

The Natal Organisation of Women (NOW): The ‘Gogos’ Organisation?

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Abstract

In the 1980s in the midst of socio-economic and political strife, the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) was established. NOW was committed to the principles of non-sexism, non-racism and democracy. It aimed at organising women around issues that affected their daily lives but also to encourage women to actively participate in trade unions and civic and community-based organisations. Whilst its membership was open to all, it was often perceived by some as a ‘gogos’ organisation, as the bulk of the constituency consisted of older women. This article provides a brief history of NOW, its early formation, activities and the challenges it endured in fulfilling its aims and objectives. This article provides insights into how regional organizations brought women, gender and political concerns in the public sphere during the height of apartheid.

Keywords: Natal Organisation of Women, NOW,

Introduction

The Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) was formed in December 1983 but it was actually formally launched on 9 August 1984 on National Women’s Day in South Africa. Women in Natal, like elsewhere in South Africa, annually mobilised to commemorate the 1956 anti-pass campaign, which saw thousands of women challenging the Nationalist Party attempts at restricting their mobility. It was against this backdrop that women in Natal felt the need to mobilise and unite and deal with problems affecting them such as high cost of living, poor housing, pass laws, lack of proper maternity benefits, child-care and education. Globally, women’s organisations played a pivotal role in liberation struggles. They served as a platform to mobilise women and provide

opportunities to articulate both political and gender concerns. Scholars such as Charman argue that women's organisations 'are important institutions in the conservation of women's subordination' rather than empowerment (Charman *et al.* 1991: 59, cited in Fester 1997: 45). Getrude Fester, former anti-apartheid activist in the Western Cape, in South Africa in the 1980s challenges this view. She argues that her experiences of women's organizations in the Cape such as the United Women's Congress (UWCO) established in 1986 (which was the amalgamation of the United Women's Organisation and Women's Front) reveals that these organizations 'contributed greatly to the politicisation and empowerment of the women who participated in them' (Fester 1997:54). Fester further adds women's organizations shaped her 'feminist consciousness Women challenged not only their oppression within the South African status quo, but also the sexism of progressive organisations and of some men within them' (Fester 1997:54).

Meer (2005) shares a similar trajectorial path in her assessment of women's organisations in the liberation struggle. She argues that mainstreaming gender issues was an integral part of women's resistance (Meer 2005). The author further notes, 'women political and trade union activists brought attention to their oppression and exploitation as women were able to place non-sexism alongside non-racism and democracy as key liberation principles' (Meer 2005: 36). Hassim (1991: 74) in her extensive research on women's organizations in South Africa describes NOW until 1990 as 'the main progressive women's organisation in Natal'. However, Hassim (2006) also notes the challenges NOW experienced. It was established 'with the intention of strong grassroots organisation but was unable to do so because of its overall emphasis on the immediate political context NOW ... began to take up issues defined in terms of the UDF's priorities rather than those of the branches' (Hassim 2006: 65 and 69).

This article adds to the current literature by tracing the early history and activities of NOW and the multiple challenges it endured. NOW was at times described as a 'gogo' (a Zulu word for grandmother) organisation, because the majority of its members were mainly older African women. The younger women within NOW were more active in civic organizations and trade union activity (Hassim 1991:66). This article highlights how NOW provided women with an alternative platform to institutionalise both gender and political issues. The varied activities and programmes instituted, albeit at times with limited success, empowered women to act as agents on key issues that affected

them daily. The history of NOW has largely been absent in South African historiography. This article addresses this gap by highlighting how regional organisations, like NOW, mobilised women as a collective during the height of apartheid. This study is largely based on NOW primary sources acquired from the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, Natal. These sources, in particular minutes of meetings, correspondence and letters, provide rich insights not only into the institutional structures of NOW but also how apartheid policy shaped and defined the lives of black ¹women in Natal.

Background to the Formation of NOW

The socio-economic and political conditions in South Africa facilitated the formation of NOW. In the 1980s South Africa experienced one of its worst economic depressions since the Second World War. Unemployment was high, particularly amongst the black African population. In the 1980s more and more black women were entering the labour market. Many in Natal were employed in service labour, particularly, domestic work and on farms. Others employed in the industrial sector were concentrated mainly in the textile and food industries. However, the economic recession of the 1980s led to high unemployment amongst women. In addition, the cost of living also increased. The prices of basic food such as bread, milk and maize accelerated. Hence, women (as caregivers and mostly house-holds heads in the absence of men because of migration) more than men were seriously affected. Their standard of living and income levels dropped. For example, in Lamontville, a black African township in the south of Durban, approximately 66.67% of the households had an income below the minimum living level (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). Malnutrition was also rife. Statistics from local hospitals in Natal reveal that 55% of all females admitted suffered from malnutrition and in rural hospitals the corresponding figure was 72% (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). The dietary intake of women reveals the levels of poverty and standard of living, particularly of black African women. According to a NOW report, the staple diet of most women consisted of ‘putu’ (maize meal) and little else Meat is rarely taken ...’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). In addition, dairy products like milk were rarely consumed, except condensed and powdered milk in tea and coffee. Black African women in Durban (the largest city by then, in Natal)

¹ Here reference is made to the oppressed groups African, Indian and Coloured.

constituted 78% of the population yet earned only a quarter of the total income is indicative of their economic deprivation in the 1980s (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76).

The situation of most women living in the rural areas and in 'squatter settlements', was much more severe. In Natal like in many other parts of the country, black women suffered from lack of basic facilities such as clean water sewerage, electricity and restrictions on their movements through the influx control laws. In the rural areas many women-headed households were common as husbands and sons left the drought-ridden and overcrowded reserves (areas demarcated for the African population) to seek jobs in the cities. Women had to rely heavily on the monthly income sent by their husbands, fathers and sons, which in many cases was a mere pittance. Whilst many women took upon the responsibility of small-scale vegetable and animal farming, factors such as drought, overcrowding, overgrazing, lack of technological skills and resources have militated against them being able to survive even at a basic level (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). Another setback for the vast majority of women in Natal was poor housing. The housing situation in Natal clearly reflected apartheid policy. There were between 300 000 and 750 000 people living in so-called 'squatter settlements' in Natal. Over half of these comprise women. These figures indicate that most women did not reside in stable homes and had no security of tenure. In Natal, black African women were further burdened by the Natal Code of Bantu Law which applied only in Natal and weighed heavily on Zulu women. This Code drafted in 1878 and enshrined in Statute by Natal Law No. 19 of 1891, regulated the personal relationships of Zulu women, making them perpetual minors. The Code gave community leaders in the reserves -'kraalhead'- wide powers regarding the mobility of unmarried women under their guardianship. Women below the age of 21 required the guardian's consent for marriage and had limited property and inheritance rights (Lupton 1975: 1-8).

Political conditions in South Africa during this period were also increasingly volatile. The re-emergence of community and civic organisations, trade unions and youth activism after a long period of repression by the South African State, gave rise to countrywide protests against apartheid. Police shootings, teargassing, detentions, imprisonment and baton charging of students were commonplace. A significant number of women surfaced in many civic, community, trade union and student organisations. In the 1980s women began to mobilise and several regional women's organizations emerged.

Amongst them were the United Women's Congress from Western Cape (UWCO), Port Elizabeth Women's Organisation (PEWO) and Port Alfred Women's Organisation (PAWO) (Govender 1987: 75). The revival of trade union activism and community mobilisation spread consciousness among women workers and students about politics and gender issues. Women participated at all levels in major campaigns such as those against the 20th anniversary of the Republic of South Africa celebrations and the formation of the South African Indian Council² (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76).

Apart from the political and economic injustices that women incurred, another significant factor that mobilised women was the 'triple oppression' they endured in terms of their race, class and gender. Black women working in the factories and industries realised they shared common hardships being wives, mothers and daughters. Moreover, gender oppression at home and in the workplace provided a common platform for women to work as a collective. Community-based women's organisations, church groups and stokvels became sites for women to mobilise (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). Gertrude Fester recalls:

My awakening to sexism was a gradual one. It took me going through marriage to realise that I was oppressed as a woman. I saw that the brunt of the work done in marriage has to be done by women (Hassim 2006:55).

It was against this socio-economic and political background that NOW was established. On the 9th August 1981 women from various parts of Natal came together to celebrate the 15th anniversary of National Women's Day. After a weekend workshop, an ad-hoc community was set up to look into the formation of a women's organisation in Natal. After two years of deliberation and consultation, NOW was established in 1983.

Membership

NOW was a multi-racial women's organisation that sought to improve the living and working conditions of both urban and rural dwellers. In the absence of political rights, NOW, even though the focus was on black women, provided

² South African Indian Council.

South Africa's women with a platform to make their voices heard on issues affecting them directly, such as housing, unemployment, health, education and gender oppression. NOW also believed that economic and social restructuring of society was necessary to allow for 'meaningful participation' of all in society (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). The need to eradicate gender and sexual stereotypes were seen by women as a major problem. NOW noted:

We view, as the root of our problems, the political, economic and social structures of our society. The absence of political rights makes our voices unheard, and does not allow us a decision making role in policies affecting us. We also believe that an economic and social restructuring of our society is necessary to allow for meaningful participation of all in our society. The socialisation of both men and women in our society into sexual stereotypes is also seen by us as a major problem and we see it necessary to educate ourselves and the community as a whole, to enable us to fight it. The need for women to strengthen themselves organisationally and thereby tackle issues affecting them is our key solution to the problems mentioned above. We believe, that strong, grassroots organisations are required to face the mammoth tasks facing us today (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76).

NOW was essentially a grassroots organisation that promoted non-racialism. However, mobilising women in itself, was a mammoth challenge given the political context. Apartheid policy had segregated the races in terms of the Group Areas Act of 1950. The Act assigned racial groups to different residential and business areas in the urban areas thereby instituting a policy of urban apartheid. Thus, women were racially divided and segregated by legislation in terms of their mobility, work, residence and trade. Moreover, there was a further sub-divide between women in the rural areas and those in the urban areas as a result of influx control laws. Undeterred, NOW members sought to recruit members as widely as possible, from both rural and urban areas, 'wherever they are – in their homes at their places of work, at religious and educational institutions' (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/53). Thus schools, churches, community halls became key areas for mobilising women. Within two years, NOW had grown considerably as an organisation. By 1986 it had a membership of approximately 1000 women, from the age grouping between 25-45 years. It had established branches and working groups in Durban central,

and the outlying African and Indian townships of Lamotville, KwaMashu, Chesterville, Umlazi and Chatsworth respectively. It also expanded its branches outside of Durban, to the Midlands to areas such as Pietremarizburg and Hamanati. It had also forged relationships and networks with women's groups in predominantly Indian townships such as Verulam and Merebank as well as student movements such as the Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO). AZASO was founded in 1979. It was a replacement for its predecessor, the South African Student Organisation which was established in 1968 (Hassim 1991: 81; KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76). By the late 1980s NOW forged networks with women in remote areas of Natal such as Port Shepstone, Newcastle, Georgedale and Empangeni (98/61/8/53).

Activities of NOW

As noted earlier NOW sought to address issues that affected women directly such as, high food prices, poverty, malnutrition, access to clean water and electricity, health care, gender violence and non-existent facilities such as creches and nursery schools. It engaged in projects that addressed both the age of its members as well as the community needs. For example, bulk buying- the formation of co-operatives -targeted mainly women between the ages of 30-50 years whilst issues of childcare and contraception addressed younger women between the ages 15-35 years. To achieve their overall aims NOW engaged in a plan of action that involved workshops, fundraising, talks and educating its members through an inhouse publication, *Speak* (NOW 98/61/8/49).

Many of NOW members were in domestic service. They endured long working hours and low wages and in many instances were forced to live away from their families. To improve the status of the working and living conditions of domestic workers NOW forged links with the national body, the Domestic Workers Association of South Africa (98/61/8/53). Fund-raising was another important activity of NOW. It networked and liased with civic organisations in various areas to address key issues affecting the community, in particular women. For example the Verulam branch of NOW between 1983 and 1987 engaged in several activities such as fundraising in terms of a fun-run and family-day outings for the Verulam Child and Family Welfare Society. They also organised Christmas parties, for the sick children, winter school for students in matric (Final year of high school) and launched a campaign against taxation on rice and other food items (NOW 98/61/6/82). The Durban Central

branch of NOW was equally active. Its members were drawn mainly from nearby suburbs such as Overport, Reservoir Hills, Berea and the city centre. One of the challenges that this branch faced was mobilising and organizing women 'on a mass level'. By 1985 there were approximately 8-10 members within this group. Nevertheless, they engaged in fund raising activities such as jumble sales and funds raised were used to finance the branch activities and to finance in-house publications such as *Speak*. (NOW 98/61/6/83).

One of the aims of NOW was not only to address issues affecting women within the communities but also to empower them with life skills. This would enable women to become independent and self-sustaining in the wake of the on-going socio-economic problems they faced. To help women overcome the effects of high food prices and cost of living, NOW instituted a bulk buying scheme programme. Women were organised in small groups and trained in how to run co-operatives and manage and control its finances. In the mid 1980s Kwamashu Women' Groups attended a workshop at Marianhill which was conducted by NOW members, Thabi Shange and Nozizwe Madlala (KCAL NOW 98/61/6/14).

NOW also sought to eradicate illiteracy amongst its members through an education based skills programme. It introduced literacy classes where members were taught to read and write in English or isiZulu. This much needed basic skill was wanting as a large proportion of women in Natal could not read or write English or isiZulu (their mother tongue). The 1980s statistics reveal that approximately 48.45% of women in South Africa (including the homelands) were illiterate. Of this approximately 15% were Coloured persons, 7.6% Indian and 0.7% White and the rest were Africans. Thus NOW's target group was largely women who were illiterate and who had very low levels of formal education. Literacy classes were run by NOW members who underwent training in Learn and Teach courses (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/76).

Health Care was another area that NOW prioritised. The health care facilities available for black women in Natal were minimal. In its yearly report, NOW noted that there were no pre-natal or post-natal clinics easily accessible to the majority of women in the communities. According to NOW, family planning clinics were generally ill-serviced and ill-equipped. Depo-Provera (a contraception banned in many western countries due to its side-effects) was widely distributed to women without providing them with an explanation of its side effects. According to NOW:

The policy of the State on Population Control is viewed with grave suspicion by the majority of women. The enforced methods of population control by employees (via the usage of Depo Provera) and the encouragement of sterilisation by the State has made the need for education on contraceptives more urgent than ever before.

In addition, hospitals, which were few in number, were grossly overcrowded and general medical clinics were also few and far between. Maternity rights for working women were extremely limited for the majority of the women in employment. An important medium of communication with its members was the publication of a newsletter called *Speak*, which was printed on a quarterly basis. The aim of this newsletter was to provide information on various issues such as NOW branch activities, work-place struggles, advice on health and education. *Speak* was an informative and educational newsletter and was an important platform for women to share and articulate common grievances. This can be discerned from the letters submitted to *Speak* in its April-May issue of 1989 (KCAL NOW 98/61/14/23). Thandeka Dlamini, a domestic worker and member of the South African Domestic Workers' Union (SADWU), made an appeal to *Speak* readers to assist in mobilising domestic workers who were not unionised:

I would like all those people who read *Speak* to help us organise those who are unorganised. I know your wife or sister, we are domestic workers. If we fight all together we will win Please people join your union. With the help from our union, now we have literacy classes for free. We don't pay anything Thank you so much SPEAK magazine, you help us (KCAL NOW 98/61/14/23).

Speak also reached out to readers worldwide. It received letters from women's organizations in Canada and Malaysia. For example, in 1989, it received a letter from Ms Tan Lee Tin of Malaysia that was published in the April-May issue of *Speak* (KCAL NOW 98/61/14/23) and read:

Dear Sisters

I learned about your magazine SPEAK from the Women's Kit compiled by the Participatory Research Group/ ICAE Women's Group in Canada. I'm most impressed with your work and would like to

exchange our newsletter SCSNEWS with your SPEAK magazine. I believe your magazine would be most helpful to our education work among the rural women of Sarawak (the Dayak-Iban). We hope these women will get organised to improve their lives and to defend their rights against the logging companies that are destroying their land and forests.

Challenges in the 1980s

Whilst NOW sought to address key issues affecting women, there were many challenges that it faced in achieving its objectives. One in particular, was its struggle to mobilise women. Political, social and cultural factors, at times, hindered the growth of the organisation, to some extent. To overcome this challenge, NOW teamed up with civic communities in 1980. During this period, community and youth activism was at its peak. In KwaZulu-Natal communities rallied together to protest against apartheid legislation. Youths spearheaded and led many community based organisations. Among them were the Phoenix Working Committee; Chatsworth Co-ordinating Council for Health, Welfare and Education; Durban Housing (DHAC), Chatsworth Housing Commission Committee; and the Durban Housing action Committee. In the 1980s NOW forged links with Chatsworth Housing Action Committee (CHAC), and their collaboration led to the establishment of a CHAC Women's Sub-Committee. This Women's Committee sought to mobilise women in the predominantly Indian township of Chatsworth. However mobilising women in this area, at times was met with resistance. Cultural and religious issues limited Indian women's participation outside the domestic sphere. Gender roles were deeply entrenched which played to the 'disadvantage' of NOW (KCAL NOW 98/61/6/84). In its report NOW noted:

Culture and values system of Indian community has negative influence where women are not encouraged to participate in community activities, attend meetings, speak out on issues, etc. (KCAL NOW 98/61/6/84).

In addition, NOW noted that there was no established progressive women leadership in Chatsworth as 'some progressive organisation are not placing high on their agendas, the need for organising women' (KCAL NOW 98/61/6/84).

NOW also sought to improve child-care facilities for working mothers. The local and central authorities were ‘disinterested’ in this issue, and there was a ‘deepening crisis’ on the provision of adequate child care facilities (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/54). One of the aims of NOW was to establish creches or nursery schools in the communities and develop and organise child minding programmes where possible. In January 1988 NOW established a creche in the predominantly African township of KwaMashu, north of Durban. The creche, ‘a cement floored room and kitchen’ was located at the back of an old Church. It catered for 130 children. Staff comprised two cooks, a teacher and three women who assisted with cleaning and minding the children. The children were taught hymns, poems, songs, nursery rhymes, drawing and painting. The children were taken care of daily between 8am and 3:30pm each weekday. Two meals, breakfast and lunch were provided daily. Parents paid a small monthly fee of R12 per child. However, by 1989 the creche was ‘desperately in need of funds, both to cover running costs as well as to make possible the purchase and construction of proper facilities...toys and materials for the various activities are badly needed’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/12/13). Fees collected from the parents were utilised for transport costs, whilst ‘the remainder of the money was stretched’ to purchase food and to pay staff their meagre wages. NOW lauded the efforts of the women in the community in sustaining the creche, ‘It is nothing but the hard work and unfailing commitment of a group of women from the area that has enabled the continued existence of the creche’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/12/13).

Political Activism

NOW was not a political organisation but it played an important role in supporting the liberation struggle in Natal in the 1980s. In 1983 it affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF), a federation of multi-racial organisations that sought to overthrow the Nationalist Party. Joining the UDF was seen as a logical step in attaining not only democratic rights but also securing women’s rights. NOW members became involved in several UDF campaigns. They assisted women and their families who were detained or killed, and provided food and shelter as well as legal and moral support. They provided homes and protection for the cadres of Umkhonto We Sizwe during the most repressive times and organised funerals for fallen activists and comrades (NOW 98/61/8/53). In 1987 it supported the families of comrades in Hammarsdale

with a message which read, 'As mothers we understand the grief faced by the families of our comrades, and we can only hope that we can unite to gain strength from each other and resist the onslaught facing us' (KCAL NOW 98/61/1/32).

For example, the Wentworth branch of NOW provided moral support for families of political prisoners and played an active role in the 'Save the Patriots' campaign. NOW noted that the Wentworth branch was proven to be a pillar of support to Mrs Doris McBride, the mother of Robert McBride. (KCAL NOW 98/61/12/13). McBride, a political activist who lived in Wentworth at the time, a predominantly Coloured township, was sentenced to death in 1987 for the bombing of Magoo's Bar in Durban in 1986. Three people died and 69 were injured in the bar. (KCAL NOW 98/61/12/13).

NOW also took part in consumer and bus boycotts. Many of its members were subject to police harassment and surveillance, detentions, imprisonment, assassinations and forced into exile (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/54). This also weakened the organisation to some extent. For example, the first Chairperson Phumzile Ngcuka was forced to flee, her successor Victoria Mxenge was assassinated on August 2 1985. Several members' homes were burnt down or petrol bombed. Many NOW members were forced to flee from their homes. This resulted in many losing their jobs and becoming completely dependent on family and community assistance. NOW attempted to assist some of its members by providing hosepipes or fire extinguishers, to those members under threat to protect their homes (KCAL NOW 98/61/12/13). Under these circumstances NOW branches found it difficult to operate. For example, the KwaMashu Women's Group described 1985 as a 'year of hardship and disaster'. After the death of Victoria Mxenge, for instance, the homes of executive members were petrol bombed and completely burnt down. The Group found it very difficult to arrange and co-ordinate meetings as members of its executive were homeless. However, they remained defiant, and met secretly in small groups, because they feared victimization. Towards the end of December when member homes were being rebuilt, only then did the Women's Group hold their first meeting together with all its executive members (KCAL NOW 98/61/6/14).

During the State of Emergency in the late 1980s, NOW offices were raided. In January 1987 security forces confiscated several documents from NOW offices and in February, the organisation was under investigation from the Department of Community Development in terms of their fund raising

activities. In 1989 another raid took place and in the NOW minutes of 22 July 1989 it was noted, ‘The Police threatened to assault ... and were extremely aggressive. They made copies of some of our documents. NOW has sent them a statement of A/c for the photocopies The Police must be told not to harass people in the office but to talk to the office Bearers of the organisation’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/15/45). In addition, the detention of its chairperson and secretary, Nozizwe Madlala further weakened the organisation. Thus, NOW found it difficult to operate with key members of its leadership imprisoned and its funding ‘frozen and stolen by the regime’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/53; 98/61/1/32). NOW also had to battle with a ‘vicious’ smear campaign by the state and ‘dirty tricks campaign of spreading false rumours about some of our members did not succeed’ (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/53). But NOW despite its repression and danger was not deterred. In fact it ‘fearlessly faced the enemy’. (KCAL NOW 98/61/8/53).

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge a member of NOW recalls the immense pressure that NOW operated following the death of Victoria Mxenge:

Although we had known that sometime or the other the supporters of the apartheid system would come for us, we did not expect retaliation to come in such a dastardly manner. We were members of the Natal Organistaion of Women (NOW), an affiliate of the United Democratic Front (UDF). It was the mid-1980s, when the struggle against apartheid had reached unprecedented levels. State repression had intensified and we knew that our lives were constantly in danger. But, that was the price we were prepared to pay for freedom (Madlala-Routledge 1997: 62).

Conclusion

In the 1990s NOW was disbanded in the wake of the new political dispensation of 1994. NOW was established under volatile soico-economic and political conditions. It sought to empower women making them aware both of gender and political oppression. Despite their many struggles, they persevered, seeking to unite women within a collective spirit. NOW clearly promoted non-racialism, an ideology that was vital to the freedom struggle. The history of NOW is indicative of women’s pivotal role in mobilisation and activism in regional politics. These narratives are largely forgotten and unknown. This

paper makes a call for a deeper exploration of how women shaped and defined the regional histories in South Africa through their political activism.

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