

Review

***Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating Autonomy, Incorporation and Representation.* Gisela Geisler. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004.**

Anne Mager

Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa is an ambitious book. It sets out to cover women in liberation movements and nationalist anti-colonial struggles, exploring their participation in post-independence governments, gender machineries and autonomous women's movements across most of the southern African region (Angola is excluded). On the way, it draws on examples from Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Ethiopia, Scandinavia and France. The case studies and examples are based on research, mostly interviews, conducted by the author, Gisela Geisler in the 1980s and 1990s. Geisler's aim is to highlight the ways that the "attitudes and paradigms" of women's politics changed over this period, and to examine the "problems and successes of African women's quest for political representation" (15).

The introduction highlights the tensions between the ideas of Western feminism and the aspirations of African women that surfaced in the 1980s. It also discusses the significance of the UN Decade of Women for African women, and provides an indication of what "attitudes and paradigms" might mean in the context of African women's politics in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The first two chapters provide a broad framework for what follows, outlining the debates on women's issues that engaged African women in politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Chapter One provides a general overview of African women's politics from the colonial period to the present, paving the way for Chapter Two, the first substantive chapter, which discusses women "fighting men's wars" through nationalist liberation movements.

The real substance of the book and evidence of the author's careful research begins in Chapter Three, on the South African women's movement. This chapter offers the only single-country case study, and sets out the complexity of this women's movement in an admirably straightforward way. It is complemented by the focus in Chapter Six on organisations and women's movements in post-independence Namibia, Zambia and Botswana. Chapter Four, which deals with the women's league "syndrome" (women's leagues as adjuncts to male-dominated liberation movements or political parties), offers a more critical reading of women's political strategy. These criticisms are taken up, albeit not quite as strongly, in Chapter Five, which focuses on gender machineries such as women's desks and ministries. The chapters that follow offer a combination of case studies grouped together on the basis of ideological and political strategies, such as Marxist liberation movements or women in gender machineries or parliaments.

Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa is based very largely on interviews, implicitly informed by a wider reading of historical and feminist literature. The case studies are wide-ranging and clearly set out. While the author dwells longest on the most well-known examples of organisation, she adds to them the often fresh and sometimes insightful voices of her interviewees. In bringing the case studies together both thematically and comparatively, the author invites the reader to look at issues in new ways. But perhaps too much is left to the reader. The book stops short of social analysis, offering censure at times, but little explanation. It is more descriptive than analytical; it tells us what happened rather than offering insight into why. This limitation may be the result (but not necessarily so) of choosing to write exclusively about (and for?) women – one side of the gender divide. While this decision may be informed by a strategic choice pertaining to women's activism, it seems to put significant limits on social analysis.

To take one example: in the discussion on the Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) in Zimbabwe, the author comments, "It would seem that the opposition to the new laws was theoretical rather than based on a real loss [of male power]". The reader is given little clue as to why Zimbabwean men were so threatened by the LAMA. One wonders whether the analysis would have been taken further if the author had interviewed men and ascertained how they saw the laws, and why they opposed them; or if adopting some of the methodologies that have come our way since the "literary turn" in the social sciences (such as discourse analysis) might have helped us to make sense of the misogynistic discourse of those who opposed the LAMA. If the reader understood what the LAMA meant to men, and to their notions of male power and masculinities, we might better understand what women were up against in this case.

The case studies take us only to the mid-1990s. The reader is left wondering what has happened in the decade since then, particularly in the rapidly changing context of a democratic South Africa. Would the 1980s and 1990s look different if viewed from the perspective of the changes of the last decade? For example, would the author now include the ANC Women's League in the chapter on women's leagues? A discussion of the weakening, even demise of the women's movement in South Africa since 1994, and the simultaneous rise and mobilisation of traditional (and often culturally conservative) leaders would have been an interesting addition, and would have brought the book's discussion of the South African scenario up to the present. It would also have taken a step further the question of why it is that women seem to be up against revitalised male power in post-independence contexts. The author's empathy with the frustration of the "limitations political careers represent for many African women" leaves the reader somewhat disappointed (16). It also leaves the reader questioning whether women have had any effect in remaking politics or rolling back patriarchal control and male domination – surely not the message the author intended to convey. Ultimately, the book begs the question of why it is that male domination – patriarchal control if you will – is resurgent in most parts of southern Africa.

The chief value of the book lies in bringing together a wide range of examples and case studies of women's political activity in southern Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. This gathering of information is an important contribution to the field of gender and politics, and Geiser's contribution in this respect is to be welcomed. Her book is written in accessible language and is easy to read – no small advantage for gender practitioners on our multilingual continent. The potential readership of *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa* is broad – it includes activists, politicians, NGOs and anyone doing business, political or commercial, in the southern African region. While all would do well to read this wide-ranging account of women's political efforts, African political women seem to be the readers whom the author had in mind.

Since the book tends to assume some understanding of gender, politics and African history, and is a little short on cross-referencing to academic scholarship and debate, it is likely to be less useful for undergraduate students and scholars beyond a very introductory level. A little more work might have made a difference. For example, the key words that historians and anthropologists as well as sociologists might look for – chiefs, traditional leaders, customary law, culture – are not listed in the index. While some of these terms appear in the text, there is little contextual information or discussion that might help to give the reader a sense of the wider politics in which women's agency is located. An academic editor might have encouraged the development of some of this discussion and made the book more useful for students, some of whom will surely want to engage in gender politics. The copy editor might also have been more vigilant. What, for example, is a Cape Town "senator"? Does the author mean "member of parliament"? Insufficient editorial support is a problem frequently seen in publications featuring African women and their concerns, and this is no exception.

Quibbles aside, 241 pages of relatively jargon-free reading on African women's political activity is to be welcomed.

Anne Mager is an Associate Professor in the Historical Studies Department at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.