



## **Understanding ‘Regionality’ – Hidden ‘democratic dispositions’ and women’s leadership in post-Apartheid Southern Africa**

### **“THE RED TENT”**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Darlene Miller**

**Co-Principal Investigator: Prof. Sandra Rein**

#### **Background to Research Project**

---

The Red Tent research project is a series of six documentaries filmed in 2012 and supported by the National Research Foundation (Blue Skies Program) and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The content of the documentaries are summarised below, and a link to the DVDs is provided at the end. The project aims to widely disseminate the Red Tent documentaries in 2013 by means of public workshops and exhibitions through local (and international) art galleries, as a multimedia mode of research advocacy.

Many women leaders and our own unique brand of 'femocrats' in Africa, are anti-democratic and neo-liberal. But have we looked in the wrong places for the lessons of the matriarchs? The RED TENT research project seeks to retrieve these 'herstories' through ethnographies of present and past women leaders. Through a series of focus groups (Cape Town, Eastern Cape, Edinburgh), this research shows the different styles of 'doing leadership' that suggest the potential resourcefulness of African matriarchal leadership traditions, against corrosive and egotistical African patriarchy - both their parsimonial and left-wing variants.

We contend that many women lead differently, by nurture rather than by nature. Socialised into different roles from men - as mothers, wives, aunts and sisters - their collective social wisdom is an important part of the civility through which we adapt and develop as human beings. Men and masculine styles of leadership dominate our public culture, on the other hand – the imperative to not be “emotional”; the preponderance of men in political leadership; the authoritarian styles that often accompany masculinist dispositions – these are the ways in which leadership is generally conducted in the public space.

If leadership could be held differently, as a shroud rather than a crown, the character of political cultures might change. 'Crowning' leadership places the individual above the mass and emphasises the need for social distance between leader and follower. The leader is something 'uber-special', invested with qualities that normal citizens do not have. But leadership that is a shroud is exercised fluidly and may shift from individual to individual. A more collective construction of leadership becomes possible, therefore, with various qualities called upon at different times in different spaces.

Instead of leadership as a reified social category, leadership becomes something more fluid and can be imbued with different qualities within different contexts. The individual exercising leadership may therefore not be the same person but shift around amongst different individuals within different spatio-temporalities. The contention is that matriarchal leaders epitomise this alternative kind of African leadership and disposition, and the 'herstories' of African matriarchs will help to bring these alternative traditions to light, including the nature, practice and potential for the extension of matrilineage in Africa. The focus groups aimed to bring to light the qualities of alternative leadership by identifying African matriarchs in different contexts who exercise leadership at a local level or beyond.

## Research Activities

---

Three focus groups were conducted in 2012 with different social groups of women:

- (i) women who were revolutionary activists from South Africa in the 1980s,
- (ii) current African middle class women immigrants based in Edinburgh, Scotland, and
- (iii) current local working class activists involved in the 'OCCUPY LAND' protests in the Western Cape, South Africa.

These focus groups were filmed by three different filmmakers in different countries/towns: Kenton-On-Sea, Eastern Cape – Iris Parker; Edinburgh – Sana Bilgrami; Manenberg, Western Cape – Charlene Houston. A fourth filming – Dylan Valley - was conducted later in the year which provided the introductory and concluding footage for each of the six DVDs that were produced. A launch event was held in December 2012 that was attended by various stakeholders.

### DVDI: INTRODUCTION

The first and introductory DVD draws on the Edinburgh focus group. In this DVD, three members of the research team (Darlene, Pam and Corinne) from South Africa explain the objectives of the Red Tent project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) to the women at the Africa Centre in Edinburgh, Scotland. Corinne explains that Red Tent is an umbrella idea for a number of projects related to women. The Red Tent in Edinburgh attempts to show how pivotal the role of women is in surviving economic crises. Drawing on the biblical reference where women went at the time of menses, the 'Red Tent' symbolically creates a safe space for women to talk about how they manage. In the grand sweep of political events and economic crises, these stories are often invisible. When governments fail to protect their people, women often step into the gap and help others and themselves. We want to make these different strategies visible that help to point the way.

The importance of the Alice Walker political praxis of book clubs and women taking care of each other are advocated by the researchers as a way of nurturing the nurturers so that their leadership

roles are reinforced. Women ‘bleed and heal’, and hence we as women reconfigure what is invisible and ‘not worth mentioning’ into something that we claim and are proud of. Our basic caring and nurturing functions in society are integral to constituting society, and the realisation of these strengths need to be absorbed into the public space to negate the ‘guns and suits’ public leadership that prevails. Citing Leymah Gbowee’s “Mighty Be Our Power”, the notion of ‘rough diamonds’ and unglossed, unpolished leadership is embraced and advocated. The ‘rough self’ is proffered as the antidote to the ‘glossed’ and untruthful kinds of leadership who break promises to their constituencies.

The DVD ends with footage of the research team in the first pilot focus group in the Eastern Cape (Kenton-on-Sea) and the international collaborator, Prof. Rein, driving to the venue where the focus group workshop and interviews are to be held.

#### *DVD2: OCCUPY AND ISSUES OF GOVERNANCE*

South Africa’s ability to play a leading regional role is undermined by the ongoing and increasing violence of social protests in South Africa. A focus group was held with 8 women from ‘Proudly Manenberg’ social movement, at their Manenberg premises on 31 March 2012. These women are social protesters who are involved in a range of community-based initiatives that have social protest as a central element in their organisational activities in post-Apartheid South Africa. The focus group took place after 46 people were arrested in Cape Town, South Africa in January 2012, following an unauthorised protest in which the protesters went to a common park, Rondebosch Common, to occupy the space. The Common is both a heritage site and utilized by people for leisure activities such as walking and jogging. The site is located in the middle of a wealthy suburb in which mostly white South Africans live.

The women protesters came from a mainly ‘coloured’ (mixed-race) working class area called Manenberg which is officially estimated to have around 70000 inhabitants. They are part of a social movement called ‘Proudly Manenberg’ that mobilizes on behalf of community members for better schooling, housing and environmentally-friendly conditions. They decided to participate in the ‘Occupy Rondebosch’ campaign because they believe that apartheid living conditions have continued under the new South Africa. Amenities, shopping malls and good schools are all concentrated in the areas where white people live, while coloured and black working class people have to travel far to work and to amenities by public transport. They believe that the government is unwilling to help them in their struggle for a better life, so they believe in the necessity of militant protest action, and are willing to be arrested if this is what social change necessitates.

# Occupying the Commons

27 JAN 2012



On 26 January 2012, a large police presence gathered at the Commons in anticipation of the protesters. The police blocked and arrested people in the townships as they were en route to the Commons. Police instructed the protesters to leave the Commons on the grounds that they had not been granted permission to gather at the Commons. After the crowd left the Commons, they sat down nearby, at which the police and special riot units roughly arrested 46 of the protesters. They were released late that night after high-level intervention (one of the youth arrested was the son of a law professor who had co-written the South African Constitution). Many of the arrested protesters were working class women (26) from Manenberg and also members of Proudly Manenberg.

The Principal Investigator on the Red Tent, Dr. Miller, had a daughter involved in the protests. The daughter and her friend, who lives in Rondebosch, decided to join the protesters and were also arrested. Dr. Miller went to the Commons and tried to protect her daughter from a violent arrest, and was herself arrested. She then questioned the women protesters in the cell that they shared while awaiting their release (or charging). The arrested/interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 60 years of age. The women protesters articulated their grievances and objectives clearly during their arrest and incarceration, indicating their disaffection with both local and national government. The group themselves selected volunteers within their own ranks for the focus group and interviews. The focus group targeted these women to understand their take on democratic SA and the problems that they face as women from (still) coloured working class townships. Their response was unequivocal. They said that “the people shall govern; not the government shall govern”. As local leaders they are an example of strong, militant, activist leadership with the understanding and will to challenge government’s policies and be arrested, if necessary.

## DVD3: *ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP*

The focus group in this DVD was the first focus group to be held and pilot interviews and a workshop were conducted in Kenton-on-Sea on 24 – 25 February 2012. In those early stages, the project’s focus was hoping for a stronger Eastern Cape focus in the project. However, the opportunities that

presented themselves for analysing women's leadership, widened the project beyond the initial Eastern Cape focus. The focus group participants were 6 South African 'colored' women activists from the 1980's social movements in South Africa. They participated in illegal political structures in the 1980s in SA and believe that this history may have to be excavated as South Africa's youth and communities once again take to the barricades (service delivery protests; Marikana and De Doorns strikes). What is it, if anything, that they have to teach the new 'strugglers'?

None of the women interviewed are active in mass movements currently and so were reflecting on their experiences in the 1980s. Three of the women had participated in left-wing, Trotskyist illegal organizations at the time, as well as being active in CBOs (community-based organisations) and mass trade unions. The women interviewed were mostly (5) from racial groups designated as 'Coloured' during the Apartheid era. The age category of participants ranged from 42 to 53 years, and they were both working and middle class in background.

These women are bearers of alternative styles of leadership which their interviews bring to light. As revolutionaries, these women gave much of their younger lives to overthrowing Apartheid. Their mission was more ambitious, however. These left-wing radical women were against a two-stage process of change, namely, first political democracy and then economic freedom. Their political programs were based on a fundamental social transformation that should be ushered in during the first stage of struggle: "They did not want to die twice," as one of their comrades from the 1980s used to say as a counter to the "two-stage theory". They occupied the space of radical transition and, in so doing, disrupted the normal cycle of family and motherhood to try to fulfill these goals.

Their reflections question their own contributions – was their sacrificed youth a wasted endeavour? They experienced disappointment with the stagist political approach that led to political freedom being attained without economic freedom. There was also disillusionment with the crass consumerism of the new elites in South Africa, both in government and society. They still want a democratic socialist society where people are given the space to work and relax well. Egotistical and exploitative relationships between people should be removed from society.

Like many accounts of political organisations, these women were the foot-soldiers of their organisations, implementing the visions of the men who provided the frontal leadership for the organisation. While the ANC suppressed alternative left-wing political voices of men and women, men comrades in these left-wing organisations exploited women comrades through dominant leadership that suppressed the potential of their women comrades.

#### *DVD4: ON MOTHERHOOD, MARRIAGE AND ACTIVISM*

There is an ambivalent relationship with motherhood experienced by the interviewees. The women interviewed did not actively embrace motherhood but saw it as a socially ascribed role. Some had abortions or avoided conception altogether; others absorbed their children into their activist lives, taking them along to meetings or university studies. Motherhood was seen as an obstruction to revolutionary participation for some interviewees who distinguished their role from 'reformist' social activism. A total life commitment to "the struggle" and involvement in subversive activities such as getting people out of the country, the organisation of and participation in illegal reading or cadre groups, created mixed feelings about motherhood.

Once children were present, they were generally loved but the presence of children often created unique difficulties for such revolutionary women, producing resentment for some. The mothering role thus created confusion about the social and political purpose of these women in the context of illegal and underground organisational activities. Motherhood is described as a social cage, limiting

the self-actualisation for many women. These experiences of abortion (chosen or organisationally mandated) clearly caused a lot of pain and unresolved) trauma for the women revolutionaries.

There are clear differences in the experiences of motherhood between the different generations and classes. The Manenberg focus group women (working class) derived tremendous joy from their children. In a difficult social and political context, they visibly lit up when speaking about their offspring. Some of them had their daughters present in their social movement, Proudly Manenberg, a clear source of pride that their daughters were following in their footsteps as social activists.

They worried, however, about the consequences of divorce on kids, saying that divorce created a tragedy in the lives of children. However, they expressed the importance of divorce in their experience, where unappreciative men held back their own potential. Self-recognition and appreciation of self were often the rewards of facing the divorce challenge (B.U.S. – beautiful, unique, special), where women did not depend on capricious men for recognition of their unique attractions. The children are expected, even if later in life, to acknowledge and respect the activist roles of their mother and the consequences of incarceration that could arise from time to time.

The foot-washing ceremony at the beginning of this DVD has a two-fold intention: first is the respect given to researched subjects, where the researchers wash the feet of the interviewees as a gesture (perhaps biblical) of appreciation for the life experiences that have been shared by these interviewees; second is the visible acknowledgement of mothers and matriarchs, a social role that is more often than not deeply appreciated without any visible gestures (social or personal) of appreciation.

Having made these active choices in their lives, some of them are now in fulfilling and supportive relationships with men. Their organisational lives deepened their personal experiences. Ideally, young women should not have to choose between personal self-actualisation and motherhood, whether through careers or activism, receiving more social and personal support for this challenging phase in their lives.

#### *DVD5: ON IDENTITY*

Respondents go through their formal racial classifications and their personal responses to them. The ‘coloured’ women revolutionaries rejected the term ‘coloured’ as an apartheid construct with no reason but to divide and separate disempowered people, and it was a derogatory term. Progressive coloureds thus called themselves black to identify that they were part of the oppressed peoples of South Africa. Politically, therefore, they self-identify as black South Africans. Awareness of racial identities are often simply accepted through everyday social life. Political organisations allowed an active consciousness about the imposition of these terms by white rulers and the mutual experience of disenfranchisement. Revolutionary activities often involved immersion in working class and black townships, living or organising in these areas. As emigrant Africans, the ‘coloured’ women in Edinburgh were challenged by black exile men about this self-identification. The interviewee points to the irony of a middle class exile with little experience of living in South Africa, denying her, as a participant in the 1980s insurrection, the right to call herself black.

#### *DVD6: TO RIO EARTH SUMMIT, JUNE 2012 (With Report, “Waiting To Be Heard”)*

*Initiative for Equality* (IfE), a global network of advocates for social, economic and political equality amongst the world’s peoples, undertook the *Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings* project “motivated by a deep desire to see a transformation of the world’s societies and relationships in the

direction of meaningful equity and deep equality” (Introduction). To achieve this vision, they believe that strategies must be based on an understanding of what currently disempowered communities need, want and think—which can only be ascertained by asking. The Red Tent research team thus participated in the development of a segment of the report (Ch. 14, pp. 159 – 187), based on the South African findings. The report, “Waiting To Be Heard”, was launched at the People’s Summit in Rio in June 2012, as part of the alternative proceedings to the Rio + 20 gathering in Brazil. The CEO of the HSRC, Dr. Olive Shisana, presented on a panel that launched the Report at the People’s Summit.

Women from the 1980s contended that Apartheid capitalist rule was destroying black people’s lives and that is why they decided to become involved politically. As ‘red’ revolutionaries, their awareness of environmental struggles was limited. To some extent, their responses to sustainability issues are now individualized and consist in personal, environmentally aware practices, e.g. buying fair trade or organic products, that is, a more middle class response. They still have an uncomfortable relationship with sustainability issues and the modes of red-green alliances. There is a concern that middle class individualism will prevail in the environmentalist agenda while working class people have to find modes of adaptation for their survival.

In addition to the report, a DVD was prepared to accompany the report. The first part of the DVD shows interviewees discussing the Apartheid geographies that keep working class people in small areas with inadequate social amenities. Malls, good schools and other public spaces are reserved for white and elite communities. For this reason, the struggle in South Africa has to continue. Sharing and caring as a value system should be the best way of living together. Indigenous knowledges often showed respect for the environment, and governments should not assume that they know what is good for people on the ground. The second part of the report is based on photographic images generated by the NGOs and CBOs (community-based organisations) participating in the IfE field hearings from different and Third World regions of the world, with extracts from the report in subtitles.

#### *RECOMMENDATIONS OF ‘THE RED TENT’ RESEARCH PROJECT:*

- ⇒ Alternative styles of leadership and women’s leadership need to be explored to reform the fabric of African patriarchy and political life. ‘Womanist’ leadership that draws on the experience and examples of (local) matriarchal styles of leadership should be more visible in public life and absorbed into frontal styles of leadership.
- ⇒ Matrilineage may be an important vehicle for legal reform and the overall transformation of political society and power relations between men and women.
- ⇒ Men and women should be allowed their self-actualization without the limits of imposed gender roles (even where these are ‘self-imposed’).
- ⇒ We should have more flexible and creative parenting styles and roles e.g. ‘momads’ and ‘damoms’, instead of forcing women into stereotypical roles while men are allowed the freedom attached to their masculine stereotypes.
- ⇒ True political democracy that allows ideas to live, breathe and help to transform society is necessary in the political environment, or cronyism and nepotism thrive.
- ⇒ Men (or women) comrades should not/never dictate pregnancy according to the needs of political organisations.

HSRC URL for DVD’s: <http://www.youtube.com/user/HumanSciencesRCSA>

*RIO PEOPLE’S SUMMIT, BRAZIL, JUNE 2012*

# People's Sustainability Treaty on Equity: developing a post-Rio Action Plan

11:30 – 13:30  
Saturday June 16<sup>th</sup>

Tenda 9, Domitila  
Barrios de Chungara  
**People's Summit**  
Aterro do Flamingo  
Rio de Janeiro



**FROM PAPER TO ACTION!** You are cordially invited to participate in developing the Post-Rio Action Plan for Equity, to turn the commitments of the Equity Treaty into on-the-ground action. Learn more about the Equity & Sustainability Field Hearings and the Equity Treaty, and then help make it happen. **JOIN US!**

SPEAKERS  
Tariq Banuri Tellus Institute; Prof, Univ of Utah; former head of UNCSD

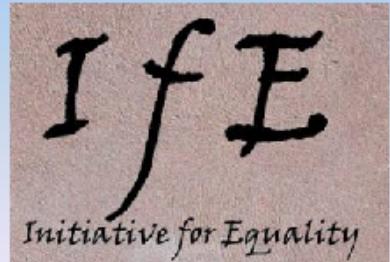
Olive Shisana President, International Social Science Council; CEO, Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa

Uchita de Zoysa Ex Director, Centre for Environment & Development, Sri Lanka  
<http://sustainabilitytreaties.org/>

Gaston Meskens Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry, Univ of Ghent, Belgium

Priscilla Achakpa Director, Women Environmental Programme, Nigeria

[Click here](#) to sign the Equity Treaty!



[www.initiativeforequality.org](http://www.initiativeforequality.org)

## Red Tent Project Launch red carpet ride

