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Absent from the Frontline but not Absent from the Struggle: Women in Mining

ASANDA BENYA

2012 has been a landmark year for the South African mining industry, dominated by strikes in all three major Platinum producing houses. What this article aims to do is to bring to the fore a feminist perspective on what has been happening in the recent strike because the dominant narrative ignores the gender perspective. Drawing from my ethnographic study conducted from 2011-2012, I show how women, both inside and outside the mine, conceived of the August Lonmin strikes. The paper is framed around two main concepts, the gendered character of spaces and how these are cultural specific and tied to everyday practices (Ntarangwi 2003), and secondly, the links between production and reproduction spaces and I show that the two spaces cannot be divorced, they are continuously impacting on each other (Peck 1996).

I focus on the Lonmin strike in order to demonstrate the gendered character of the strike, which culminated into what has been popularly known as the “Marikana massacre”. Most of what has been reported has mainly focused on the actual massacre day at the “mountain”, and in that, much of women’s involvement has been lost and in some cases totally hidden. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to show the role that women played in the build-up to the fateful massacre day where 34 people, mainly workers, were killed and dozens injured during police confrontation at the hill with workers.

The paper first gives a background to the strike and how it was gendered. This allows us to see why women mineworkers were not at the mountain top and the front line of the strike. This shows the masculine character of mine-life and its premise on the marginalization and exclusion of women from some spaces. Secondly the paper focuses on the space (the mountain) where the strike and the massacre took place. In doing that we illustrate how women in the community conceived of the space and how their conceptions of the mountain contributed to their initial background role. I link their absence from the mountain top to their cultural understandings and symbolic meanings of the mountain. Thirdly, I try to capture a turning point in women’s participation in the strike by examining the role of Women’s Movements during the strike and subsequent to the strike. Their involvement shows two things; firstly the

links between the spaces of production and reproduction and secondly, the shift by women from passive participants to robust active participant. Throughout we shall see the centrality of gender in organising mine life and the dominant position occupied by men and masculinity.

Women Mine Workers

Due to legislative restrictions, underground women mineworkers are a recent phenomenon in South Africa, with the first group of underground women employed only in 2004 (Benya 2009). The numbers have risen from zero in 2003 to over 43.000 (12.8%) in 2012 (Statistics South Africa 2012). While the numbers have increased due to the adoption of policies¹, some occupations remain clutched by men. This is the case with Rock Drill Operators (RDO). At one of the mines where we were conducting our research, the labour complement is over 28.000 and 5.351 are RDOs in different capacities. A huge number of these are stope RDOs at 4.246, followed by 1.060 development RDOs, 23 shaft RDOs and 22 learner RDOs and all of them are men. Mining houses in the region have similar trends.

This gendered allocation of work is crucial in understanding the absence of women from the frontlines in the Marikana strikes because the initial framing of the strike was targeting only RDOs and by extension men. Women were therefore excluded since they mainly work as winch operators and equipment helpers. The masculine framing of the strike, as a strike for RDOs and the exclusion of women from the RDO occupational category were the reasons women mine workers were not at the forefront of the strike but in the sideline.

Miner's Wives

Unlike other strikes that take place inside the employer's premises, the Marikana strike took place on the mountain top, around the community. Consequently, the community was involved and women initially played a traditional supportive role; cooking for those at the mountain top and holding vigils, offering emotional and spiritual support to families but not part of the mountain top delegation.

Against the background of the "mountain" as the central place, it is important we contextualize the cultural and gendered symbolism of this space for women. The significance of the mountain, however, can only make sense when one goes back to where the Marikana women originate from, the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

For these women, the mountain had the same resemblance as a *kraal* and *iboma*. A *kraal* is an animal enclosure where family and communal affairs are discussed and women are prohibited to participate in discussions or matters raised in the kraal.

Others saw the mountain as an *iboma*, a sensitive secluded space usually on the mountains for boys undergoing circumcision. Women are not allowed in an *iboma* because of superstitions about the "dangers" they pose to young initiates. The use of

the mountain as the battle ground was an exclusionary factor for women, therefore, because they had these symbolic meanings attached to it.

A Watershed Moment for Women

Prior to the massacre there was compliance with cultural norms on what is deemed appropriate women's roles and there was also respect for the symbolic gendered character of the mountain space. However, after the massacre there was a shift in women's role in the strike. This shift seems to be closely linked to the shift in the "consciousness of women in relation to the work experiences of their husbands" (Porter 2011, 263). As a result, after the massacre, it was women who were outside the court supporting, protesting and demanding the release of those arrested.

Their involvement confirms Peck's (1996) assertion that what happens at work affects what happens in the household and vice-versa and that these two spaces cannot be viewed as separate. Their separation is artificial and porous and is as far as "they have their own structures of dominance along with their own distinctive rhythms and tendencies, but they are also related in the sense that each conditions and interacts with the other" (Peck 1996, 39).

The indignation to see justice done led to the formation of *Sikhala Sonke* (we cry together) Women's Association. When the police were clamping down on gatherings, throwing tear-gas canisters on women and children, knocking down doors of homes of striking miners every night and shooting with rubber bullets people standing in groups of more than five, *Sikhala Sonke* Women's Association, organised to protest this.

This faced resistance from public safety officials, police officials, the Madibeng and Rustenburg municipality officials. The women were illegally and unconstitutionally banned from protesting by government officials. In order to march, the women had to contest municipal's decision and the banning of their march all the way to the provincial High Court where they won.

Prior to the march the women of Marikana received solidarity messages, legal and financial support from other women and human rights groups from other provinces. This support was further cemented by a huge attendance of the march by women from other provinces. These actions by women had their own casualties; at least four women who were mingling in the streets awaiting a meeting, two weeks prior to the march, were shot at by police using rubber bullets, and one of them died a few days later in hospital.

Conclusion

The women of Marikana moved from being passive cultural norm carriers, to being proactive and militant participants in the fight against injustices in their community and workplace. They actively challenged their status as peripheral bystanders to engage in the struggle for better wages and broader social justice. They defied their

“naturalized” marginalization in production politics by taking a more vigorous role in the strike after the massacre.

The strike action by women in Marikana revealed the socially constructed divide between home and work. The strike shifted from an exclusively industrial strike to a community struggle; thus exposing the artificial divide between the two spaces of reproduction and production. As a result, what started as a workplace dispute was eventually taken up by wives and sisters of mineworkers as they were directly affected by the meagre wages that they are tasked to stretch thin, deaths and arrests of their husbands and male relatives.

Note

The Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act of 2002, and the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1996.

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