national organisation that speaks for us or with whom we can rally – but rather a multitude of small organisations, associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Struggles take place in communities and villages and informal settlements and in workplaces by women. There are two or three organisations organising in Johannesburg (Progressive Women's movement) and Cape Town (New women's Movement) that as self-identified women's membership-based movements are self-evidently seeking to build women's solidarity and sisterhood within the parameters of open and non-secular organising.

Agenda believes that bridging the knowledge gap and by developing the practice of information-sharing among each other we can build a stronger platform of understanding of the nature of the problems of gender inequality. This will inform us as to how we can work more strongly to prioritise and strategise to overcome the more pervasive forms of gender inequality which we have to fight. In this way we can strengthen both the individual and collective efforts to ensure gender inequality does not find a welcome home in our society, and so that no one sector experiences social and political equality at the expense of another in post-apartheid South Africa.

Within this context, Agenda seeks to convene a two-part dialogue. We invite women to attend a platform building session, bridging the knowledge gap as well as sharing information on our efforts to organise. We need to understand successes and failures in this regard, and how these can inform the feminist project and practices to overcome prejudice, bias and exclusion, and build more solid lines of accountability from government and understanding of women's experience of gender inequality.

Summary:

1. There is a need to build a stronger relationship between research and women's experience on the ground.
2. It is necessary to acknowledge that in spite of the Constitution, gender machinery and the many international women's rights instruments, many women are in the dark as to what these mean and how these impact on women, how these turn into legal rights and how these are monitored.
3. How we locate the specific post-apartheid and post-colonial experience of women in Africa must inform the understandings of 'mainstreaming of women', which often means peripheralisation, silencing and relegation to ministeries which lack budgets and programmes which will empower women in their organisations to exercise more say in the decisions that affect them. Struggles are often contained in the margins where they pose no threat. How can we ensure that the institutionalisation of women's gender machinery opens doors to the mass of women and not just the elite who are in power?
4. Many women's organisations work against a range of social inequities (in the justice system, education, access to power, in the family, in budgets, in the media etc). While they often work in isolation, they share broad common interests and work together, often including men's organisations that are committed to eliminating

gender violence. With such partners, we can build a movement and a stronger voice to speak out against the abuses, sexism, silencing, negation and effacement that women have come to accept.

5. A form of solidarity politics among women, while not by any means new, is now necessary to interrogate the conditions of women's lives, which women themselves need to speak to. How else can we question the uncritical acceptance of problems that oppressive forms of patriarchy present to us? How can we ensure that development agendas do not re-create new forms of exclusion and that post-apartheid's neo-liberal agendas do not negate the need for redistribution, gender-sensitive planning and representation of women?

Some possible choices which suggest how Agenda may use its position as a feminist media organisation to build appropriate forms of new awareness- or consciousness building towards this are offered below.

Dates for the dialogues: mid-November and mid-February 2012. Dates to be finalised.

Dialogue 1

Format for the dialogue would comprise two elements: one, women's organisations to speak about a recent struggle that they have been engaged with overcoming and how these are being resolved (protest, resistance, negotiation, other methods); two briefing/s from formal government gender structures and an opportunity for engagement to learn more and open doors for understanding of how women are served by gender machinery or local government structures, and two identify successes and failures and what needs to change.

Draft programme attached.

Dialogue 2

Building a women's movement in the post-apartheid context - sharing experience on organising as women and an agenda for advancing gender equality:

Invite two speakers which budget allows, from women's movement organisations. Open up floor for discussion from the chair on discussion on how women's movement can be advanced and what the benefits of this are for women as a constituency. Towards an agenda for transformation?

The speakers and the discussion will be included in the sequential issue of Agenda and posted on the website and social networks Facebook and Twitter. One of the intentions of the Dialogues is to engage with women's organisations on areas of discrimination and oppression to inform the identification of journal themes. The issues raised will feed into the discussion of journal themes.

A further element will be the use of social networking platforms during the dialogue and that we hold a live tweet-up –from the dialogues – where comments are streamed on twitter on a pre-advertised site – and facilitates feedback into our session on tweets received from those following the debate. We will also invite radio journalists to be present, to record some of the discussions, conduct interviews and air issues on radio on our discussions. These could be posted on the website too.