INTRO SIG TUNE

DAVIS 1: This incredible conference took place in 1985, in Nairobi, Kenya. It was the first international women’s conference that had ever taken place on the continent of Africa...

SFX: MUSIC – STUDY WAR, AMBIENT (MOBY GRATIS)

INTRO: American political activist, scholar and author – Angela Davis...

DAVIS 2: And there was an enormous delegation from the US. This huge delegation goes to Kenya armed with all of this sophisticated analysis about what it means to struggle for gender justice, gender equality... And we had this amazing encounter with African women – with Kenyan women because this was also the first international conference that was attended by huge numbers of women from Africa and women from the global South in general. So we were talking about intersectionalities and those kinds of questions and a number of African women were saying, “Well, for us, water is a feminist issue. Clean water is a feminist issue... Firewood is a feminist issue...” and so that was a very humbling experience. We learnt of the extent to which our rather provincial albeit sophisticated notions of what counted as feminism had to take a back seat often times to some of the more important issues that involved saving lives.

NARRATION: Hello and welcome, my name is Thobeka Linda. Women at the grassroots level are the driving force behind social movements in South Africa today. These women are largely unemployed or self-employed in the informal economy. They may not consider themselves feminists but they are re-organising and showing their level of dissatisfaction with a system that continues to neglect their wellbeing.

VOX-POP: My name is Monica Mabanga. I am from Gauteng in the Vaal Triangle and my organisation’s name is Chinwendu. We are dealing with climate change... the environmental issues, women issues, kids and youth... because of the system. We need to cover all of the directions of the poor communities that they are facing so we workshop our community around the issues that are affecting us because when the electricity is no more in the house, kids are going to cry for women and women in rural areas are using the trees... to cut the trees for fire to make food. Women are affected, their chest, their nose because of smoke. So women are getting more affected directly... My name is Lorraine Heunis and I come from an informal settlement called Civic Road Informal Settlement under the umbrella of Informal Settlement in Struggle and we are fighting for the plight of people that lives in backyards, those that rent houses or flats, even those that live in the informal settlements and people who don’t even have a roof over their heads. You know, it’s very bad affecting the women because women have to be in the community. They have the children on their shoulders, they are unemployed. Sometimes their husband is unemployed... then they are the source of providing food and all of this work that they do in the community and in their houses is all unpaid... not appreciated and sometimes you get abused within the system and within your household for participating in all these platforms.

SFX: MUSIC
NARRATION: Zacki Achmat is the founder of the Treatment Action Campaign. The TAC is a South African non-profit organisation campaigning for the rights of people with living with HIV and AIDS.

ZACKI 1: If you look at the Treatment Action Campaign, we’ve built an organisation of about ten thousand volunteers. Members across the country in more than a hundred townships... Township-based branches and at a few tertiary institutions. We have ten thousand members – plus minus. The majority of our members – more than 70 percent of our members are women. The majority of our members – more than 80 percent are black, African members. The majority of our members are aged between 14 and 24. The majority of our members – 90 percent, I would say, are unemployed and so the disproportionate burden of openness, of dealing with activism and dealing with the epidemic is carried primarily by black, African women and that is of course wrong because the disease is not only among black African women. The disease is throughout our community.

SFX: SERVICE DELIVERY PROTEST

NARRATION: In 2005, there were a staggering sixteen service delivery protests each day – or almost six thousand protests that year. Nina Benjamin who is the Gender Programme coordinator for the Labour Research Service says this illustrates how women, in particular, are concerned with day-to-day survival issues.

NINA 1: Our living standards have declined over the past few years and for many people, the question of just surviving... of being able to eat, of being able to have some form of a roof over their head has become a key question. When people are engaged in these protests now, a lot of it is about issues of survival. So it might not be the big questions around removing the ANC government or dealing with the State. A lot of it is about how do I feed my children, how do I get money for school fees. So it’s a lot of it is about questions of survival but what this means is that building organisations becomes a lot more difficult now because people don’t have money to come to meetings. They are concerned now often with basically daily survival.

SFX: MUSIC

NARRATION: Benjamin says it’s a huge challenge to develop new leadership without the input of organised workers.

NINA 2: Many of the leadership of the past organisations – even the union leadership – don’t really exist any longer to provide guidance to these new protests and what it means is that people who are now protesting have to now develop a new layer of leadership... have to now develop the skills that is involved with being a leader... and they have to do that often with having come through years of unemployment, having come through a process where they have very little access to resources.

NARRATION: According to our next guest, the term ‘feminist’ has many different uses and its meanings are often contested.

BERNE 1: I’m Bernadette Muthien and I work with an NGO called Engender that’s focused on intersectionalities... the idea that all issues are interconnected, interdependent, can’t be separated from one another. So gender issues can’t be separated from issues of economics or poverty or health, etc.
BERNE 14: Feminist for me is just a word. It could be any other. It could be dog, cat... Feminist is just a word. So what we do with that word is we stick our own meaning on it. Of course feminism has a history. It’s located in moments and one has to honour the memory of suffragettes – women in the global North fighting for the vote – some only decades ago achieved in some European countries. These women were hung up by their ankles, beaten, raped... Horrific stories for a vote. Can you imagine? So one honours them in the origins for feminist struggles but for me feminism is just about the struggle for gender justice, the struggle to transform patriarchy and the rule of men over children, dogs and everybody else. There are obviously different kinds of feminism... liberal feminism which changes laws. We scoff at liberal feminists but really, if you are a rape survivor and a rape law has been changed or enacted to benefit rape survivors, then it’s a good thing that they’re doing – even if they are not transforming patriarchy.

NARRATION: Bernadette Muthien offers an example of how grassroots activism is being fostered amongst working-class women in Cape Town.

BERNE 22: There’s a programme that some of my feminist friends and colleagues have been engaged in around building women’s activism and building women’s leadership. It’s a very profound and powerful process of inviting working-class women who wouldn’t have access to gender training and training in patriarchy and intersectionalities... how it connects to poverty and all of the other things... and taking them through a long process over a year or more. Then having large groups of activists learning about patriarchy and struggles against patriarchy in very accessible ways... to claiming feminism and so on... to building leaders out of those groups who then go forth and multiply – no pun intended. So that is a very powerful model for me of political education for women in building feminist leadership in grassroots communities. The problem for me with mainstream grassroots struggles – even ones led by women – is that unless we women have internalised feminism... unless we have grappled with our demons from heteronormativity to all manner of issues of power, then we tend to become patriarchal puppets like some of the women ministers in many African cabinets. To what extent do we just perpetuate patriarchy or even just in the ways that we organise... have our meetings. Do we have hierarchies? Are we inclusive? Do we consult? Do we use feminist principles, etc? So for me, it revolves around the extent to which training is available and how much grassroots work are we doing like activism and leadership partnerships with other gender activists

OUTRO: American political activist, scholar and author Angela Davis brings us to the end of this programme.

SFX: MUSIC – STUDY WAR, AMBIENT (MOBY GRATIS)

Davis 3: As I think back to that period, I remember all of the debates that were going on with respect to the nature of feminism and women’s issues... You know, was feminism a white women’s thing or could black women or women of colour associate themselves with the campaign for gender equality and many of us said yes, we must, but gender does not stand by itself. To be a feminist involves not only a commitment for gender justice but a commitment towards racial justice and class justice and sexual justice as well.

OUTRO SIG TUNE