Oxfam South Africa

A Gathering of Womxn Activists: 60 Years of What?

On August 26, 2016, Oxfam South Africa (Oxfam SA) gathered approximately 40 women (“womxn”¹) at Mosaic’s offices in Wynberg to reflect on where womxn and the womxn’s movement in South Africa are now, particularly in the context of the 60th anniversary of the 1956 “Women’s March” on South Africa’s Union Buildings. The purpose of the gathering was to foster reflection, creative expression, solidarity, community, and to provide a nurturing, celebratory and healing space for Cape Town-based activist-feminists.

¹Note to participants: While we used the term “Femme Bodies” in the meeting invitation as an alternative way to include all people who identify as women/womxn, since we did not have the opportunity during the meeting to discuss, unpack and collaboratively agree to this terminology, we have not used it in the report notes. “Womxn” is the alternate spelling of the word woman or women, adopted by intersectional feminists who assert that the alternate “womyn” spelling is too narrow a term, excluding trans* womxn, womxn of colour and other womxn identifying with feminist movements. The “x” also identifies womxn as autonomous beings from men, not offshoots of them. Trans*: Trans with an asterisk is an umbrella term used to describe all non-cisgender people within the gender identity spectrum, including but not limited to, genderless, bigender, non-binary and trans men and womxn.
Who We Are and Why We Have Gathered
The half-day meeting was a nurturing space for womxn to reflect, share, engage, create and support each other. Participants included nearly 40 womxn of all ages, from South Africa and other countries, and from a range of economic, race, cultural, and language backgrounds, drawn from various organising spaces: AIDC, SWEAT, AEDC/Project Ulwazi, Rape Crisis, Aids Accountability International, Triangle Project, Mosaic, the Right2Know (R2K) Campaign, Oxfam, FreeGender, the Rita Edwards Collective, Rural Women’s Assembly, FEMME, Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation, Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement, Yenza, Women’s Circle organising in various communities on the Cape Flats, feminist academics, students, poets and journalists, and community councillors.

We formed a solidarity circle and started our conversation with introductions, explaining what we actually do and what our friends/family THINK we do: Some described themselves as troublemakers, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters, activists and carers; a few womxn said their families thought that they were angry; one described herself as a “shit-stirrer” who would like to spend more time in jail than she’s currently spending writing proposals: “My family think I’m a radical, feminist ungovernable, queer heathen – in a good way, “ she said, explaining that her family was actually correct, “I AM a radical feminist, queer ungovernable heathen”; a few echoed the idea that they spend too much time raising funds or behind their laptops; another said her self-esteem was depleted; and one said she loved being in the room, explaining that she didn’t want to be there (at first), but she changed her mind when one of the participants mentioned (during introductions) having been evicted, because that made her think about different kinds of vulnerabilities.

A key activity at the meeting was creating art pieces that illustrated participants’ reflections on womxn’s lives and bodily integrity.

Magazines, art supplies and even dolls were made available for participants to individually or collaboratively reflect and express themselves, their feelings, ideas, successes, frustrations and visions.
Rukia Cornelius, Oxfam’s Regional Gender Lead, spoke to the purpose of the gathering. She spoke about how the 60th anniversary of the historic 1956 “Women’s March” and Women’s Month (August) provided an important opportunity for us to reflect on how far we have or have not come. She spoke about South Africa concluding yet another local government election, demonstrating that our sense of constitutional democracy is still thriving, even if we are jaded by government and political parties that are fraught with corruption and a lack of accountability and responsibility. Rukia reminded us that four years later, there is still no justice, peace, nor compensation for the slain Marikana miners and their families. She said that womxn activists remember the rape of “Khwezi” as if it were yesterday, and that the “IEC4” protest action disrupting Jacob Zuma on the day the election results were announced was courageous and honoured the pain and anger carried by womxn in South Africa. She also spoke of a South African womxn who, when asked what recourse she wanted to take after her abusive husband was killed, said she only wanted the perpetrator to pay for her husband’s funeral expenses. Rukia said she felt that that was fine, and asked whether her feeling that was a “normal” emotional response.

**Creative and Therapeutic Activities**

Central to the meeting was creative expression. Similarly, the meeting itself was very fluid and directed by the energy of the womxn activists. Art, song, performance and poetry were the main ways ideas and solidarity were shared. Throughout the meeting, Thola Antamu shared her poetry with those in the room. Womxn would spontaneously break out into song, including struggle songs and songs celebrating womxn in many languages. Rukia led us in an exercise where we roared like lions, and the art reflection was the main activity of the meeting. All participants had the opportunity to either individually or collaboratively create a poem, or a piece of art to reflect on the question of womxn in South Africa, who we are, how we are, where we are, where we have come from, and where we must go.
Some reflections from womxn during our art reflections or in discussion at the meeting:

Struggle of the 1956 womxn - Are we carrying their mission? No! We are messing around with the story of those womxn.

60 years of women’s charters: Many of the issues are still applicable, but we need to revive the Women’s Charter; build on it; re-write it.

We have never had a female president, but we have more womxn than men. Same in trade unions: There are more womxn than men, but we have male leadership. Womxn need to put womxn in leadership positions. We need to support each other to get into positions of power.

What I’ve learned and experienced: Empower womxn to be self-sustainable, to stand for themselves; rape can even happen in a marriage; food security - give money to the womxn, then they buy hampers for elderly people.

Teach womxn the principle of Ubuntu: I am because you are. Examples of work: organic food gardens; income generation in Paarl. Clothing bank: get loan - get lots of clothing for R200.

What does 1956 mean? Today, I have so many fears. What does 60 years mean to me? I feel vulnerable.

When womxn stick together- what does that look like? In the sex work sector, there is lots of stigma against each other. We are struggling with the need to be intersectional. Do we take into account everyone, take into account our differences, our inequalities? What does this look like? Where do they come from - people who understand their privilege? I am tired of the ways of organising as before. Let’s ask ourselves what does a new way of organising look like? For the 1956 march … everyone raised eyebrows. But today, this (marching on government) happens everyday, but achieves very little.

You strike a woman, you strike a rock.

Cutting and pasting words and images from magazines, writing, drawing, and even creating a piece of human/performance art allowed the womxn to share their stories and the stories of womxn in and outside of South Africa. One womxn paid tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi and another used alliteration as she wrote about “problematic patriarchy perpetuating patronizing policing of women’s bodies...”. Afterwards, many womxn presented their art and its significance to the others.

Using dolls, three womxn created a piece of performance art, countering the message on one of their t-shirts, namely that “a woman’s place is in the revolution.” That womxn was tied up, silenced, laden with taking care of babies, holding white babies (not hers) in the front, and her own Black baby on her back (as do many domestic workers in South Africa), highlighting not only gender injustice, but also social, race and class injustice. The overwhelming message was that patriarchy imprisons and oppresses as the womxn was dragged as if by chains, bound, silenced, and restricted by patriarchy and poverty.

ABOVE LEFT: This womxn says that right-way-round, her drawing looks like a heart or vagina, but upside down, it is like a man’s buttocks. While she’s bound, her art speaks to power, division and asks in multiple languages the question “Why?” … When she unbinds her mouth, she asks why it is that the same men whom womxn nurture both inside and outside of their wombs become so violent and angry?

ABOVE RIGHT: This womxn’s art focuses on building her self-esteem: “…wake up, happy and walk with head up. I must not feel emotional…I must feel as a butterfly and feel loved…and feel as a blooming flower.”

LEFT: “Put the Cunt into Country” – We must work together as womxn, and do so intersectionally, says this womxn.
Themes and Discussion
Here are some of the discussion points that came up as we reflected on where womxn are:

Intersectionality – this came up in a number of ways and it was also clear that participants define this differently. Some see it as the connection of struggles (“my struggle is your struggle”) - more in the way of independent struggles working together to achieve social justice, while others see that individuals belong to numerous struggles e.g. A womxn who is LGBTQI, Black, facing poverty, a sex worker, disabled and has HIV reflects the intersectionality of injustice and inequality across many issues for one person. One participant shared the Xhosa term “ukudibana komntu” which speaks to this, meaning, she explained, “the many sides/identities of one person”.

The conversation on intersectionality was also linked to the topic of solidarity between womxn: “We have to get rid of stigma between ourselves to do the intersectional work,” said one participant.

Similarly, the idea that old ways of doing things are not working for us was repeated, and a few womxn said we need to rethink and reimagine our activism.

Also, the power of youth was mentioned, and it was agreed that it should be harnessed.

Language – language as a barrier was discussed, particularly in that it excludes those whose mother tongues are not being used.

Work – what is work? What about unpaid, domestic, and sex work? In addition, there was an interesting discussion following a story one Black womxn shared about a White neighbour. She explained that despite the fact that they had both been living in the same building for years, the womxn had not recognised her as a neighbour and had chosen to assign her the identity of a domestic worker. That, then raised a different question and discomfort for participants around whether we see a domestic worker identity as less. While the womxn participants agreed wholeheartedly that we do not, this discussion highlighted the need for us to deepen our engagement in working class struggles and identities.

Outcomes
Womxn participants were able to network and create with each other, and share ideas, frustrations and reflections. They were provided with a creative and nurturing space to build solidarity and have a creative outlet and output. The combination of creativity, art, physical release, song and dance was also a form of self-care for the womxn. Care was central to the way the meeting was facilitated, emphasising the importance for womxn activists to care not only for others, but to care for themselves, to heal, to express themselves, and to seek out the support that they need.
Next Steps/Topics to Follow Up On

Some topics came up that we feel are worthy of follow-up discussions or meetings in the near future:

- The idea was presented that we should re-write the Women's Charter. This would be an impactful activity to focus on in a follow-up meeting of womxn activists.

- We did not have the chance to properly interrogate the problematic use, both by ourselves and others, of the term “corrective rape”, and so should do so on another occasion.

- A key theme that came up in the meeting was intersectionality, what it means, and how it influences how we organise, as described earlier. A follow-up workshop focusing just on this topic would be useful, and there seemed to be an appetite for this among the womxn participants.

- “Femme bodies” versus “womxn” – we did not have the opportunity to interrogate the term “femme bodies” and whether it is a more inclusive term and properly understood both by activists and the public, so this too should be further discussed.

- The conversation mentioned above on how we view and treat domestic workers must be expanded upon. The working and living conditions of domestic workers who carry the burden of caring for their families and for others are often deplorable, and our organising must engage more deeply in working class struggles and how they relate to race, identity, status and social hierarchies, economic conditions and class, and inequality. Care work is “work” and we must put an end to womxn’s labour being undervalued, under or unpaid, unrecognised and/or disrespected or marginalised.

All photos within this report are by Czerina Patel