

Agenda – 25 years of feminist publishing Putting feminism on the map

Draft only for internal discussion

In its 25th year, Agenda the feminist media initiative looks back proudly at what has been a tireless collective effort by a small group of gender activists and feminists to keep bringing out a quarterly journal from its Durban-based office where it started in 1987. Based on volunteerism and a commitment to the legitimisation and actualisation of women's thinking, theorising and understanding of the real politics of women's lives and to put African feminism on the map on the eve of the democratic South Africa.

Agenda was started by a small group of feminist activists and students sitting around their kitchen table who saw that women's voices needed to inform the struggle for women's gender equality in the pre-democratic struggle = wanted a publication that would speak for all women. the journal filled a gap in existing publications as the only self-proclaimed feminist journal. The issues were published and edited on the run, out of car boots and during moments snatched from teaching and work. Articles offered open criticism of male-dominated and often gender-blind political organisations, including COSATU and the ANC.

Agenda was birthed in effort to prevent the sidelining of women's interests into the 'Women's Departments' where issues were ghettoised from the mainstream political agenda. As sisters in neighbouring African states had seen, once political liberation had been achieved, the women who had fought side by side with men to attain this freedom, and their concerns, were relegated to their usual subordinate invisible position. The lessons drawn from the experiences of women in other liberated African states, drove the founders of Agenda to ensure that women's/feminist concerns would feed into the debates of the day in order to shape the would-be South African constitutional democracy . The equality provision, the safeguards against the tyranny of customary law and traditional leaders that the majority of women experienced are some of the results of this "womenspeak".

Women's independent publishing

Enlightening women's politics would be through research, debate and analysis of women's lives in the post-apartheid state. It called for a certain kind of "independence" – women's theorising and intellectualism in its own right. Agenda organised a meeting on the eve of the first elections where women from the different political parties spoke: this was part of an endeavour to strengthen "women's voice" on issues of common concern. Many fora were held where women were invited to contribute to debate on gender equality on the upcoming issues. The Agenda collective raised funds and published journals that sought to cover the critical areas of women's lives in the transition from apartheid, demanding accountability, critiquing gender neutral policy and questioning women's inequality in every sector of life. Women who later rose to government and in the social ranks in the newly emerging democratic state comprised many of its contributors, including Thuli Madonsela, Pregs Govender, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, Thembi Sanku-Mthembu. Today's leading academic researchers such as Shireen Hassim, Jane Bennett, Cathi Albertyn and many others, and aspirant writers like Jacqui Mofokeng, a beauty queen who later became an editor were among the contributors. Opposition to women's subjugation and feminist critique of all forms of gender oppression and patriarchy, remained its guiding principal.

Agenda's first test was criticism from black women activists and researchers regarding the representation of black women. They questioned who should speak for black women. This led to a change in practice that reflected more consciously the broader inequalities among women and consciousness of need to challenge the politics of knowledge production.

A forum for women to write and speak

Agenda survived its first decade and reflected many of the broader power and race and gender struggles that were taking place in the country's transformation. Change was happening on many different fronts that were presenting many challenges for women's equality in the new democracy which promised much hope. It tracked and offered gender analysis on the unfolding of the new state gender machinery that was being set up and the rise of the new women in government dubbed the femocrat, on the Constitution and the Equality Clause that defined gender equality for men and women in clear uncompromising terms, and the passage of important legislation affecting women which involved organisation on the ground and the formation of broad alliances among women's structures,. In the late 1990s Agenda could not ignore the impending tragedy for women of HIV/AIDS and published several issues on the crisis to advocate for gender awareness and feminist analysis of the pandemic – as well as to give women a forum to talk about the stigma that was as bad as the disease, to question the distortions and prejudice that women were vectors of disease and the unequal and inadequate treatment available to women and the need for activism to challenge the overwhelming prejudice.

Deconstructing gender

Agenda's collective has selected themes that are relevant and that have urgently needed social attention, seeking to feed into the broader project of gender equality within the grid of unequal race and class relations in the post-apartheid context. A critical area Agenda has over the years kept under the spotlight was that of violence against women or gender- violence. Opening up debates on the need to deconstruct damaging social constructions of gender - femininities and masculinities - Agenda aimed to subvert and unsettle the stereotypical view of men and to encourage new less violent ways for men to be 'men', calling for men's activism and research on masculinities. The Agenda trilogy on gender violence opened up the door to better understanding and questioning of only the unequal power relations that underpin gender and the social acceptance of violence against women in both the private sphere and public sphere. At the same time Agenda attempted to respond to new political challenges that threatened to entrench women's inequality further, focusing on neo-liberalism and the GEAR policy and the incursions into southern women's economic self-interest and autonomy and sovereignty posed by globalisation and World Trade with dominant northern interest driving an agenda which does not recognise gender as a category.

Speaking to African feminisms and difference

In 2002 The feminist project decided to start publishing to reach an African-wide audience and has to date published six special issues on African Feminisms broadening the scope for contributors to the journal from many African countries and for theoretical understanding of the issues and concerns of women on women's inequality on the African continent. An important black feminist intellectual departure was the celebration of identity politics that flowed from the intellectuals of the African diaspora in the 90s and debates on gender and of difference –white/black, women/men and many other axis. The differences debate, apart from the black/white schism, also looked to bridging the

academic/activist , /rural/urban and other “divides” between and amongst women– in a sense to break down the “class” and other barriers manifested in so many forms amongst them, in order to build “voice” amongst women and more importantly, to hear what these “voices” had/have to say. Writers took that freedom to explore gender politics in new ways that unsettled understandings of the ‘totalising’ discourses of race and class of colonialism and apartheid. Lesbian, gay and transgender identities became an important if not critical area of equality and constestations of the dominant heteronormative meanings of both gender and of sex.

In practice, one might say this accounts for Agenda’s hybridity – the variety of the contributions and the various efforts that it has made through the years, to bring in the diverse voices of women and to reach out to them. Agenda’s audience has never been very large as a peer reviewed journal, but as the only feminist journal in South Africa for many years, run by women and gender activists as an independent project, it also endeavoured to find ways to reach broader audiences of women to bring the message of women’s rights to equal rights by running a programme that kept community radio stations abreast with news on laws, policies and the information that women needed to know about to exercise their rights, publishing writers on the Agenda website, and running writing development programmes to encourage women to write and publish.

Following an evaluation in 2009-2011, today Agenda has decided to focus on publication of the journal and also produces podcasts for broadcast on themes that can be downloaded from its website. It encourages new writers and guest editors to work with the editorial collective and editor to write, have their work peer reviewed and to publish their work on the issues that the new millennium presents to women 18 years following democracy.

Agenda has repeatedly stated that we have to ask how far we have come in the project of women’s emancipation and liberation and keep on questioning in terms that women writing about women can voice as activists serious about the world in which they live to end the injustices, inequalities and violence When Agenda began, feminism as a term was not necessarily welcome but the feminist project has since grown strong African roots, as testified to recently at an Agenda’s Feminist Dialogue. here it was noted how there are many organisations that identify with the project of women’s gender equality as feminists whose struggles call for an agenda that is both about ensuring women’s freedoms are extended and that ground won through hard fought battles is not rolled back – as we have seen in the attack on the Traditional Courts Bill.

The imperative to publish a feminist journal that gives women a forum to publish their concerns and advance informed research has not diminished. Agenda has maintained a focus on the shifting meanings of gender equality that is accessible to women themselves, policy makers, women in government, educators, students, activists in social movements and other organisations. .

Women and the new millennium

In new the millennium Agenda has returned to revisit some of the basic issues that shape women’s lives such as the family, patriarchy and marriage, as well as critically engaged new issues that can both open doors for women and also pose new threats - such as information and communication technologies (ICTs) and bio-politics. The need for a focus on governance and the inclusion and implementation of gender in law and government policies – and ensuring that we monitor implementation of policies have not been excluded. Agenda has covered the important international women’s human rights conventions and conferences, and interrogated and followed-up implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action in

South Africa. This year Agenda has focused on the relevance and importance for women of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Social priorities need to be evaluated in terms of women's unequal relationship to land and other critical resources that are necessary for survival, as well as women's progress in education and representation in government structures which the MDGs foreground.

Can women demand and enforce the change in social priorities needed to make the world a more equal place? We may have to question the value of women's representation in government against the extent to which women are able to see their representation of women as a constituency outside of party-political lines - representation that needs to be informed by and supported by women's organisations on the ground. Vulnerable and exploited groups of women continue to organise and use their collective strength to negotiate and demand improvement and recognition of their right to equal status; similarly, social research agendas need to recognise both the complexity of gender politics and the idea of gender democracy for men and women in intersection with South Africa's race and class history, and continue to pinpoint the critical areas of gender inequality that continue to undermine the possibility of full citizenship in the post-apartheid democracy.

Agenda is planning to publish a Reader next year to celebrate its 25 years that will be compiled from a selection of published papers in the journal.