

**AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGIES OF SURVIVAL:
INTERSECTING FAITH, FEMINISMS, AND DEVELOPMENT**

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As required by university regulations, I hereby state unambiguously that this study, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work.

Beverley Gail Haddad

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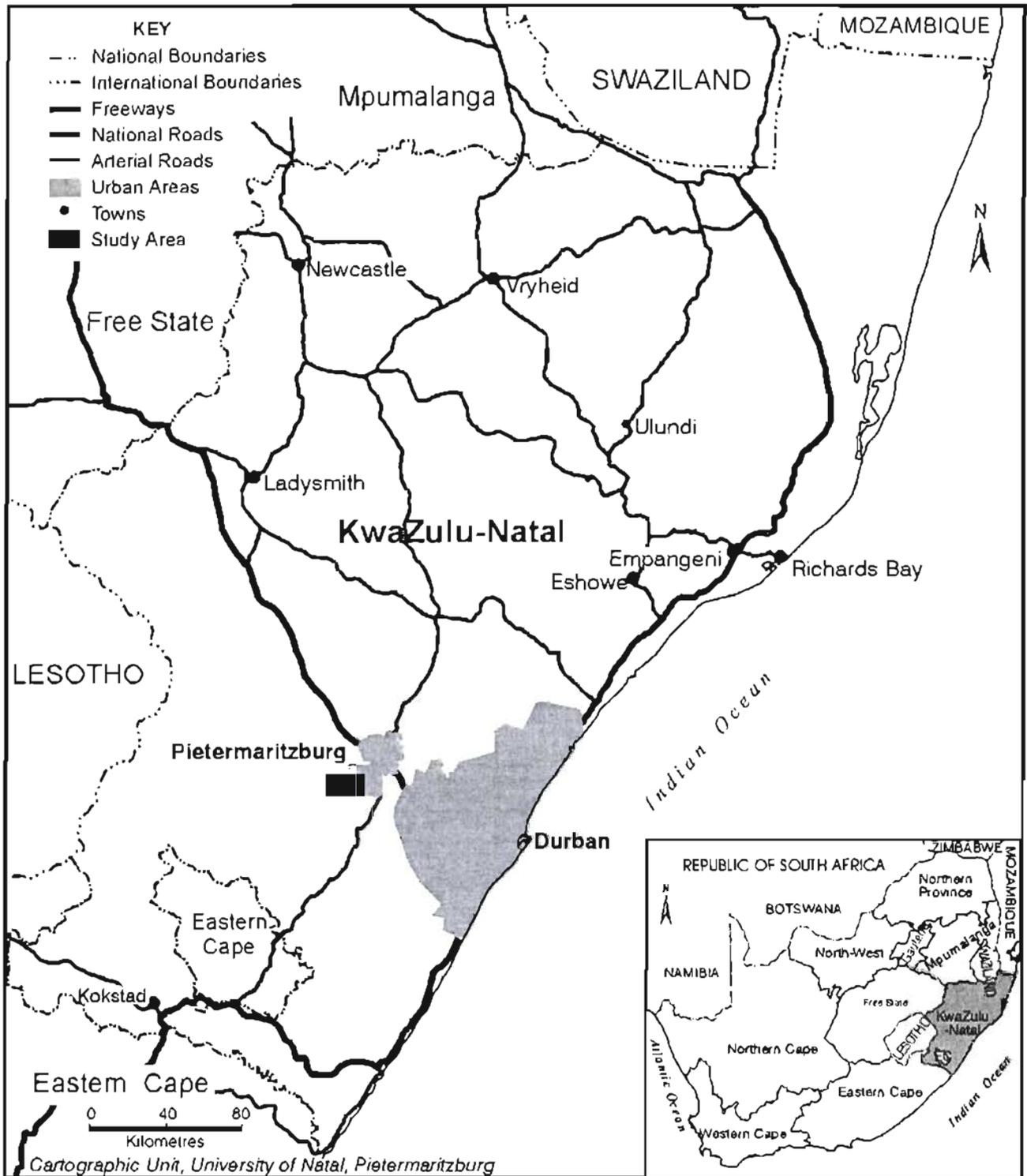
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Map 1 Showing Pietermaritzburg within KwaZulu-Natal



Map 2 Showing Sweetwaters and Nxamalala within the context of Vulindlela.

BIBLICAL TEXTS USED IN GROUP SESSIONS

Below is a list of the Biblical texts used as a basis for our discussions in the Nxamalala Bible study group, indicating the transcript number of the sessions in which particular texts were read.

| | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| Genesis 37 | T35-T38 |
| Exodus 1:8-22 | T43-T46 |
| 2 Samuel 13:1-22 | T31-T34 |
| 2 Kings 5:1-14 | T23-T25 |
| Ruth | T15-20; T49-T51 |
| Matthew 21:28-32 | T48 |
| Mark 5:21-43 | T1-T4 |
| Mark 10:17-22 | T47 |
| Mark 12:35-13:2 | T6-T7 |
| Luke 7:36-50 | T41-T42 |
| Luke 10:38-42 | T21-T22 |
| Luke 13:10-17 | T12-T14 |
| John 4:1-30 | T27-T29 |
| John 5:2-9 | T8-T9 |

LIST OF WOMEN INTERVIEWED

Thokozile Cele
Margaret Khanyile
Violet Mhlongo
Elizabeth Mpulo
Mavis Ndlovu
Selinah Ndlovu
Josephinah Nene
Lilian Ngcobo
Sophia Ntombela
Maria Sibiya
Miriam Zondi
Bella Zuma

ACRONYMS USED IN THE TEXT

| | |
|---------|---|
| ABM | American Board Mission |
| AIC | African Independent Church |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| ANCWL | African National Congress Women's League |
| AWF | Anglican Women's Fellowship |
| BSG | Bible study group |
| BTP | Black Theology Project |
| CBO | Community-based organisation |
| CASE | Community Agency for Social Enquiry |
| CGE | Commission for Gender Equality |
| CPSA | Church of the Province of Southern Africa |
| DAWN | Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era |
| EATWOT | Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians |
| FSAW | Federation of South African Women |
| GAD | Gender and Development |
| GEAR | Growth, Employment, and Redistribution: a macro-economic strategy |
| GETNET | Gender Training Network |
| GPRP | Greater Pietermaritzburg Reconstruction Project |
| ICT | Institute for Contextual Theology |
| IFP | Inkatha Freedom Party |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| ISB | Institute for the Study of the Bible |
| MDM | Mass Democratic Movement |
| MU | Mothers' Union |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NOW | Natal Organisation of Women |
| OSW | Office on the Status of Women |
| PAC | Pan Africanist Congress |
| PRA | Participatory Rural Appraisal |
| PRODDER | Programme for Development Research |
| RDP | Reconstruction and Development Programme |
| SACC | South African Council of Churches |
| SADEP | South African Development Education and Policy Research |
| SAP | Structural Adjustment Programme |
| SCA | Student's Christian Association |
| UNISA | University of South Africa |
| UDF | United Democratic Front |
| UWO | United Women's Organisation |
| UWCO | United Women's Congress |
| WA | Women's Alliance |
| WAAD | Women in Africa and African Diaspora |
| WAD | Women and Development |
| WID | Women in Development |
| WNC | Women's National Coalition |

ACRONYMS USED IN THE BIBLIOGRAPHY

| | |
|----------|---|
| AACC | All Africa Council of Churches |
| AFCWU | African Food and Canning Workers Union |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| ICT | Institute for Contextual Theology |
| CASE | Community Agency for Social Enquiry |
| CCAWT | Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians |
| CEDPA | Centre for Development and Population Activities |
| CGE | Commission on Gender Equality |
| CODESRIA | Council for the Development of economic and Social Research in Africa |
| CPSA | Church of the Province of Southern Africa |
| DBSA | Development Bank of Southern Africa |
| EATWOT | Ecumenical Association for Third World Theologians |
| EFSA | Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa |
| ESSET | Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation |
| FCWU | Food and Canning Workers Union |
| FSAW | Federation of South African Women |
| GPRP | Greater Pietermaritzburg Reconstruction Project |
| ICT | Institute for Contextual Theology |
| IDASA | Institute for a Democratic Alternative South Africa |
| PACSA | Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness |
| PNG | Personal Narratives Group |
| RDP | Reconstruction and Development Programme |
| SACC | South African Council of Churches |
| SAPES | Southern Africa Political Economy Series |
| SAUSSC | Southern Africa Social Sciences Conference |
| SIDA | Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency |
| SPCK | Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge |
| TRC | Truth and Reconciliation Commission |
| UNISA | University of South Africa |
| UWTG | Umtata Women's Theology Group |
| WCC | World Council of Churches |
| WNC | Women's National Coalition |

ABSTRACT

This study intersects the disciplines of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. It is located within the socio-economic and political context of the region of Vulindlela, on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Its subjects are poor and marginalised indigenous African women of faith who live in the area and attend the local Anglican churches. Engaging the theoretical debates of these three areas of gender studies, it argues that indigenous African women live by subjugated survival theologies. These working theologies are forged within a context of struggle for literal survival and give expression to the voices of millions of women in South Africa. Survival, it contends, intersects faith, feminisms, and development.

Two potential locations of survival theologies of poor and marginalised women are identified in the study: the Mothers' Union (MU), the Anglican women's prayer union which is a part of the indigenous *manyano* movement, and a contextual Bible study group of women from the area. In the MU, an established site of women's theology, rituals such as the wearing of the church uniform, extempore praying and preaching, and fundraising are practices which reveal aspects of subjugated survival theologies. In the contextual Bible study group, a new social site was established through the efforts of the author, in order to create a place for the safe articulation of these theologies. This aspect of the study explored the extent to which collaborative work amongst women across race and class is possible and the ways in which it furthers the liberative agenda of the women's project.

Employing postmodern notions of identity, subjectivity, agency, and historicised local knowledges, this study argues that survival faith needs to shape the way feminist paradigms understand notions of liberation, activism, and solidarity. It contends that these subjugated survival theologies pose a challenge to the academy and to the practice of the church because they are, in part, a resistance discourse which has not been recognised. The voice and agency of poor and marginalised women of Vulindlela is highlighted throughout and, the study argues, it is these voices that have been neglected in the women's project. It is the subjugated knowledges of poor and marginalised women of faith that have to be recognised and recovered, if the women's project is to truly reflect *all* South African women.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Unkulunkulu wangisiza kakhulu ngoba ngabona izinto ziqhamuka ngingazi ukuthi ziqhamukaphi ngingasho kanje ngithi wangisiza uNkulunkulu ngomthandazo ngangithi uma ngithandaza kuNkulunkulu ngibone okunye sengikuthola ngibone nezingane zifika namanye amatoho sihlanganise senze ikhaya leli ehe. Ekuhluphekeni kwami uNkulunkulu ngambona ukuthi ukhona ngoba ayikho indoda eyayingena lapha izongenzela kodwa ngamandla omthandazo ngithi uma ngikhala ngibheke kuNkulunkulu ngithi Nkosi ngisize ngaloku ngempela iNkosi yangisiza ke ngabantabami bakhula.

God helped me a lot because I saw things coming up not knowing where they were coming from. I can say that God really helped me with prayer. I used to pray to God and I would see myself getting some of the things and I would see the children coming with some temporary jobs and we would combine all the resources and build this home. During the days of my sufferings I experienced that God is there because no man was coming to assist me here but because of the power of prayer whenever I was crying to God saying, “Lord help me with this”, the Lord used to assist me until my children grew bigger.

(Gogo Thokozile Cele, July 1998, Sweetwaters)

I still believe that we can make life different; and so do the poor and marginalised women of Vulindlela. We may appear to employ differing strategies, but our task remains the same. As women of faith we believe in a God who gives us the resources to persevere; a God who makes a way out of no way (Williams 1993).

My work with the women of Vulindlela has been more than a research project. It has been a collaborative journey between women of faith within a pastoral context. I arrived in

Vulindlela undertaking to carry out both priestly and activist-intellectual tasks. As an ordained woman of the church, a patriarchal institution, while I carry out pastoral duties with dedication, I am also committed to changing its oppressive structures. Working in the Vulindlela community as an activist-intellectual is not mere “research”, it is also an aspect of my vocation. My life as an activist-intellectual compels me to both act against injustice and to reflect on that activity, in congruence with the broader political women’s project. This study is an exploration of an action-reflection process which has taken place within the context of my pastoral/priestly role in the community. It has been a deeply personal experience. Without doubt I have been changed through the lives of faith of the women of Vulindlela as I have experienced and witnessed their struggle to survive .

Their faith has driven me to believe that gender activists have failed to take seriously enough the role that religion plays in the lives of poor and marginalised women in South Africa. In wanting to explore this dynamic in the struggle for survival, I am more certain than before that poor women have significant theological resources that, if recognised and recovered, would contribute to the process of overcoming oppression. As gender activists and intellectuals, we must be committed to work collaboratively in recognising, recovering, and employing these resources in our women’s project in South Africa. My study is an attempt to do just that.

1.1 Scope of the study

My work primarily seeks to amplify the voices of poor and marginalised women of faith in academic debates concerning the material conditions of their lives. To this end, it is an ambitious project which explores the three disciplines of gender and development, feminist studies, and women’s theology. It is the *intersecting* of all three of these disciplines that is the particular contribution of this project to the field of gender studies. Because of the ambitious nature of this project, I have had to circumscribe the terrain of each of the disciplines within which I situate my analysis.

Within the field of gender and development I have limited the debate to the relationship between poverty alleviation and gender equity and to an analysis of gender and development

planning paradigms. I have not attempted to discuss specific women's issues in development planning such as health, reproductive rights, employment in formal and informal sectors and so forth. Rather, the focus has been on the epistemological issues that are directly linked with the feminist project generally and with the women's theological project in particular.

The epistemological contribution of postmodernism to the feminist project forms a theoretical thread that runs through the study. In highlighting theoretical issues such as the historicised location of knowledge, identity, subjectivity, and agency, I have stressed the need for a critical engagement between these postmodernism themes and the political feminist project as it applies to the South African context. It is out of this discussion that I seek to show how in both the field of gender and development and in the women's theological project, postmodern impulses are crucial to recognising and recovering the subjugated knowledges of poor and marginalised women.

Women's theology provides the third theoretical dimension of this study. In circumscribing the academic theological terrain, my prime focus is on women's theology as articulated by African American and indigenous African women generally and by South African women in particular. My main interlocutors are not feminist theologians from the first world. Instead, I deliberately seek out academic theological voices that speak from within situations of material deprivation. I do not discuss this body of work in detail, but rather identify key thrusts that enable the women's theological project to take seriously the voices of poor and marginalised women.

In attempting to do this, this study draws on postmodern impulses to assist in the process of recognising and recovering the *theological* resources of poor and marginal women, its prime interlocutors, as subjugated theological knowledge. As Cochrane (1999:22) points out, in recognising and recovering this subjugated knowledge, it is important that those of us who stand outside of these communities accord a "certain kind of respect" for what is known away from the centres of power. "It means recognizing that what they know is not simply a matter of ideas, or of our judgment on those ideas, but a reflection on hard-won experience" (Cochrane 1999:22). Within the women's theological project, our reflection requires us to understand more intimately "this hard-won experience" of poor and marginalised women.

Faith for these women is an expression of their understanding of an encounter with the realm of Christian tradition, but it also expresses their encounter with the world of their ancestors as well as the material reality of the need to literally survive day by day. It is in drawing on all aspects of this encounter, Christianity, culture, and survival, that the subjugated theological resources of poor and marginalised women is manifested.

At the beginning of this chapter, *Gogo* Thokozile Cele asserted how God helped her to make a way out of no way. She goes on to describe how God helped her. In interpreting her response, it is apparent that God's help came in various ways: through prayer, the pooling of resources, and a reliance on other women. She prayed to God, believing in and drawing on the realm of the sacred in her time of need. In so doing, she does not remain passive but encourages her children to seek employment in order that they survive. According to her testimony, material resources were forthcoming as she believed they would be through praying to God. In her "aleness" as an African widow, without the assistance of a man in her house, she rallies together the women in her household and corporately they express their faith in the will to survive. Faith in God and survival are intertwined in her daily reality. When asked how God had helped her, *Gogo* Cele gave no simple response, but chose to include both practical and spiritual dimensions of her faith. In so doing she was beginning to articulate what I have called survival theology. This study is an attempt to reflect theoretically and theologically on the complex implications of *Gogo* Cele's response.

Theology is not about "sterile formulations" (Cochrane 1999:23), but about life and death. For poor and marginalised women, their theologies are *lived* theologies, born out of their hard-won experience of the impoverished rural areas, the shack settlement to which they fled in search of employment, or the harsh experience of living as an uneducated woman in the city. The theologies they live by are those born out of the struggle to survive. Faith for poor and marginalised women is a recognition of God's presence in the very act of survival. It is this will to live in the face of death that not only shapes their faith, but potentially offers the women's project a rich resource from which to effect the social transformation of our society. In attempting to draw on these theological resources, this study privileges *survival*, the lived experience of the vast majority of South African women, as a locus of knowledge that is important for theology. Not only is survival a locus of knowledge, but I would go even

further to suggest that it is a key theological category for poor and marginalised women. This theological reality can no longer be ignored within the church and the academy.

Survival runs as a thread throughout the study as a point of intersection between the academic disciplines of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. Women's survival is fundamental to the gender and development debate and, I will argue, should also be crucial to the agendas of the feminist and women's theological projects. *Resistance* is understood to be at the heart of the feminist project and within feminist studies is seen to define much of the theoretical terrain. I will argue that strategies of survival (which include the theological) are forms of resistance that are not always recognised or understood by feminist activists committed to overt action. But, an engagement with these covert strategies by development practitioners and researchers, and feminist activists and intellectuals is crucial to a women's political project that wants to take the voices of poor and marginalised women seriously. Taking these voices seriously in the South African context means recognising *faith* as an important dimension in the women's project. Religion cannot be relegated to the margins. It is central in the struggle for survival and in the resistance to the patriarchal forces within the church and in society. It is in linking these notions of survival, resistance, and faith that I theoretically intersect gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology.

As I will show in the next section on the research process, an eclectic theoretical approach in transdisciplinary work such as the one I have adopted, is consistent with and acceptable to a growing body of work on feminist methodology. In as much as my work aligns itself with this paradigm, it is my hope that its strategic value within each of the fields of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology will be acknowledged.

1.2 Research process

In this study I use a wide range of analytical tools and concepts from each of the fields of gender and development, feminist studies, women's theology, and from the social sciences more broadly. I work within an explicitly feminist research paradigm and employ various feminist research methods.

As Reinharz (1992:240) argues, feminist research methodology encompasses a number of themes which guide its practice. Undergirding feminist research is the principle that feminism is a perspective, rather than a methodology, which enables the use of many *innovative* methods of inquiry (Reinharz 1992:241). “Despite this multiplicity, feminism is not open to everything” (Reinharz 1992:247). While being grounded in academic disciplines, for feminists, there is always a hermeneutic of suspicion that prevents an uncritical acceptance of disciplinary conventions (Reinharz 1992:247). This hermeneutic of suspicion is exercised through the lens of feminist theory (Reinharz 1992:249). Implicit in this discussion is the acknowledgement that there are many feminisms which embrace the rich diversity of women (Reinharz 1992:252).

Given its multiple approach and its commitment to critiquing academic disciplines through a feminist theoretical lens, feminist research has an affinity with transdisciplinary work (Reinharz 1992:250). “Feminist research thus not only stretches methodological norms, it also reaches across disciplinary boundaries” (Reinharz 1992:250). I would argue that this is precisely what my study attempts to do in general, and its particular contribution to feminist scholarship is its transdisciplinary focus within the broad terrain of gender studies. Reinharz (1992:243) argues that there is no single way of doing “feminist research”. Rather, feminists use creativity to define their choices which they do with little respect for “methodological correctness” (Reinharz 1992:243). Creativity has been a strong impulse in the methodological choices made in my work with the women of Vulindlela, and I have been open to being flexible in the research process as I have carried out my priestly and activist commitments.

Feminist research is amoeba-like; it goes everywhere, in every direction. It reaches into all the disciplines and uses all the methods, sometimes singly and sometimes in combinations. The amoeba is fed by the women’s movement. The women’s movement, in turn, is fed by women’s outrage and hope (Reinharz 1992:243).

Outrage and hope lead to the activism that drives feminist scholarship and its commitment to social change. As my study shows, this activist thread in feminist scholarship has not always

been rooted in the voices of poor and marginalised women in South Africa. My work is inherently activist with a strong emphasis on, firstly, amplifying the voices of women outside of the academy and, secondly, the importance of the mutuality of the relationship between the academic researcher and the women she works with.

This focus on *relationship* is a key aspect of my research methodology. Reinharz (1992:258-268) suggests a number of ways in which the relational aspect of feminist research is important. In feminist research the involvement of the researcher as *person* is fundamental to the paradigm, with personal experience often being an important aspect of the work. There is also a strong focus on the involvement of the people being studied in the research process. While emphasising these aspects in my own research paradigm, my work also extends these tenets further by suggesting that this personal and interactive relationship between researcher and those she works with, needs to be a *mutually transformative* one. Hence my stress in this study on the way I, my field assistant Nonhlanhla Magubane, and the women of Vulindlela have been re-shaped and re-created by our work together.

Reinharz (1992:267) suggests a final way in which relationship is foundational to the feminist research paradigm, and that is in the way feminist scholarship involves the reader directly in the research and attempts to forge a further connection that extends beyond the research boundaries. In my written presentation of this study, this is a particular goal which I have attempted to do through the inclusion of photographs, extensive transcript quotation, and interspersing personal illustrations throughout my theoretical reflection. I will discuss this style of presentation further in the next section.

Elements of my research methodology could be broadly termed feminist “ethnography”. Reinharz (1992:46) understands this approach as multi-method research that includes observation, participation, archival analysis, and interviewing. I have used all four of these methods in this study with the explicit intention of embarking on a process of “excavation” (de Vault 1999). “Excavation” is meant to capture a process of “uncovering and articulating what has been hidden or unacknowledged and the sense of discovery that accompanies that process” (de Vault 1999:55-56). This process has depended on my commitment to active engagement with those I work with, which has implied an active participant-observer role. I

have attempted, from this active participant-observation, together with archival analysis and interviewing, to analyse faithfully the particular and local context of the women of Vulindlela in which they intersect their faith with an active struggle for survival in their daily life (deVault 1999). This analysis has drawn on the critical tools of political science, sociology, and anthropology, particularly their conceptualisations of “resistance”, “domination”, and “hegemony”.

Being a priest in the community both helped and hindered this process of participant-observation. Many would argue that the social status ascribed to this priestly role would be a stumbling block to effective participation in the research process. The strongly authoritative and hierarchical role the priest plays in a community such as Vulindlela is in sharp contradiction to my emphasis on the mutuality of relationship between the researcher and those she works with. I have been acutely aware of these power dynamics in the research process and have endeavoured to actively foreground my relationship as one of mutuality even though these endeavours are constrained by greater social forces. Having said this, it is also my conviction that my role as priest aided the participant-observation process significantly. I was not simply the “priest”, but I a “woman-priest”. As woman-priest, stereotypical notions of “priest” were deconstructed in the very process of us aligning ourselves together as women.

Furthermore, the functional status that came with my priestly role enabled me to be present as an “insider” at gatherings of religious women which might otherwise have been closed to me as a woman from outside the community. If I happened to arrive at the building where an interdenominational *manyano* [church women’s prayer union] was meeting, they would insist that I attend and I would always be given a platform to preach together with all the women present. Weekly meetings of the Mothers’ Union, the women’s organisation of the Anglican Church, were open to my attendance and my role as priest required participation in their annual regional meeting. Attendance at these gatherings provided opportunities for an active engagement with women of faith in Vulindlela that was at once “separate” from my research and yet integral to it.

These opportunities for engagement were specifically made available to me in my role as

priest. In fact at times I was obligated to attend certain gatherings. But, I also used my priestly role in a more proactive way by facilitating the opening of a space for women to meet from one of the congregations I served, St Gabriel's, Nxamalala. After working with the congregation for about a year and having won the trust of the male leadership there, I invited women from the congregation to attend a weekly contextual Bible study group. Because it was *umfundisi* [the priest] who had called the meeting, women were freer to leave their domestic responsibilities to meet together. No one questioned the legitimacy of such a meeting. The contextual Bible study method I used is a particular approach to studying the Bible with poor and marginalised communities. It is a communal reading process that engages the critical resources of the Biblical scholar and the subjugated theological knowledges of the community as derived from their lived reality. In this critical, collaborative, contextual process, readings of the Biblical text are offered that can become personally and socially transformative. The transcripts of this weekly contextual Bible study group, which met for two and a half years, are an important source for recognising and recovering the subjugated theologies of survival of poor and marginalised women in Vulindlela. This group continues to meet together since my departure as priest in the community, and their Bible studies are now facilitated by the gender co-ordinator, Phumzile Zondi, of the Institute for the Study of the Bible, University of Natal.

Active engagement with the women of Nxamalala which allowed for strategic participant-observation would not have been possible without the involvement of my field assistant, Nonhlanhla Magubane. As I alluded to earlier, her role was crucial to the process, both practically and in the way her presence forged a link between myself and the women we engaged with. Practically, she acted as interpreter during group sessions and thereafter wrote up the transcriptions from tape recordings of our discussion. Nonhlanhla's presence, as she stood between myself and the women, is discussed in the study through an exploration of the meaning of our theological work together as women across race and class. Race and class immediately raise questions of difference between women themselves and particularly the issue of representation in the research process. I have chosen to integrate these important theoretical questions into my study as they pertain to the women's project in general, and to the women's theological project in particular within the South African context.

Nonhlanhla also acted as interpreter and transcriber for the interviews we conducted with elderly members of the Mothers' Union. These interviews, together with the Bible study transcripts, formed the body of field research in this study. Working as a Anglican priest in Vulindlela, it quickly became obvious that the Mothers' Union plays an important role in the church. Shortly after arriving, I attended a regional gathering where women who had been members of the organisation for fifty years were presented with certificates. It became apparent to me that many women from St Raphael's, Sweetwaters, had been involved in the congregation for a long time. This suggested the key role women played in the church there, particularly in light of the fact that the area had never been served by a full-time priest. Inspired by this reality and drawing on insights from feminist oral history methodology (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991; Etter-Lewis 1991; Patai 1991; Reinharz 1992; Salazar 1991), we interviewed twelve elderly women who had been members of the Mothers's Union for an extensive period of time. Each woman was interviewed twice; the second interview was used to deepen issues that arose in the first. An interview schedule loosely guided the discussion. The purpose of the interviews was to record each woman's story with a focus on the role the church, and particularly the Mothers' Union, had played in her life. A particular interest was an exploration of the significance of the church uniform and the Thursday meeting (known as *manyano* day) for each of the women.

Through archival research, these two issues were identified as sites of resistance by indigenous Anglican women against the missionaries who had first introduced the organisation into South Africa. Both the uniform and the Thursday meeting had become particularly indigenous aspects of the organisation, and were appropriated by local women to resist both patriarchal and colonial forces. The archival research was a crucial stepping stone in the exploration of these indigenous appropriations and it too is incorporated into the study.

Within the feminist oral history tradition there is an emphasis on biographical and autobiographical narratives (Cotterill and Letherby 1993; PNG 1989; Reinharz 1992). Using women's stories and personal narratives is a feminist tool that aids the recovery of voices that reside outside of the academy. Book length studies that have used this method have been carried out in South Africa (Bozzoli 1991; Gordon 1985; Kendall 1995). Increasingly within the South African women's theological project, the use of story as a methodological tool is

being employed (Haddad and Magubane 1999; Landman 1994; 1996; 1999; van Schalkwyk 1997). While these projects are an attempt to recover voices of indigenous African voices, the initiators of these projects are still mostly white women. As suggested earlier, issues of race and class in the research process raise representation issues which will be addressed in this study. Having said this, it is important to note that there is a growing body of autobiographical literature written by indigenous African women and fiction that focuses on indigenous African women's experience (Kuzwayo 1985; Mashinini 1991a; Magona 1998).

My work uses story as a methodological tool and overtly foregrounds issues of race and class that intersect the work we do as women together. Theoretical reflection has been interwoven with these practical life examples in cycles of critical reflection. The opening chapter is entirely devoted to introducing the main characters of this study through personal narratives. I have deliberately chosen to include my autobiography as the first character story in the chapter. De Vault (1999:3) has suggested that this "is in keeping with the feminist idea that knowing a speaker will deepen one's understanding of her speech". I want to deepen the reader's understanding of my speech, but I also want to highlight my own subjectivity in the research process early on in the study.

In recording my work with the women of Vulindlela, I have chosen to incorporate fully into the English text the vernacular Zulu as spoken. While this might not be recognised by some as "correct" academic practice, and in fact might seem to English readers a little tedious at times, I have deliberately done so to give priority to the voice of the women who are the subjects of this study. This is a conscious attempt to highlight their subjectivity and bring the marginality of their language to the centre of academic debate. In addition, the English translation relies heavily on Nonhlanhla's interpretive skills and other Zulu mother tongue speakers might want to interpret the woman's words more fully. By including the vernacular in the text, the potential for as full a discourse as is possible is incorporated in the study.

As I have already stated, the research process has been an intensely personal experience for myself. I am aware that as I have recorded this process I have also written into the text intensely personal stories and experiences of others. Pseudonyms have been used in the text when referring to women in the Bible study group in order to protect their anonymity. The

names of the interviewees from the Mothers' Union have not been changed, as abbreviated versions of their stories are already published under their own names (Haddad and Magubane 1999).

1.3 Structure of the study

This study is an attempt to show how poor and marginalised women intersect the spiritual, material, and emotional aspects of their lives in their struggle for survival. These intersections, I argue, offer a challenge to gender studies in South Africa generally and to the women's theological project in particular.

In Chapter 2 the stories of the main characters of the research project are introduced. These stories centre around women attached to the two Anglican churches in the Vulindlela area, St Raphael's in the ward of Sweetwaters, and St Gabriel's in the ward of Nxamalala. A brief history of these churches provides some background and context to our stories. I introduce my autobiographical story first. This is followed by the stories of some women who are members of the Mothers' Union of St Raphael's Church. In Nxamalala most, although not all the women who attended the Bible study group, were members of St Gabriel's Church. They are briefly introduced through a series of vignettes that I drew from personal experience. The chapter closes with the story of Nonhlanhla Magubane, the field assistant, who lives in the community but has managed against the odds to complete a university level education. Our interwoven stories reflect our diversity as women and the potential of our work together across divides of race and class.

Division has characterised South African society, and Vulindlela has not escaped this legacy. Chapter 3 attempts to focus on the political economy of the area. This includes its political history and the consequent socio-economic effects. An analysis of the demography, housing, and social infrastructure is outlined. Three issues have had a particularly devastating socio-economic impact on the community in the past decade. These include the 1987 floods, the political violence of the late 1980s to early 1990s, and the AIDS pandemic. Each of these issues is explored in some detail as a way of further indicating the material context of the survival struggle faced by the women of Vulindlela.

Having focused in these two chapters on the specific context of the study, in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I turn to a theoretical analysis of the intersection between development, feminisms, and faith in a broader perspective. Chapter 4 engages the gender and development debate as it has emerged globally over the past thirty years, and I use the emerging theoretical parameters to shape my analysis and my work. Development questions are intimately related to the literal survival of millions of women and children who live in areas such as Vulindlela. These women employ their own survival strategies, strategies deeply informed by their faith, in order to survive. In discussing these strategies, I argue that religion has not been sufficiently acknowledged by gender activists as a key resource for poor and marginalised women. Having shown the interconnectedness of survival and faith, I then critically discuss various approaches to gender and development in the third world. In the South African context, poverty alleviation and gender equity are two central commitments of the post-apartheid government. Despite these commitments, gender activists have expressed theoretical concerns as to the efficacy of development policy adopted by this government. However, women themselves are not in agreement as to the way forward and to this end, the contribution of postmodernism is offered as a part solution to the gender and development theoretical quagmire.

Postmodernism as a theoretical tool, however, potentially renders the feminist project politically impotent. Chapter 5 therefore attempts to sketch the debate between feminism(s) and postmodernism and stresses the necessity of a critical engagement between these two theoretical paradigms. “Feminism” is problematised through critiques by non-western women. These are familiar issues in the South African context, where the “feminist” project is contested terrain, as I show. Postmodernism is then critiqued and its usefulness for the theoretical debate in South Africa outlined. There are key theoretical issues raised by this discussion that intersect with the gender and development debate and my central concern with survival in the previous chapter. They include questions of difference and solidarity, identity, subjectivity, and representation. These issues are discussed and the chapter concludes by exploring my role, as activist-intellectual, in the South African women’s project.

Chapter 6 is an exploration of the third theoretical leg of this study, namely women's theology. Here, an attempt is made to intersect theoretical issues raised by the previous two chapters with women's theology. The focus of this chapter is on the contribution made by South African, continental African, and African American women theologians to this study. I begin the chapter by situating South African women's theology within the context of third world women's theology. This is followed by a discussion on the division that exists within our project as a result of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. Our different subject positions are illustrated through short biographical sketches of Denise Ackermann, Christina Landmann, and Madipoane Masenya. Aspects of the work of each of these South African theologians highlight critical issues in our project that need to be addressed and also make a contribution to this study in particular ways. Ackermann's work raises the question of solidarity and difference, and while her emphasis on contextual liberating praxis makes a contribution to my theological reflection. Landman's work raises the question of the representation of poor and marginalised women, and her emphasis on telling women's stories has undergirded this study. Masenya has addressed directly the question of the naming of our theology, and her emphasis on the Bible as it relates to cultural practices has offered important insights in my practical work. Having discussed each of these dimensions of their work, I then go to examine the contribution of African women's theology. This body of work has made a contribution to my study through its critique of patriarchy from a cultural perspective, and through its emphasis on engaging women in the church. Both these aspects are important elements of this study. Thereafter, African American scholar Delores Williams's (1993) contribution to this study is discussed. She foregrounds survival in the lives of faith of African American women by employing the Biblical figure Hagar, as a prototype of all African American women who "make a way out of no way" in the wilderness. Drawing on her analysis, the chapter concludes with a discussion on how the women of Vulindlela similarly make a way out of no way in the desolation of their struggle to survive.

Survival theologies as subjugated knowledges is the focus of Chapter 7. It begins by discussing the importance of recognising and recovering subjugated theologies of marginalised communities. Two potential sites of subjugated survival theologies are located: the indigenous *manyano* [church women's prayer union] movement, particularly the

Anglican Mothers' Union, and the new embryonic site of the Nxamalala Bible study group. The history of the *manyano* movement and the Mothers' Union is sketched. Thereafter, three dimensions of the survival theologies of indigenous *manyano* women are outlined, namely, their church uniform, their extempore preaching and praying at the Thursday meeting, and their fundraising practices. As a case study, the Nxamalala Bible study group is then discussed as a site of exploration for subjugated survival theologies. The contextual Bible study method is outlined as useful to recognising and recovering these theologies. This is followed by a discussion of the Bible study group process. Here, our collaboration as women across race and class is problematised, the creation of a safe social site as a place where previously hidden forms of discourse might be articulated is discussed, evidence of the emergence of survival theologies outlined, and the effects of our collaborative work on all of us acknowledged. In concluding the chapter, the interconnection between the established site of the Mothers' Union and the embryonic site of the Nxamalala Bible study group for the recognition and recovery of subjugated survival theologies is made.

Resistance to domination and oppression lies at the heart of the women's liberation project. Very often poor and marginalised women, because they do not employ overt strategies of resistance, are seen to lack agency in the struggle against oppression. In Chapter 8 I argue that survival is a form of resistance and that far from lacking agency, poor and marginalised women employ disguised forms of resistance that are not always easily seen or understood. These forms of resistance are analysed using critical tools from the social sciences, particularly those employed by James Scott (1990), in the two resistance sites of the Mothers' Union and the Nxamalala Bible study group. Resistance to colonial and ecclesiastical domination by the Mothers' Union in South Africa and emerging resistance discourse in the Bible study group in Nxamalala is discussed. In giving agency to the poor and marginalised women, the role of the activist-intellectual comes into question. The chapter concludes with a discussion on her role in collaborative resistance activity with poor and marginalised women. I explore the role she might play in assisting with the securing of safe social sites where the articulation of resistance discourse can take place, and also in being a boundary crosser as she lives in the worlds of both the dominant and dominated.

The study concludes by intersecting faith, feminisms, and development by using survival as

the central integrating concept. The conclusion demonstrates the important intersections of this inter-disciplinary project and indicates why the recovery of subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised women is crucial to all our liberative work.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCING THE MAIN CHARACTERS OF THIS STUDY

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter an account of the main characters of this study is given. It tells the story of my involvement with indigenous African Christian¹ women of the Vulindlela area outside Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.² It begins by locating these stories in the specific history of the Anglican church in the area to which most women that I worked with belonged. This narrative includes biographies of the main characters, who I identify as myself and my field assistant Nonhlanhla Magubane, together with two groups of women residing in the Vulindlela area in two different wards, Sweetwaters (Mpumuza 1) and Nxamalala.³ The first part of the narrative incorporates the stories of elderly women who are members of the Mothers' Union⁴ of St Raphael's Anglican church, Sweetwaters.⁵ Twelve women were interviewed about their involvement with the Mothers' Union. I have included aspects of three of the women's stories which highlight different issues in their lives. The second part of the narrative includes the story of my involvement with a group of women who are

¹ While not always referring to the women I work with in Vulindlela as specifically Christian, this is assumed throughout the study.

² After 1994, the borders of South Africa were revised and nine provinces were constituted including the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The region has been referred to in various ways in the literature. During the nineteenth century, the area south of the Tugela river and north of the Umzimkulu river in the south was known as Natal. The area north of the Tugela River up to the Mozambique border was known as Zululand. During the apartheid government and particularly during their 1970s homeland policy, this division became complicated. The region known as KwaZulu during this era included the former Zululand as well as "black spots" within the former boundaries of Natal. The entire region came under a single provincial control in 1994. See Maps 1 and 2. I deal with the socio-political and historical aspects of the Vulindlela area in the next chapter.

³ See Map 2 for the location of these two wards within the context of the entire Vulindlela area.

⁴ The Mothers' Union is a women's organisation within the Anglican church that began in England in the late nineteenth century. It was initiated in South Africa by female missionaries in the early twentieth century. I discuss this history in more detail in section 7.3.2.

⁵ See Map 2 for the geographic location of St Raphael's church, Sweetwaters, within the Vulindlela area.

members of St Gabriel's Anglican church, Nxamalala, and some of their non-Anglican neighbours.⁶ For two and half years we studied the Bible together. Nonhlanhla Magubane's role in this study is significant as will become more evident in later chapters. She acted as interpreter and transcriber of the Zulu field notes, without which my work with the women would not have been possible. Her story I have narrated from her own written reflections on her involvement in the group process.

I introduce narrative at this early stage of the study because perhaps it enables the reader to begin to experience something of the "lived experience" of the research. My involvement with the women was more than simply research, it intersected with my work as assistant parish priest and I engaged in their lives in profound pastoral ways that extended way beyond the scope of this study. One of the frustrations about writing up this study has been a sense of being unable to adequately convey this profound lived reality that was mine as I experienced the privilege of being both priest and researcher. I was intimately involved in the lives of the women I worked with and simultaneously involved in a process that self-consciously reflected on the process of this work. Within feminist scholarship there has been an emphasis on narrative, life stories, and auto/biography as an appropriate methodological tool for academic research, as discussed in the previous chapter (Chanfrault-Duchet 1991; Cotterill and Letherby 1993; Etter-Lewis 1991; PNG 1989; Salazar 1991). Given my commitment to give voice to those who are usually silenced, it seemed appropriate to situate biography in these early stages of the study. This also foregrounds my personal experience of the research as a "lived reality", while at the same time implicitly raising issues of our identity as women in South Africa. These identity issues are crucial to this study where the intersection of faith, feminisms, and development are explored.

But before narrating the stories of the main characters of the study, the historical context of the Anglican Church in Vulindlela is sketched briefly because it is the immediate setting of the research process.

2.2 History of the Anglican Churches in the Vulindlela area

⁶ See Map 2 for the geographic location of St Gabriel's church, Nxamalala, within the Vulindlela area.

The work of the Anglican Church in the Vulindlela area is centred around two congregations. The larger, more established congregation is known as St Raphael's and is situated in Sweetwaters. St Gabriel's, a much smaller congregation, is situated in Nxamalala. They fall under the jurisdiction of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa within the Diocese of Natal.

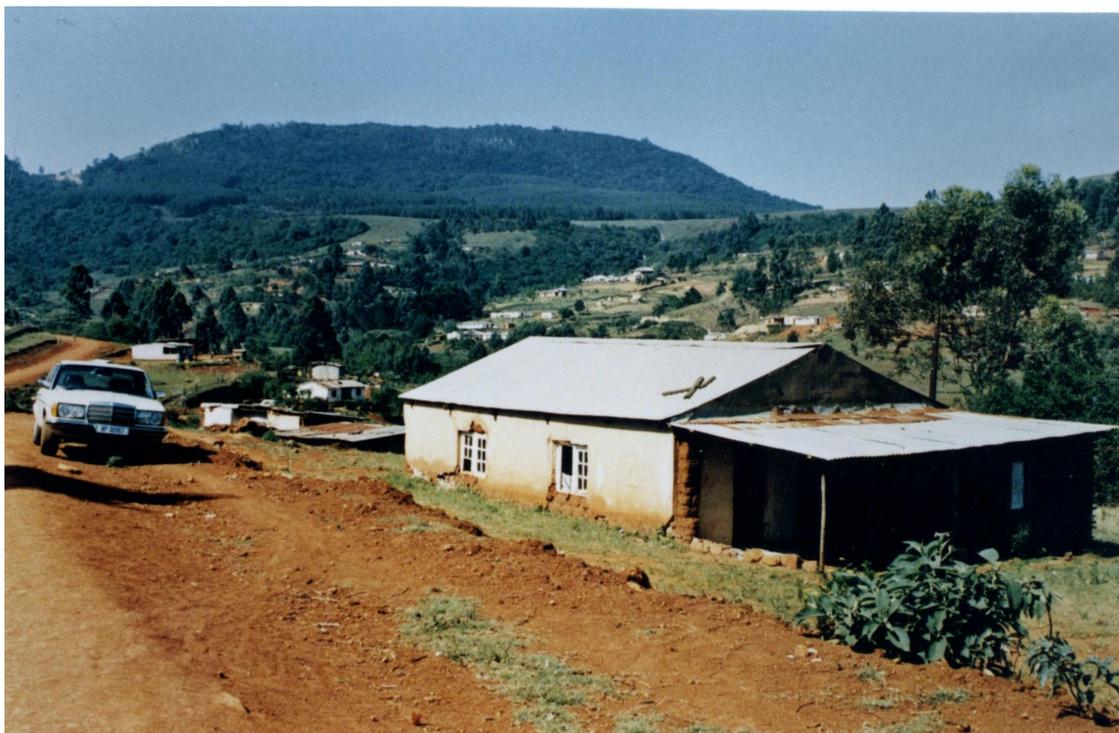


St Raphael's Anglican Church, Sweetwaters

St Raphael's Church was built and dedicated in 1971, after most of the parishioners had been moved out of the Winterskloof/ Hilton area through the implementation of the 1950 Group Areas Act in the 1960s. Until then there had been a thriving congregation worshipping at St Michael's, Winterskloof⁷ which had been part of the "native [sic] mission work" instituted by the Kirby-Hilton parish in 1909. Kirby-Hilton employed a catechist and later provided the resources for the building of a small mud structure in 1919, built by members of the "native"

⁷ Winterskloof is now part of the Hilton local transitional council which serves an area that was declared for whites only under the Group Areas Act of 1950. The racial demographics of this area have not substantially changed since the new dispensation in 1994. Neither have those of Vulindlela.

congregation (Natal Diocese A n.d.). Eventually, this mud structure was replaced with a brick building, named St Michael's, in 1932 through the efforts of a committee from the Kirby-Hilton parish which also included the then catechist Mr Titus Gule (Lake n.d.). The first lay preacher, Mr Abia Khana, was followed by Mr William Nzimande from 1944 to 1952 (Lake n.d.). Mr Titus Gule who had formerly been the catechist became a lay preacher in 1953 and lived in the cottage behind the church. He was followed by Mr Gilbert Lakaye in 1957 who ministered there until he retired in 1992 and moved to Imbali where he lived until his death in 1999. Together with this band of lay preachers who dedicated their lives to building up the church in the area, two white clergymen are, in my experience, also fondly remembered by the members of St Raphael's, Canon Robinson and Bishop Hallows, both of whom were involved in monthly Eucharistic services first at St Michael's and then at St Raphael's. In fact it seems from my discussions with parishioners involved at that time, that they literally helped build St Raphael's church.



St Gabriel's Church, Nxamalala

Continuing the long history of the Kirby-Hilton parish's "missionary responsibility" to the

Vulindlela area, it seconded Graham Beggs as a community worker there in 1978 (Cowley 1993:48). Because of the distance between Nxamalala and St Raphael's Church in Sweetwaters, the Anglicans living in Nxamalala met in the homes of local lay preachers, Mr Khumalo and Mr Khambule for morning prayers before St Gabriel's, a small mud structure, was built with the financial assistance of that parish and the efforts of the community during the 1980s. Once a month they would walk first to St Michael's and later to St Raphael's for a Eucharist service. Today, the clergy conduct the monthly Eucharistic services at St Gabriel's church.

My colleague, Rev Lincie Cele, after being a lay preacher in the area for many years, was ordained a community priest in 1993⁸, and made priest-in-charge in 1996, the year I joined him as the assistant-priest in the what had been declared a "Development District" in the Diocese of Natal.

In this short history, the names of the male leadership are prominent. However, it is my contention that it is the women, who are in the majority, who have developed and sustained the life of these congregations. It is to their stories and mine that I now turn. I begin with my story as a way of foregrounding my autobiography and thereby socially locating myself in relation to those I work with. This is not to suggest any priority, but rather to give recognition to the importance of my social location as researcher.

2.3 My story

2.3.1 Childhood and racial ambiguities

My maternal grandfather arrived in Port Elizabeth by boat from the Lebanon in 1899. He

⁸ Rev Cele is employed as principal of a local primary school where he has taught for most of his working life. He had to flee the political violence and abandon his home at Table Mountain, outside Pietermaritzburg, in 1990 when he came to live in Vulindlela. As a community priest, he is ordained to work only within the area and does so without remuneration.

established himself economically by travelling around the Eastern Cape and later the Orange Free State with a small horse-drawn cart full of wares that he sold to farmers. Once he had finally settled in Ficksburg and opened a store, he returned to Lebanon to marry. My grandmother arrived in South Africa as a young woman of seventeen, hardly speaking any English, and the bride of an arranged marriage. My paternal grandparents came to South Africa from Lebanon not long after and settled on a farm, also in the Orange Free State. The families set about the process of enculturation into the existing racially stratified society. When the National Party came into power in 1948 and rumours of a system of racial classification began to do the rounds, my maternal grandfather, a prominent leader in the Lebanese community, became part of an advocacy group that insisted on “white” status for their community. The government was unsure what to make of these “Syrians”, as was stamped in their passports. Finally, after resisting classification as “other Asian”, the lobbyists managed to convince the authorities of their “whiteness” on the basis of their Christian faith, despite the colour of their skin which suggested, including myself, otherwise. The many generations of Lebanese South Africans that have since followed have enjoyed the socio-economic privileges that came with this racial classification. However, the colour of my skin did not let me escape the social discrimination that was so rife in South African society. Let me share an example that typified many of my childhood experiences.

When I was about seven years old, my mother took me on an outing to the Johannesburg Zoo. Having walked around for most of the morning, she offered to pay for me to have a ride on the pony. As she sat under the tree in a position to witness the whole event, I excitedly clutched the money she had given me and went to the booth to buy my ticket. The bespectacled man behind the glass looked at me with a worried frown on his face as I stood on tip toes and held out the money. After a pause, he asked, “What nationality are you?” Confused by this response to my request for a ticket, I hesitated and eventually responded, “I’m Lebanese”. The frown grew deeper as he suggested that he “had no idea what *that* means” and therefore refused to sell me a ticket.⁹ By now thoroughly confused and bewildered and without any idea that he was worried by the darkness of my skin colour, I ran off crying to my mother. Hearing the story, she marched up to the ticket counter demanding

⁹ At that time only white children were allowed to ride the ponies at the Johannesburg zoo.

to know what the problem was. On seeing my mother who is of fair complexion he quickly apologised and sold her a ticket.

For the rest of my childhood and teenage years I never again openly declared, “I am Lebanese”. I had learnt my lesson, from then when in doubt I affirmed that I was “South African”, which meant that I understood myself to be “white” in our racially conscious society. I lived in a white suburb, went to a white school, and played with white friends. Yes, I was Lebanese. It was the birthplace of all four of my grandparents. But, from then on my Lebanese background was secondary, to be ignored, hidden, or grudgingly acknowledged as social situations dictated.

2.3.2 Adulthood and African identity

I had never considered myself “African”. That meant you were “black” and as my childhood experience at the zoo (and there were many other experiences like that) had taught me that if I was going to make it in this racially conscious society, I had to at all costs declare my “whiteness”! As I became older, internal conflict around my identity grew. On the one hand, I felt the need to deny my Lebanese inheritance because it suggested through skin colour that I was not “white”, yet on the other hand I did not have an “acceptable” Anglo-Saxon background that legitimated my “whiteness”.

But I lived in the “white” world, and I knew very little else. The only “African” people I knew were those who worked for my parents as domestic servants or gardeners. One woman, Rosie Tshabalala, began working as a domestic servant when I was eight years old. She was like a second mother to me. Yet, re-reading letters that I wrote to my sister who was away from home at that time, I had clearly adopted the racist values of the home in which I had been nurtured, even towards Rosie Tshabalala. When I arrived at the University of the Witwatersrand in the mid-1970s, I began to meet people from a variety of racial backgrounds who exploded my narrow world of black servitude. I began to make friends with those who

unashamedly declared their blackness.¹⁰

This was the beginning of a tentative counter-exploration of my parents' racist values, as well as a search for my identity as a second-generation South African. However, despite the political turmoil of that decade which was evident on the campus as sectors of the student body demonstrated on campus, invoking the ire of the police, my search did not move me into political action. Without being absolutely sure why this was so, it is perhaps best answered by the fact that my encounters with black South African students were largely within the structures of the Students' Christian Association (SCA) which at the time adopted a conservative theological stance on active political involvement. Nonetheless, these friendships opened up the possibility for me of exploring "other" ways of identifying myself in the South African context. At the very least I began to recognise and articulate my privilege as well as my culpability for the social injustices of our society.

After graduating as a social worker, I spent a few months travelling around the United States of America in 1980. While I was staying with a family in Houston, Texas, I was invited to speak on South Africa at a high school close to the Mexican border which was attended mostly by teenagers originally from Mexico. Having now recognised my complicity in apartheid as a white South African, I felt compelled to declare my identity to the classroom full of eager faces. So I stood up and opened my presentation on South Africa declaring, "I am a white South African who has enjoyed the privileges of that racially divided society". During the question time afterwards, the classroom exploded with angry voices demanding how I could possibly call myself a white South African when I looked just like them (in fact darker than a few of them). They went on, angrily outlining their experiences of discrimination in the United States, and with outrage declared that given my skin colour, I "had no right" to benefit from white South Africa. I confess to feeling shocked and at a loss for words. My understanding of being a "white" South African was being fundamentally

¹⁰ Throughout this study, I use this term "black" to corporately refer to those who were not classified "white" by the apartheid government. The Black Consciousness movement adopted "black" as a positive self defined term that stood in opposition to the apartheid category "non-white" which defined blackness in terms of others (Frostin 1988:85-89).

challenged. It seemed that it was not enough to declare my privilege. Skin colour identified me with the marginalised. This had never occurred to me.

A few years later in 1983 I was studying in the United Kingdom, and was standing in a queue in the American Embassy in London, waiting to apply for a visa to visit friends there. In front of me, a fair-skinned woman was engaged in a discussion with a man also waiting in the queue. Very quickly, I realised from the discussion, which I became more and more interested in, that she was from Lebanon and was trying to enter the United States to meet up with her brother who lived there. Engrossed and intrigued in the conversation she was having about the situation in Lebanon, as I had never met a person from Lebanon before, (except for the occasional family member visiting South Africa), I was perhaps a little unaware as to how obvious my eavesdropping was. She suddenly spun around and declared, “You are from Lebanon too, aren’t you?” With the same sense of bewilderment that I felt as I clutched my money and asked for ticket to ride the pony all those years earlier, I realised that I did not know how to respond.

This confusion of identity catapulted me into an active identification with those less privileged than myself. Through a series of events, I became politically active in the struggle for justice in South Africa and increasingly chose to recognise myself as a South African African who is “not quite white”. For me, my chosen identity as an African reflects my desire to choose Africa as my home and place of location of my theology and life’s work. I have chosen to be shaped by “blackness” rather than by “whiteness” as I live and work in the post-apartheid South Africa. The history of my ministry during the last decade reflects this conscious choice and so beginning my work as a priest in Vulindlela was a logical step in this process.

My story would be incomplete, however, without giving recognition to the growing awareness of the force of patriarchy in my life. My Lebanese ancestry has meant that I have grown up in an environment that was also strongly authoritative and patriarchal. My father was the head of the home and had the final say in all matters pertaining to our family. In looking back, particularly over my adolescence, I recognise that my own sense of self, separate from patriarchy, was being nurtured in the all-girls’ high school that I attended.

There I was elected to a number of leadership positions that encouraged confidence and independence separate from men. During my university years this independence grew.

It was at the time that I was untangling my confusion of racial/national identity, that I was simultaneously seeking out networks of women. My own understanding of how patriarchal forces shaped my life developed, as did my growing commitment to my African-ness. This process led me to a recognition that given the complexity of my identity in the South African context, I had to make a choice both in terms of how I constituted my identity in South Africa and *where* I aligned myself within the fractured women's project. My choice has been to actively seek to be constituted as a *woman* by women who are "other" than myself. This is a dynamic process. It is a constant engagement with women such as those I have been working with in Vulindlela who are re-shaping what it means for me to be an African woman with Lebanese ancestors who has grown up economically privileged yet socially discriminated against in the South African context. They continue to help define who I am as we work together.¹¹ It is to their stories that I turn.

2.4 Women of St Raphael's Anglican Church

2.4.1 Setting the scene

Every Sunday I drive from my suburban home near the university across town and into the valleys of Vulindlela nestling on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, to St Raphael's Anglican church. A journey that takes about twenty minutes in which the changing socio-economic realities of South Africa are brought sharply into focus.

Those who arrive first at the small church building, begin singing choruses as they wait for the service to begin. Slowly people filter in mostly clad in black skirts, white blouses, and a black hat; the designated church uniform of the Mothers' Union (MU). By the time we have

¹¹ In section 5.5.5 I discuss what it means theoretically to "unlearn one's privilege" (Spivak 1988; Landry and Maclean 1996), to "collaborate" with those I work with (Cochrane 1999; Schüssler Fiorenza 1989; Sylvester 1995), and to be "partially constituted" by those "other" than myself (Welch 1990; West 1999).

processed into the church and are seated at the front, the facts are clear - 95% of the active congregation are women and children. As I look around me, the harsh realities of daily struggle etched on their faces, it does not take long to realise that God is central to their life experience. No matter what they have had to endure, it is God who sustains them.

The life stories of these women are filled with details of suffering and exploitation. But interwoven into their life is the church and their love for God. There is no distinction between a life in the world and a life in the church. Both are integral to their story.

2.4.2 Their stories

Let me introduce you to three women who are members of the MU at St Raphael's church. The stories are recounted in their own words as told to myself and Nonhlanhla during the interviews we conducted.¹² I have chosen to recount excerpts from three stories which highlight the way in which the women's life in the church and life in the world are integrated in their lived reality. These particular excerpts have also been chosen because they represent different aspects of survival in the face of suffering that the women of Vulindlela face, which I will introduce at the beginning of each of the stories.

¹² Twelve short stories from interviews we conducted with women who have been members of the Mothers' Union for about 50 years have been published in a Zulu/English booklet (Haddad and Magubane 1999). Before publication, the stories were read back to the narrators by Nonhlanhla to ensure that the women themselves experienced them as authentic. The booklet was primarily written as a community resource and launched at a special service where the women involved in the project were acknowledged for the role they had played in the life of the congregation.

The excerpt from Sophia Ntombela's story illustrates the enduring effects of poverty and illness on children in rural areas. In her case, she was born in an even more rural area than Vulindlela, and saw coming to the "city" as a way of survival. Her ethnic Sotho background, in contrast to the mainly Zulu speaking Vulindlela, mattered little in the face of death. Mrs¹³ Ntombela, a sickly child, was forced to give up school and work as a domestic worker, accepting that she would need to become a child labourer in order to survive. She begins her story by going so far as to describe her geographical birth place according to a parish church delimitation. Her story ends with her marriage, a symbol of greater material security and her church membership. And so for her, the church is integrated as an anchor in her life amidst the suffering that she has faced. Mrs Ntombela tells her story in her own words (Sophia Ntombela, 6 May 1998, Sweetwaters):

Mina ngazalelwa eStepmore endaweni okuthiwa iseLotheni

*kodwa kuphakathi koMkhomaas neLotheni,
 kwesinye isikhathi sibiza ngokuthi kuseStoffelton
 kodwa kungenxa yokuba iPerish yethu
 kuseStoffelton angisho njalo. Ngazalelwa lapho
 ke ukuza kwami lapha ngafika ngisemncane
 kakhulu ngini 12 years, ngangigula manje usbali
 wami othathe udadewethu wayesebenza lapha
 eWinterskloof ngeza ke ngize kadokotela
 ngasengiyahlala khona kusho ukuthi uMrs
 wakhona wayenomusa kakhulu ngoba
 ngesikhathi ngifika lapho wangithatha,
 ngiyasheshisa? Manje wayesengithatha
 engixubanisa nezisebenzi zakhe uMrs lo,
 ngahlala nje wayesengifundisa umsebenzi
 ngahlala ke lapho ngaze ngasebenza nje*

¹³ Throughout this study, when referring to the women with whom I have worked, I more often than not do so using the title "Mrs". All the women that I have focused on have been married. The women themselves would refer to one another in public in this way. I have deferred to their preference and want to respect their common practice. I do so, however, fully aware of the ambiguous and contested nature of this title.

*ngahlala ke ngangabe ngisaya ekhaya sengiya
nje ekhaya ngokuvakasha. Ngihlala ke ngaze
ngashada ke lapha eSweetwater, kodwa
sasilaphaya phezulu eWinterskloof eSt.
Michaels. Inkonzo yami yiyo le nasekhaya
ngangisonta khona eAnglican...*

I was born at Stepmore, the place called Loteni, which is situated between Mkomaas and Loteni. Sometimes we call it Stoffelton, but it is because our parish is in Stoffelton, let me say that. That's where I was born. When I came here I was too little, I was 12 years old and I was sick. Then, my sister's husband was working in Winterskloof. I came to see the doctor and I stayed there because Mrs there was merciful, because when I came there she took me. Then she mixed me with her employees, then she taught me the job and I worked and didn't go home. I used to visit home. I stayed until I got married here in Sweetwaters, but we were up there at Winterskloof at St. Michael's. This is my church, even at home I was an Anglican...

Josephinah Nene, unlike Sophia Ntombela, says little about her childhood but places emphasis at the beginning of her story on her life in the church. A great storyteller, Mrs Nene poignantly describes the search for food, the exploitation and hardship endured to earn a few pounds, and the struggle to provide for her family. Skilfully she weaves the place of children into her story, bathing them and carrying them on their backs as "they walked to church", to ending her story with the struggle to provide for them. We are reminded in her description of her search for food, that the search would occur even "when we were coming from church". Her story is a living example of how theological resources are key to poor women in their struggle for survival against poverty. For Mrs Nene, her "life in the world" and her "life in the church" are all part of the same story (Josephinah Nene, 24 April 1998; 1 May 1998, Sweetwaters):

Oh, Ukuqala kwami ngaqala eNkampani, kuthiwa kukaSmith igama. Lapho yindawo nje okuthiwa yiseNkampani yabelungu ngaseHilton. Ngale phansi

kuthiwa yiseMngenyane ehlanzeni... ehe... Ehe ngabelethelwa khona ke ngasukake lapho sengihlakaniphile sayokwakha kaHaza, sabuya ke lapho sengikhulile ngagana ngashada ngisonta emaRomini ngiyiKhatholika... Ngaphuma ke lapho ke ngashada ke kwaNene ke ngaphuma ke emaRomini manje ngazongena la eSheshi manje kumkhwenyana. Ngahlala ke khona ke ngangena eSheshi ke uMfundisi wami ke kwakunguLobinsen umfundisi oMhlophe ehe, okunguyena ke engathi uma sengingena eSontweni laseSheshi wathi mangikhuphuke ngize lapha eAltha angibusise ngoba ngingowaseSontweni lasemaRomini angizufunda imithetho yaseSheshi ngoba ngiphuma emaRomini. Hayi ke ngahlala ke khona kwaNene ke ngasonta ke ngasonta ke eyi omama behamba oLweSine nathi sabona manje singomakoti nami ngabona manje ukuthi angiwuhambe uLweSine, ngabona umuhle uLweSine. Ngithathe umtanami ngimgeze ngilandele komana sifike sihlale phansi ishe inkonzo kube mnandi kube wuba. Hayi ngezwa nami impela sengithanda manje ngathi hayi Mama sengiyafuna ukujoyina manje, wathi hawu usuyajoyina ngathi ehe sengiyajoyina impela manje ngangena nami ejoyinini manje ngaba yinkosikazi ejoyinayo manje. Sisuke le ngezinyawo size la eHilton ehe kukhona inkonzo lapha eHilton sizosonta khona ke ehe sibelete izingane emhlane. Sibuye siphindele emuva futhi kude uyabona sihamba indawo sizihlupha ngokukholwa uma eza nje uMfundisi sazi ukuthi uyeza silale singalele sijahile ukuthi nje kufuneka silungise konke masinya sigeze masinyane nezingane sizigqokise nathi sigqoke sihambe. Kukhale insimbi yeSonto sinikele eSontweni kanjalo nje...

Ewu sasiphila kanzima sihlupheka siphuma esontweni sihambe siye ehlathini siyokukha imifini ehlathini lesizulu siyikhe siyikhe lemifini siyafika emakhaya sesiyagaya ke manje sigaye impuhu uyabona sishaye ummbila etsheni siqothe siqothe impuphu... Ehe, sihlupheka sisuka le endaweni ekude siya le eMerrivale, sothwala umthwalo sothwala umbila uposiwe kwenye indawo uposwe ngabadala ekhaya ukuthi nanku ummbila siwulande egushede uthengiwe. Sithwale lapha emakhanda sisuke izwe elikude siye sofika emakhaya nalemithwalo sihamba sihlupheka, sidlani sihambe sidla uyayazi ke

wena intebe. Sikha intebe kukhona loku okuluhlaza okumila ngasemfuleni, sihambe sikukhe sikukhe sikuhlube sikushumpule sikuthi shumpu phakathi sifakeebhodweni kuvuthwe siloku sikuthela amanzi ngoba kuyakhakha futhi. Uqalelele kube manje uyakupheka manje kuzole kugxabhe njalo koze kube ntambama senzela ukuthi kungakhakhi lapha. Sikubonde ke manje sesisheba ke manje mhlambe yipharishi mhlambe yimpuphu ubonda ipharishi ubonde sishebe ke nalokhu sishebe ke. Ehe sihlupheka kuqala. Sisuke ke manje sesisemsebenzini ke manje siyasebenza siyaxebula imithi ke lena uyawazi ke wena uwatela. Sixebule sixebue amagxolo hlambe made siyawadweshula mhlambe sithi siyawashaya abe ngowafu omkhulu ongaka bese siwabeka ke lapha phansi ke siwabeka izixha ezingaka sibophe sibophe ishumi lamagxolo namagxolo amabili kube yimakhathi kuthiwa uqede isitokwe ke, futhi siholani sihola imali encane kusaholwa dade opondo abathathu uthi uholile impela uthi iningi. Hawu kade kuhlushekwa kuqala phezu kuthiwa kushibhile ethawini kodwa imali ibe incane. Uma unezingane nje yini into ozoyithenga uthengele izingane uthengele nawe nawe uyafuna lapho nendoda nayo iyafuna lapho akukho lutho sidle ukudla okukhathele nje uyazi nje. Yimanje masesibusa manje hayi manje sesiyabusa manje ngoba sesiyadla, ntiye leli itiye leli singalidli itiye leli uma udle itiye kube engathi udle into enkulu. Izinkwa lezi zijabule izingane uma uya ethawini mhlambe ubuye nesinkwa kujabule nabadala bezodla isinkwa nje uyabona, hayi sasihlupheka kabi kodwa siphila sihamba siya emasontweni phezu kwaloko. Sigaye ematsheni sigaye izitambu sele, mtshela isingisi ngesitambu sisigaya etsheni ke thina sisele emnyango kukhona umoya. Lokhu ngoba sisigaya etsheni kuphephuke loku kommbila kuphephuke kusale loku kommbila. Sisigeze sisigeze sisifake eziko sipheke sifake ubhontshisi nobhontshisi mhlambe mncane yinkomishana nje ehe. Awu angikhulumi kona uma kufakwe nopelepele sithi hawu kumnandi kuyasha sihluphekile uyabona nje. Hayi sengiqedile ke

Oh as for my start I started at eNkampani [a company]; it's name is Smith. It's just a place called eNkampani, for a abelungu [white person] near Hilton. Down there, it is called Mngenyane. Yes, it's where I was born. Then when I

was clever [had grown], we moved to Haza. When I was old, I got married. I used to go to Roman [the Roman Catholic Church]. I was a Catholic... Then I got married to Nene and left the Roman Church and joined my husband at Anglican [the Anglican Church]. I joined Anglican. My *Mfundisi* [priest] was Robinson, the white *umfundisi*. He is the one who called me to come up to the altar and blessed me because I was a Catholic. I was not going to be able to learn the Anglican rules because I was from Catholic. Then I stayed at Nene and attended the services. Mothers used to go to Thursday meetings and we realized as *makotis* [young married women]... I realized that I should join. The Thursdays it was a good thing. I would take my child, bath him and follow the mothers. We would sit down and the service would be so much burning. Until I felt that I liked it. I said, "No mama, I want to join now". I joined and became a joining woman. We used to come from far away on foot coming to Hilton to have our services with our children in our backs. And after service we would go back again. We were serious about faith. Whenever *umfundisi* was coming we would know that he is coming and we would sleep without sleeping, being zealous that we have to be ready, quickly bathing our children and dressing them and go. When the bells ring, we quickly go to church, just like that...

Haw, we were having a very hard life, we were very poor. When we were coming from the church, we would go to the forest to go and fetch the *imifino* [green leaf vegetable]. We would fetch this *imifino* and we would go home and grind the mielie meal you see, in the stone... We were suffering coming from too far - going to Merrivale to carry the luggage, to carry the mielies which have been posted by the elder people saying, "here is the mielies". We would collect it from the goat shed. We used to travel long distances carrying the mielies on our heads until we reach home. We were suffering. We used to go eating the *intebe* [green leaf vegetable]. You know *intebe*? Something green which grows by the river. We use to fetch it cut its ends and put it in the pot and continuously putting water in the pot because it irritates [in the throat]. You would cook it from early so that it won't irritate. Like you would be

cooking it now until afternoon so that it won't irritate. Then we would stir it and eat it with the porridge or mielie meal or something. We were suffering in the olden days. When it comes to work - we were taking off the barks, you know the wattle tree? Sometimes they are long, sometimes we are cutting them like this [demonstrating how], we would put them into piles of about twelve barks. Then you have finished, you stack. And how much we were earning? We were earning three pounds, and you would say it is enough? We were suffering. Things were said to be cheaper in town, but the money was too little. If you had children what were you going to buy? Buying for the children and for you and also for your husband, he also wants to have a share. We used to eat bad food, oi ...

In the following excerpt, Miriam Zondi demonstrates the central role the church plays in her life, a characteristic of all the women we interviewed. Mrs Zondi focuses her story on the church structures which brought an end to the wearing of the uniform, a symbol I will later show to be of importance in the spirituality of these women. She emphasised that the removal of her uniform for most of her adult life was a hardship. In fact it took on the same proportion as the hardship endured through an abusive husband and being exploited as a domestic worker. Both these aspects of her life she shared with us later in the same interview. This indicates that even though the lived reality of the women of Vulindlela does not distinguish between a life inside and outside the church, the church structures too can be a source of oppression for women. Mrs Zondi's story vividly illustrates this point (Miriam Zondi, 10 June 1998, Sweetwaters):

Yes, Ngazalelwa eThanhil abazali bami babeseThanhil, eTownhill ngo1927. Basebesukake beza emaplazini eNkaphani ngaseHilton, sahlala ke lapho uBaba wami ke mina wayewuMshumayeli waseSheshi. Ngalesosikhathi uMmfundisi kwakunguCanyon Robinson, owayephethe inkonzo yomama kwakunguMrs Nima. Ngakhulaa ke ngashada ke ngo1945 December 23ngashada ke eSontweni sahlala ke ngathola umntwana wokuqala sengishadile sabuya seza laphaya uyabona kuMita laphaya esalukazini sasakhe ngalapho. Lapho kukhona khona uMita usashona uMita uyena

owayengumkhokheli wethu sakhokhelwa wuyena sajoyina ke inhlango yomama ingekho iyunifomu ingagqokwa iyunifomu kwakugqokwa noma iyiphi ingubo. Kwasekuba khona uMkhathekisi uGule wathi kufuneka sibe neyunifomu wathi asibe neziketi ezimnyama nanablawzi aphephli. AbaBhishophi abamhlophe bathi , abafundisi babelungu bathi uGule uzonqunywa enkonzweni ngoba uthatha ingubo yabaBhishophi uphephli athi awugqokwe ngomama yayekwa ke iyunifomu ayangaba khona abanye basebewathengile amablowse aphephli ayekwa. Bangavuma yayekwa ke iyunifoma leyo kwahlalwa ke kwahamba kwahamba nje sengimdala nje kwaba yikhona iqhamuka futhi leyunifoma ukuthi asigqoke ublack and white ehe...

Yes I was born in Townhill, my parents were at Townhill, in 1927. Then they moved to the farm near Hilton at *eNkamphani*. We stayed there. My father was a preacher at Anglican. At that time the *mfundisi* was Canyon Robinson. Mrs Nima was in charge of the Mothers' services. I grew up and got married in 1945, December 23. I got married in the church, then I gave birth to a first born child, then we came here. You see, Mita, the old lady, we had our home next to where she is. Mita was the *mkhokheli* [parish leader of the MU]. She has passed on, she is the one who was our *mkhokheli*, who made us join the Mothers Union. There was no uniform. We used to wear any kind of dress. Then there was Gule, the catechist, he said we should have a uniform. He said it should be white skirts and purple blouses. The white bishops said that Gule will be removed from the church because he is saying that mothers should wear the bishop's dress. Then the uniform was taken off. Some had bought some purple blouses, it was taken off. Then it remained like that until when I was old, the uniform came back again, that we should wear the black and white.

These three excerpts from the stories of Sophia Ntombela, Josephinah Nene, and Miriam Zondi, draw us into their lives. They reflect a tapestry that weaves together the threads of the women's life in the world and their life in the church. In so doing these women demonstrate their faith as they struggle to survive, and inasmuch typify the life of all the women I have

come to know in Vulindlela. It is the weaving together of these two central threads that is crucial to what I have termed the “survival theologies” of poor and marginalised African women. These working theologies of survival which hold in tension a “life in the world” and a “life of faith”, are, I suggest, a key to the intersection of faith, feminisms, and development (see section 4.2.4, Chapters 7 and 8).

Through these stories we catch a glimpse of the lives of members of St Raphael’s church, Sweetwaters, as recounted by elderly women who have lived through decades of change in South Africa. Their narratives are a reminder of the legacy of those women whose stories will never be told because they died not knowing liberation in 1994, nor the experience of the consecration of the first black bishop to lead the Diocese of Natal, the Rt Rev Rubin Phillip, in February 2000. Given these changes in the community and church, there are now possibilities for women’s voices to be heard more overtly. It was these possibilities brought about through this changing context, that motivated my Bible study work with a group of women based at St Gabriel’s church, Nxamalala. As a project, it became an experiment in doing women’s theology across culture, race, and class. I now turn to the story of the beginnings of this project and to the story of the second group of women, who live in Nxamalala.

2.5 Women of Nxamalala

2.5.1 Setting the scene

My first contact with members of St Gabriel’s, Nxamalala, was in July 1996. On that first day my colleague Lincie Cele and I attempted to transverse the hill with great difficulty in my car that was not designed for that road! We eventually conceded that we were not going to make it using the direct road up to the church, so he directed me via a more roundabout route. The final stretch found me edging the car along a narrow track with overgrown bushes on either side and down a steep ungraded, rocky descent to the little mud building in front that is the church.

The church with its crumbling mud walls and broken windows and frames looked slightly

forlorn and neglected with a very small congregation of not more than twenty people. There were signs of the scars of the political violence that had been particularly fierce in the area. The congregation had been unable to meet for a number of years as they were literally geographically divided by political affiliation. Some members lived on the one side of the valley that was controlled by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) while other members lived on the side on which the church is built and is controlled by the African National Congress (ANC). It has taken years for trust to begin to develop again and for members to return to worship.

After about a year of working in Nxamalala, I had begun to feel despondent that there were no signs of active involvement by the church in working together to alleviate the extent of their poverty. One morning, while waiting to conduct a Eucharist service outside the building while the service of Morning Prayer was completed by the lay ministers, I looked across the valley to where the remains of burnt out houses were still visible. The valley symbolized for me the senseless violence and division of KwaZulu-Natal which seemed to be dictated primarily by the needs of the male leaders, with ordinary people, especially women, being caught in the crossfire. Over the previous months, through a variety of incidents, I had been struck by how stifling working in the Vulindlela area had felt to me. It is a place where political and cultural conservatism abounds together with strong patriarchal control by the *indunas* [local head men]. People do what they are told, especially the women and children! That day I made a decision to act. As I looked over the valley with the now familiar voices singing in the background, I decided to invite women to join a Bible study group and see what the response was like. I would work out the logistics later! I made the invitation at the end of the service and a small group of women gathered afterwards. Taking a strong lead in facilitating the meeting (something expected of me as the priest), we agreed to meet the next week. And so began a journey together that would continue for another two and a half years.

2.5.2 Their stories

In this section I briefly introduce some of the key women who attended the Bible study group

meetings.¹⁴ Their stories do not resonate with the personal immediacy and detail of those recounted in section 2.4.2 as they were not recorded through formal interviews. I did not want to interview the members of the group as I felt such a process would possibly jeopardise my attempts to create a space of mutual learning. Formal interviews would establish another set of power dynamics between myself and the women outside of the group process which I believed would complicate my emphasis on mutuality within the group. However, given my stress on the importance of personal narrative in this study, there would be a gap in the text if nothing of the life histories of women in the group is shared.

¹⁴ Since leaving my position as priest in the community in April 2000, the group continues to meet with the Bible studies being facilitated by the gender co-ordinator, Phumzile Zondi, from the Institute for the Study of the Bible, University of Natal.

In order to do this, I have written the following short descriptive paragraphs from my notes on formal information shared during introductory sessions within the group session, as well as from informal discussions and my pastoral work as a priest. They offer biographical details which reflect the life histories of each of the group members and also show some of the differences that exist between the women themselves.¹⁵ I have included biographical details such as age, marital status, number of children, literacy level, and church affiliation or leadership position in St Gabriel's church. These particular aspects of life experience were not chosen at random. Rather, I came to understand that they each played a role in the power relationships that developed within the group process (see section 8.5.2). They are often interwoven with patriarchal and cultural forces that circumscribe these women's lives. My purpose in this section, however, is not to reflect theoretically on these power dynamics, but rather to offer the stories of the women of Nxamalala as their lived reality.¹⁶

Them bani Khoza¹⁷, one of the older woman, is married to a lay minister of the church who is also the secretary of the local community council. As there is no full time priest, her husband's status in the church is significant. Through her marriage, Mrs Khoza occupies a powerful position amongst the women in the church, and assumes the leadership role normally assigned to the priest's wife. The Anglican church is her adopted church affiliation, having belonged to an African Independent Church before her marriage.¹⁸ Her own family members attached to this church conduct all night vigils in her home at times of death or illness, suggesting that in spite of cultural custom, she has retained her own family's church ties. Mrs Khoza has nine children, two of whom have passed away, and four grandchildren. A particular aspect of her suffering relates to the disappearance of one of her daughters

¹⁵ As I will indicate in section 5.3, "third world women" do not speak with one voice. Likewise "women of Vulindlela" are not an essentialist category, but are themselves caught up in competing and conflicting interests.

¹⁶ The stories of most of the women who attended the group on a *regular* basis have been included. Lindiwe Khabela and Sibongile Mbele were in regular attendance, but only at certain moments in the process. They remained marginal members and I have not included their biographical narratives because of my limited understanding of their stories.

¹⁷ Because of the personal nature of the group discussions, the names of the women who attended the Nxamalala Bible study group have been changed to protect their identity.

¹⁸ A Zulu woman is expected to adopt the church affiliation of her husband's family at marriage.

during the political violence. Her daughter's body has never been found which continues to be a source of great pain. Mrs Khoza is semi-literate having attained a Standard Four level of education.

Busisiwe Khabela was born near to Vulindlela in Howick. She is one of the younger women who is married with four children ranging in ages from twenty years to two years old. As a *makoti* [a young married woman] from a family which has a long history of lay ministry among the men, she has a responsibility for ensuring the involvement of younger women in the MU. She is married to the brother of another influential lay minister in the church, but her husband does not attend church in any regular way. Mrs Khabela is literate and often reads the Biblical text in our group discussions.

Phumla Ngema is a widow who is of a good age, yet amazingly active and strong. She lives alone and does not have children which often evoked particular pity from the other members. As a member of a local African Independent Church, her insights into the group Bible study were often infused with an emphasis on the Holy Spirit which other members in the group found refreshing. She is forthright and direct in her responses and often spoke out when others were afraid to do so. She is illiterate and given her age, sometimes found it difficult to engage with the text directly. As the group grew and became more focused on the Anglican church in the last year of the process, she stopped attending the meetings.

Ntombi Shabalala is also a member of an African Independent Church. An older woman, she is also a widow who cares for a number of grandchildren while her grown up children are employed and reside in Durban. While we were together, her eldest son who lives in a hostel, was seriously injured in an attack and almost died. As a key breadwinner, her son's recovery was crucial to her and her family's survival. This incident generated enormous anxiety and thereafter she began attending the group irregularly and eventually did not attend during the last six months. Mrs Shabangu too is illiterate.

Thoko Zitha is one of the younger women in the group but has a shared experience with some of the older women in that she is a widow. Her husband died as a young man leaving her to care for their three small children. She herself was orphaned while still a child. Thus she

never had the opportunity to go to school, despite other women her own age doing so. Members of the group felt particularly empathetic to her situation and would use the meetings to encourage her in her struggle to survive and bring up her children. She lives in her late husband's homestead together with her ailing mother-in-law as cultural custom demands. Being the bread winner, feeding her children depended on her being employed. Seeking and finding employment (often temporary) defined her attendance at the group meetings. In the last few months she participated infrequently as she had managed to secure a permanent position as a domestic worker.

Elderly Chiki Ngongo, was held in high esteem by the group and greatly missed when she was not present. This was primarily because she has a wonderful sense of humour. She was the only member to be given a nickname, *imbongi* [praise poet], after she played that role in a drama they enacted after one of the Bible studies. Mrs Ngongo attended meetings erratically at times, as she had the added burden of caring for her husband who was sickly. Her children are all grown, and like most of the older women in the group she cares for a number of grandchildren at her homestead. Mrs Ngongo, despite her age and the fact that she was illiterate, always engaged with the Biblical text in our discussions.

Thandiwe Mdluli was not an active member of the congregation when she started attending the group meetings. Born in urban Ashdown, Mrs Mdluli moved to Vulindlela when she got married. Her husband owns one of the few businesses in the area which is located at the bottom of the hill, a distance from the church. She asked me to speak to her husband (as *umfundisi*) about having time off from working in the business while she attended the group ("church"). I did this, which seemed to enable her to attend regularly. Despite being regarded as a *makoti* by the older women, she became a very strategic member of the group and was sometimes given recognition in ways traditionally reserved for older women. This was probably the case because she is one of the more resourced members of the group in terms of education, access to material resources, and her links with urban township life. Her three children all attend school "in town" and her eldest daughter is currently at university in Pretoria. During the process she has become more active in the church and "took on the uniform" of the MU which for her was an expression of that commitment. She would read during the group sessions, sometimes translate or explain issues to the others, and be drawn

into any practical arrangements that were being made by the women. She also volunteered to attend other activities that I invited the women to, such as a women's workshop on virginity testing. It also became clear, that unlike the others, she had a supportive husband who "allowed" her to do these things and enjoyed engaging with the discussions that took place in the group, even around "women's issues" such as rape, which she shared with him at home. Mrs Mdluli seemed to be the only woman in the group that felt free and able to do this.

Janet Nzimande lives close to Thandiwe Mdluli and together they would meet at the bottom of the hill and wait for the ride up to the church. In terms of age, she assumed an ambiguous position. She was not regarded as a *makoti*, but yet did not often assume an authoritative position in the group process, which most of the older women did. This might have, however, been a reflection of her diffident nature. Mrs Nzimande is a widow, her husband having been killed in a car accident ten years ago. He had been a lay minister in the church and so she was often given recognition as an "important" church member by members of the group. She has a grown son, her teenage daughter having recently passed away leaving a young child in her care. This child always attended the meetings with her. While not quite overtly stated, it was quietly acknowledged that her daughter had probably died of AIDS and recovering from and coping with the consequences of her daughter's death was a particular burden she carried. Mrs Nzimande was literate and contributed to the process by often reading the Biblical text.

Nozipho Zama did not belong to any church. She was not well known by any of the other members as she had moved back to the area just before she arrived at a meeting "to see what was going on". Married with three daughters, she like Mrs Nene, was in an ambiguous position in terms of her age. Mrs Zama was never aligned with either the younger or older members through her own initiative or through the initiative of others. Her behaviour was emotionally erratic which meant she was easily offended. This often left me feeling anxious about her position in the group. During the group process, she began to attend church regularly and clearly felt accepted by the other women who always handled her behaviour far better than I did! It appeared that she did not read and hardly ever engaged with the Biblical texts, but always had a great deal to say when we discussed community issues.

2.6 Nonhlanhla Magubane's story

From the short biographies of the women in the group, it becomes clear that many of them have had to deal with particularly painful events in their life. Their stories allude to a daily struggle for survival. In my experience, the overriding characteristic of the women's lives is their incredible faith in God in the midst of their suffering. It was this aspect of the women's lives that also made an impression on Nonhlanhla Magubane. Initially she was employed to act as interpreter for this project and to transcribe the recordings of the sessions. As her story tells, involvement in the group became more than simply fulfilling a task. Her life too was re-shaped by the women. Nonhlanhla was born in Table Mountain, outside Pietermaritzburg, in 1969. As a five year old child, she moved with her mother and six siblings back to Vulindlela, her mother's birthplace. Her mother, a widow, was struggling to support her family and decided to return to her home where she could rely on the support of her brothers and cousins. She completed her secondary schooling in the area late in her teens. Without many employment prospects, her pastor encouraged her to attend university and with his assistance managed to access financial loans. She began working with the group in her final year at university.

After a year of working together, in a written reflection on what being part of the process has meant to her, she acknowledges that what started out as a means to earn a small income has evolved into a recognition that she like all of us, almost by default, has been part of a process that has shaped her faith and understanding of what it means to be a Christian woman in South Africa today. When we began working together, her faith tradition and experience was a pietistic one, with a strong emphasis on "being born again" and the necessity of "spiritual" salvation. Through her encounters with the women of Vulindlela, faith took on a new dimension. It was intimately related to the day to day life experiences of the women she met. She recounts how the stories of the way in which women coped with the political violence as told to us in interviews, impacted on her understanding of faith. It's clear that there was a shift in emphasis from a God who saved us in the future, to an understanding of a God who is with those who struggle to survive each day, in the present.

In her written reflections at the end of the group process, she made it clear that she felt that our work together has had a significant impact on her life. She has been challenged to rethink what it means to be an African woman which has been a complex process that carries with it inherent contradictions. On the one hand she speaks of learning from the women we worked with that suffering is part of a woman's burden, and says, "I will still have to suffer once I have a husband but I will remain strong". However, on the other hand she asserts that since working with the group she now considers herself a "feminist". She suggests that her "place" as an African woman is to suffer, and yet simultaneously acknowledges that she now recognises that male dominance has "damaged" her and "disadvantaged" her. These ambivalence and ambiguities suggest the complexity of her reconstitution of identity. Nonetheless, the overriding acknowledgement that she has been damaged by patriarchy has led her to change her actions and reactions to events in daily life.

Nonhlanhla recounts in her reflections a number of incidents where she has taken action as a result of her heightened awareness of male dominance and resistance to it. The first is an incident involving her mother who fell ill, and refused to be taken to the hospital until her sons arrived to do so. She did not want Nonhlanhla or her sister (who care for her on a daily basis) to take her. Desperate, as her brothers showed no interest in coming, she enlisted the help of her niece to come and tell her grandmother that her son would wait for her at the hospital. Nonhlanhla indignantly concludes, "Imagine, we (me and my sister) live with her and we are the ones that are financially and physically responsible for her health, but to her the important thing is her sons".

There have been other incidents. She relates the following account of what took place in her church context (Nonhlanhla Magubane, March 2000, Pietermaritzburg):

Our church in Bulwer offers my Pastor and I accommodation through one of our members, because we often go for the weekend as it is too far to travel to and from Pietermaritzburg. One day we had a guest from Pietermaritzburg, a woman who is a school Principal. I realized that as a guest and also a professional somebody, she must have a better place to sleep. Then I thought

that because the bed that I sleep in is not comfortable but there are three comfortable beds in Pastor's room, I asked the owner of the house to lend us one bed from Pastor's room for the guest's sake. The owner of the house, an old woman, refused saying, "No, I can't do that because those bed's are waiting for *abantu*. Normally in Zulu, when you speak of *umuntu* you are either referring to a human being or to a man. But in that context, she meant men and she felt that nice beds must wait for men and not be used unless men use them. I marked her words and I made a joke out of it as I was telling Pastor about the story. I said to him that we are not human beings just because we are women, therefore we do not deserve comfort. I also in a joking manner always use that story to make him see how the ideas of male dominance have damaged women's perceptions about gender relations, and how we are supposed to get rid of that as a church. I first made him feel bad about the guest having slept in an uncomfortable bed, then I started to make him see the need for us as a church to deal with such attitudes.

Nonhlanhla now recognises that there might be a personal cost to her actions that challenge her pastor both to consider his own attitude to women, and the role he needs to play in re-shaping attitudes within the church. This recognition indicates that through our work together as women, she has begun to question previously held views and attitudes. While this is true for Nonhlanhla, it is also true for myself and the women of Nxamalala. We have all been shaped, re-made, and re-constituted through our relationships together (see section 7.5.5).

2.7 Conclusion

Committed to a research methodology that uses stories and personal narratives as a feminist critical tool, I have begun this study by weaving together the stories of the main characters. These stories do not form a continuous, coherent narrative, but do reveal the varied life experiences of all the women involved. They represent the various and multi-faceted layers of "women's experience" that is ours as South African women. They also begin to reveal the complexity of the South African women's theology project, a focus of this study.

A central argument in this study is the women of Vulindlela do not distinguish between a life in the world and a life in the church. The church is thus integral to their lives and so I began the chapter by introducing a short history of the Anglican church in the Vulindlela area which provides an aspect of the context of their stories. Other aspects of context such as the socio-economic and political factors will be discussed in the next chapter.

As a way of acknowledging my subjectivity in this study, my story follows on this short church history as the first of a number of stories of women who have contributed to the research process. In my story I attempted to illustrate my shifting identity through various significant stages of my life and highlighted factors that shaped and re-made me. This process of my shifting identity showed how I moved through a period of confusion of identity, to a recognition of its complexity, to a recognition of the need to re-construct who I am. While not wanting to suggest that this is a linear process that is final and complete, I did assert that I have chosen to constitute my identity as a South African African in collaboration with *women* who are “other” than myself.

Because I contended that this process is necessarily a mutually collaborative one, the voices of the subjects of this study were amplified in this chapter through the telling of parts of their stories. I have therefore focused on two groups of women, MU members of St Raphael’s church, Sweetwaters, and women involved in the Bible study group in Nxamalala. Three excerpts of the stories of MU members of St Raphael’s church, Sophia Ntombela, Josephinah Nene, and Miriam Zondi were offered. I tried to show through these excerpts the way in which their life in the church and in the world are an integrated through forms of suffering such as illness, poverty, and ecclesial and colonial oppression. Following on from these personal narratives, I offered short biographical stories of nine members of the Bible study group in Nxamalala. In doing so, I shared something of their lived reality in its complexity and difference.

The chapter concluded with the story of Nonhlanhla Magubane, the field assistant to this research project. From her own written reflections, I recounted her story and particularly the impact that our work together as women has had on her life. I showed that this work has initiated a process of reconstitution of identity as Nonhlanhla has been re-shaped and re-

made, together with us all.

Part of the process of reconstitution is to allow those at the margins to move to the centre. This study attempts to do this by moving the struggle for survival of poor and marginalised indigenous African women of faith to the centre of the women's project. Survival has been a key notion in the work of gender and development theorists and practitioners. Theoretically, this body of work is crucial to this study. Central to this debate are the unequal and androcentric global structures of the world which keep poor women poor. Feminist theory, through the influence of postmodernism, has begun to engage with this global debate. In this debate, which no longer rests in the hands of first world feminists, a key issue that has emerged is the representation of the "third world woman" as a vulnerable, helpless victim. I argue that the women of Vulindlela, as representative of the "third world women", are not passive in their struggle to survive. A key resource in their active engagement with their lived reality is their faith. Therefore, it is imperative that theoretically development, feminisms, and faith intersect. This study seeks to do just that.

In attempting this task, it is important to locate the survival struggle of the women of Vulindlela in its socio-economic and political context. This is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF VULINDLELA

3.1 Introduction

Having introduced the main characters in the previous chapter, I now turn to a discussion on the socio-economic and political context of this study. Vulindlela, as the geographic location, is the focus of the chapter. By way of introducing the chapter, I illustrate the discrepancy in life experience between the white settlers who gainfully employed workers who now live in the Vulindlela area and that of the Vulindlela residents. I do this by juxtaposing the experience of a white landowner living close by in Winterskloof with that of a farm labourer. Thereafter, I set the geographic context of Vulindlela, which used to be known as the Zwartkop Location, into the broader historical and political narrative of Africans living in and close to the city of Pietermaritzburg. Through this historical analysis, the effects of colonial and apartheid legislation become clear.

While the previous chapter sought to detail the personal lives of women in Vulindlela through the use of narratives, this chapter is intended to detail the socio-economic and political context of their lived reality as reflected in the writings of social researchers as well as the personal experience of residents themselves.

Vulindlela is described through a thick socio-economic description which includes aspects such as demography, housing, and social infrastructure. Wanting to not only illustrate the impoverished socio-economic context but also particular factors that have shaped the magnitude of suffering faced by women of Vulindlela, I deal with three issues in detail. These include AIDS as the new crisis facing the area, which follows on the crisis of the 1987 floods, and the political violence during the late 1980s to early 1990s. In this thick socio-economic description of Vulindlela, I have drawn on a variety of sources for my discussion. These include personal narratives from women we interviewed, newspaper reports,

interviews with researchers and consultants who have worked in the area, photographs taken during my own work there, as well as academic studies.

3.2 Setting the scene

Driving in a westerly direction out of the centre of Pietermaritzburg up the hill towards Winterskloof and Hilton (see Map 2), one passes lovely homes with large gardens, enters groves of large trees, and looks down into the valleys of pine forests. It is a typical experience of “white suburbia” as it would be known in South Africa pre-1994. The only hint along this main road of the anguish of the forced removals of the 1960s, are one or two corrugated iron houses probably owned by black families, two General Dealer stores, the Union Bible Institute which used to be an African Primary School, and the now empty St Michael’s Anglican Church which was the centre of worship for African Anglicans until the 1970s. There is no hint of what lies to the left of the road in the valley as one approaches Winterskloof on the way to Hilton.

Turning off this road at the second General Dealer store down the hill lies the valley in all its splendour and poverty. Thousands of mud, and now increasingly concrete block houses, are scattered up and down the hills. This area in the view of the naked eye and for many kilometres beyond is known as Vulindlela, and is controlled by Tribal Authorities and administered by the Indlovu Regional Council. It used to be known as Zwartkop Location - the first native [sic] location to be established in Natal and demarcated in 1846 (Rosenberg, 1989:5).

In talking with other people who have worked in the churches there as well as researchers and development specialists from the University of Natal, it is described as “a forgotten place”. Of course many rural areas throughout South Africa are described in this way. But perhaps what makes this description so poignant and filled with emotion by those who have worked there is the fact that it takes a mere 15 minutes to get there from the centre of Pietermaritzburg, but you have to make the turn off the road and into the valley to find it. And most urban residents of Pietermaritzburg do not bother.

The white residents of Winterskloof and Hilton know about Zwartkop Location. But how much they “bother” is debatable. Their history is intricately intertwined with the residents of the valley, because it has been these residents that for a century and a half have provided cheap labour for their colonial farming enterprises, brought up their children, cleaned their homes, and cultivated their beautiful gardens, many of which are displayed annually as part of the “Open Gardens” of KwaZulu-Natal. However, on reading histories of the area (Lake nd; Hoepfl, Lake & Lake 1991) the interconnectedness of the histories of the people of the Winterskloof /Hilton area and those of what was the Zwartkop Location is alarmingly absent. Let me illustrate this omission.

The history of the greater Winterskloof area written by Chris Lake (nd) has been described by one reviewer as a series of “potted biographies” that span the 100 year period of 1860-1960. It is a partial history - a history of the white settlers to the area and is written as a response to a question posed in the introduction to the book, “How and when did local civilization start?”! *A Hundred Years in Winterskloof* tells of the acquisition of land and the stories of those who acquired it. One such “potted biography” is that of the Schofield family - its significance will soon become apparent.

Lockart Alexander Schofield was born in Canada in 1880. He was sent to school in Edinburgh with his three sisters. Later he came to South Africa to visit one of his sisters, Letitia, in the Orange Free State. Her husband was responsible for the early colonial administration.

After marrying Mary Murray in England he moved to the Natal Midlands and acquired The Nest... At the Nest, the Schofields farmed Methley plums, flowers and had poultry. Donkey carts took the flowers daily to the Winterskloof station. The Schofield's had three daughters...

The Schofield's were refined gentlefolk who loved people. Mrs Schofield played the piano for church services in their home before the church was built. Pastor Jeudwine was the preacher at the time. After six years at the Nest they moved up to Glengarth... The three girls travelled by train to Mrs

Colepepper's school, Uplands in Blackridge and then later went to St Anne's [an exclusive, private Anglican school for girls]. Mr Schofield died in 1954 and Mrs Schofield continued to live at Glengarth until her death in 1960 (nnp).

The people of Zwartkop Location have no written history. Their history remains in the hearts of those who live there and increasingly in the spirits of their ancestors! Geographically and socially it epitomises the South African context where the forces of colonialism, racism, and apartheid raged unabated until 1994. Its untold history is one of subjugation and control that had brutal effects on the community, particularly on women who bore the brunt of the suffering as they struggled to ensure their children survived. Through my pastoral work as a priest, I have come to know some of the residents. One of these residents is Mrs Alzinah Mlokothi, an elderly woman who lives in a *dakka* [mud] home on a slope of one of the many hills. On my first visit to her home, I had difficulty finding the home, abandoning the car when the road had become impassable for an ordinary vehicle. On arriving at the homestead, I was immediately struck by the well laid out garden filled with a variety of blooms (the significance of this fact was later to become very apparent to me). Mrs Mlokothi was diffident and overawed by my presence. She called her son Mr John Mlokothi to assist her. Together they recounted the story of their lives before moving to their home in Sweetwaters in 1960. The following narrative is a reconstructed account of their story.

Mrs Alizinah Mlokothi together with her husband, lived and worked on a flower farm owned by a *mhlungu* [white person] for seventeen years. Her job was to plant, nurture, and pick the flowers ready for delivery across the country. Mr Mlokothi earned £3 a month, Mrs Mlokothi earned 20p, and John a child at the time, earned 5p. Hours were long with little time off. Attendance at church could not be regular because more often than not, Sunday was a working day. Even on Christmas day, work had to come first. As a child, John was forced to work on the farm. The farmer's wife refused to allow him to go to school. Finally, at the age of eleven years, after Mrs Mlokothi pleaded unceasingly, permission was granted - at least for a limited period. When Mr Mlokothi fell ill, John was forced to leave school for six months while his father recovered, in order to ensure the flowers got to Winterskloof station for delivery as usual. Once John married, he had to leave the farm and seek alternative accommodation. He then moved to Sweetwaters. The farmer died, followed by his wife in

1960. The farm was sold and Mrs Alzinah Mlokothe and her husband were forced to leave. Shortly thereafter they discovered that the farmers' daughters were not only dismissing them from the farm, but they were being forced to leave after seventeen years of service without pension or compensation. The farm was Glengarth, owned by the Schofield family.

3.3 Africans and the city of Pietermaritzburg

The Group Areas Act of 1950, declaring that different population groups were to live in separate geographical areas, was formally implemented in Pietermaritzburg in 1960 through a series of proclamations (Wills 1994:296). However, segregation between African and white colonialists was deeply rooted in a long history of dispossession of land rights from Africans beginning with the Native Land Act of 1913, the Urban Areas Act of 1923 and the Urban Areas Amendment Act of 1937 (Motala 1961; Wills 1994). Wills (1994:283-284) points out that accountability for the apartheid city of today does not simply lie with the post-1948 authorities. By the time of the implementation of the Group Areas Act in Pietermaritzburg, Africans mostly lived beyond the city borders, and thus in terms of forced removals, it was the Indian population of the city that was most severely effected (Motala 1961). However, Africans were not unaffected. Those living in the Hilton/Winterskloof areas were forced to move to "designated African areas", such as Vulindlela, leaving land and homes that had been in their families for generations.

Resistance to an African presence in the town of Pietermaritzburg was present from the very earliest stages of the founding of the *dorp* [town]. The *Voortrekkers* saw the city as their preserve and made no provision for the indigenous population except for servants and other employees (Wills 1994:286). Zwartkop and Edendale Locations¹ were established beyond the Pietermaritzburg boundaries and housed the large daytime African population (Wills 1994:288). In spite of the passing of the Native Locations Act in 1904 by the Natal Parliament, which enabled municipalities to establish a "native location" in town,

¹ A "location" is a designated area for specific population groups first introduced by the colonial authorities to deal with "natives" living in towns and cities. During the apartheid era, the policy of different population groups living separately from one another was refined and vigorously implemented.

Pietermaritzburg did not do so immediately. Sobantu, the one location within the town, was only built when the Urban Areas Act of 1923 enforced and funded its establishment (Wills 1994:287). Sobantu provided very limited accommodation, and so the majority of Africans continued to live in the large peri-urban settlements beyond the borders of the city. These peri-urban locations provided to a certain extent, a refuge from government authorities (Wills 1994:291).

Zwartkop Location, now part of a territory that came to be known as the Vulindlela District,² could not escape the authorities when in 1951 the Black Authorities Act was introduced by the Nationalist Party, the architect of apartheid. This act made “provision for a uniform system of local and central government in the form of tribal, community, regional, and territorial authorities” (DBSA 1988:8). With the passing of the Self Governing Territories Constitution Act of 1971, areas under traditional authorities came to be known as “self governing territories”. The Zulu Territorial Authority was proclaimed as a result of this act and received full independent status as the “KwaZulu government” in 1977 (DBSA 1988:9). Effectively all rural areas were placed under the authority of this KwaZulu “government” which formalised structures of “Tribal Authorities” to govern its territories. The Vulindlela District fell under this system of governance.

² The term “district” is a construct of apartheid policy. I use the term to refer to Vulindlela in this chapter as it is referred to as such in the socio-political history under discussion, but refrain from doing so in following chapters. In the rest of the study I refer to the geographic location of the women I work with as those from the “Vulindlela area”.

A major consequence of the introduction of self-governing territories was that the title deeds of land held by the South African state were handed over to these authorities.³ Hereafter, it was the *amakhosi* [chiefs] who had the right to administer and allocate land under their jurisdiction. Prior to 1994, the KwaZulu government passed a series of laws entrenching the rights of the *amakhosi* and *indunas* [local headman], a process which culminated in the introduction of the KwaZulu Amakhosi and Iziphakanyiswa Act of 1990. This act set out not only the powers and duties of the *amakhosi* with regard to land tenure, but also laid out sentences and fines for the punishment of people living within their jurisdiction. On 24 April, 1994, three days before the first democratic election in South Africa, the KwaZulu government passed the Ingonyama Trust Act of 1994 which created the Ingonyama Trust with the Zulu king as the sole trustee. All land, including the Vulindlela District, held by the KwaZulu government was transferred into this trust. With Vulindlela incorporated into this trust, future possibilities of the area being incorporated into the city borders were hindered despite the fact that its residents were socially and economically linked to the city. This has had serious implications for the socio-economic development of the area, as becomes apparent later in this chapter. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the political party formed by the KwaZulu government, won the KwaZulu-Natal⁴ provincial election in 1994 and continued to implement in legislation passed during the pre-1994 era.

With the publishing in 1995 of the research report of the Greater Pietermaritzburg Research Project (GPRP) attempts were made by the local council to reincorporate Vulindlela into the Pietermaritzburg boundaries. It was argued in this report that the city would benefit from the taxes paid by the residents, and likewise that the residents would benefit from the extension of social services provided by the local council of the city. As this council is dominated by the African National Congress (ANC), the issue became a political tug of war between the ANC and the IFP. Reincorporation efforts were ultimately stymied by legislation passed by

³ I am indebted to Mr Owen Greene, a land surveyor based in Pietermaritzburg, for my understanding of this next phase of the political and historical context of Vulindlela.

⁴ See footnote 1 in Chapter 2.

the IFP-led Provincial Government which further entrenched the jurisdiction rights of the *amakhosi*.

Recently, a national Demarcation Board has been established to reassess all local government structures, with the particular intention of rationalising resources throughout the country.⁵ Proposals are in place to amalgamate a number of local councils into larger metropolitan councils. In the Durban-Pietermaritzburg metropole, “traditional authority areas” such as Vulindlela will be included in these larger structures. *Amakhosi* will be represented on these councils in an ex-officio capacity with the details of payment and delivery of services still to be finalised. It seems to me that this process has the potential to take seriously the enormous development needs of an area such as Vulindlela, which hopefully in years to come will no longer be the “forgotten place” that those who live and work there feel it to be.

3.4 The Vulindlela region

3.4.1 Demography

The region of Vulindlela covers an estimated 26 000 hectares, adjoins and is to the south-west of Pietermaritzburg (Rosenberg 1989:5). It also adjoins the Imbali/Edendale/Politique area known as the Edendale Complex (see Map 2). This large area has a railway line that no longer operates dividing it into two and comprises a number of wards and sub-wards that are controlled by *amakhosi* and several *indunas* (see Map 2). The subjects of this study live in the two wards of Mpumuza 1, popularly known as Sweetwaters, and in Nxamalala. The focus of this study is on these two wards (see shaded area, Map 2).

When the area was declared a location in 1846, the population consisted of 8000 Zulu speaking people, “of whom 3000 were under chiefs and considered the original occupiers of the various localities” (Rosenberg 1989:5). According to the 1986 census figures, the population grew from 73 000 in 1970 to a resident population of 161 800. The Integrated

⁵ This information on the demarcation process was obtained from a lecture given by Mr Mike Sutcliffe, chairperson of the Demarcation Board, in Pietermaritzburg on 18 February 2000.

Planning Services Report of 1995 conducted as part of the Greater Pietermaritzburg Reconstruction Project (GPRP) suggests that there is a high degree of discrepancy in population figures for this area. It concludes that the 1991 census figures of 135 600 is fairly accurate based on the number of voters in the 1994 national election. However, other institutions such as the Development Bank of South Africa estimated figures as high as 240 000 people in 1993 (GPRP 1995:90). What does seem to be clear is the fact that residentially there are more women than men living in the area. Figures suggest that 56% of the residential adult population is female while 44% of the population are children 15 years of age or less (Rosenberg 1989:50). These figures, still reflective of the current situation, have enormous implications for a gendered development analysis of the area. Women, as the more economically marginal sectors of society, would feel the effects of its impoverishment more significantly than men. My work assumes that poverty and its consequences impacts women more significantly than it does men, and thus their daily reality is a struggle for literal survival (see Chapters 4 and 7).



The region of Vulindlela

The density demographics of the area are also significant to this study. There is “a decrease

in density as one moves from east to west, ie. decreasing density with increasing distance from Edendale - Pietermaritzburg” (Rosenberg 1989:50). From aerial photography taken in 1983, it was estimated that in Sweetwaters, closest to Pietermaritzburg, there were 29 people per hectare. In Nxamalala further west, there were 24 people per hectare. At the furthest westerly point away from Pietermaritzburg in Mpumuza 2, there were 16 people per hectare (Rosenberg 1989:51). These density demographics also indicate levels of urbanization throughout the area, with the easterly areas being more peri-urban and the westerly sections of the area being more rural. This would be apparent in the types of homesteads built, quality of the roads, amount of land and agricultural production taking place and so forth. Even though there is a short geographic distance between the two focus wards of this study, there are some differences between women in Sweetwaters who have greater access to resources in the city, including water and electricity, and those of Nxamalala whose lives are more rural as is reflected in their homesteads.

3.4.2 Housing and land

Types of housing in the area is a key indicator of the urban/rural divide as well as the extent to which there is a cash income within the family. Families live by and large as extended family units. Housing is usually constructed on the family land in a traditional way, with there being two small square mud brick buildings as well as a thatched rondavel which is used as a kitchen (although there is still evidence of the older form of construction where mud and wattle poles were used) . However, increasingly, particularly in Sweetwaters, this form of housing construction is giving way to one larger family home built in a more western style of concrete blocks.

Being an area originally part of the so-called KwaZulu homeland and thus under Tribal Authorities, three land use categories (besides State forests which are present in the area) namely, residential, arable, and grazing land were established as part of an agricultural development plan, the so-called Betterment Planning Scheme,⁶ drawn up and implemented between 1950 and mid 1960s (Rosenberg 1989:8). Today, both Sweetwaters and Nxamalala

⁶ The Betterment Planning Scheme was one attempt at a “development strategy” by the state which was linked to the forced removals of Africans, who had previously resided in “white areas”, into Vulindlela.

have no large tracts of arable or grazing lands to speak of, clearly reflecting the lack of success of the scheme and the increasing impact of urbanization on the area. What communal land does exist, appears to be controlled and for the use of the local chief. All residential land is obtained by family households,

each of whose head has obtained the right to occupy and build a house on a residential site allocated through the chief's appointed *induna* for that particular area in his ward. Registration to occupy is done through the Tribal Authority Office in the chief's ward after a nominal payment. The new resident or site occupant is introduced by the *induna* to the current residents at a community meeting, at which the boundaries of the allocated site are pointed out. Acceptance of the applicant and the site allocation by the local community is the *de facto* tribal recognition of the applicants occupancy rights and security of usufruct. If the household head wishes to dispose of the property, he is able to sell the 'value' of his house to anyone accepted by the community through the process described above (Rosenberg 1989:28).

I include the detail of this process to highlight the obvious. It has been concluded that the number of women residential in the area is significantly higher than the number of men, yet the formal access to land remains the preserve of the household head who is assumed to be a man. When I have asked if this is the case, I have been told that women theoretically are allowed to apply for a residential site. In talking to local women, however, their experience seems to indicate that this is not the reality. Single women (including older women) simply understand that they need a male family member to secure land rights.

In traditional areas, land is usually only allocated to families born in the area. Vulindlela reflects a different reality because of its close proximity to Pietermaritzburg. Ten years ago, two categories of occupants were identified (Rosenberg 1989:29). Firstly, those families that have long standing traditional ties, having been born there and thus enjoying rights to land and usage of the local natural resources. Within in these families anyone over the age of about 30 years, would have personally experienced "forced removal from their family lands and their resettlement in designated residential areas during the period of Betterment scheme

implementation from the mid-1960s” (Rosenberg 1989:29). The above personal story of Mrs Alzinah Mlokothi refers to this period in their family history.

The second category of occupants identified ten years ago was that of “new immigrants”, “being those families who have sought refuge in the Vulindlela Tribal area as a result of forced removal and displacement from black spots and white owned farms elsewhere in Natal” (Rosenberg 1989:29 29). Of course since then, this category of “new immigrants” swelled substantially during the period of political violence where thousands of people in the Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal were displaced particularly during the so-called Seven Days War (see Aitchison 1991).

Today, Vulindlela reflects a community that is typically peri-urban with a diversity of reasons for people accessing land in the area. The insistence of the provincial authorities to regard it as a “traditional area” suggesting a strong rural emphasis, does not bode well for future development planning. From my perspective, the latest attempts to reincorporate the area into the Pietermaritzburg boundaries is vital to its social and economic growth. As the population continues to increase, social and economic growth is essential. This is particularly true in light of the devastating impact of AIDS which has gripped the area, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

3.4.3 Social infrastructure

Social infrastructure is crucial to the political economy of any community. It is the lack of infrastructure within the Vulindlela district that very quickly becomes apparent when one begins to work there. The Vulindlela Structure Plan (Rosenberg 1989) was one attempt by a group of consultants to make recommendations concerning development planning in the area. The Greater Pietermaritzburg Reconstruction Project (GPRP 1995) was a more recent attempt at the same task. A major constraint for development planners when formalising development plans such as those of the Vulindlela Structure Plan and the GPRP has been the recognition that the ultimate authority on “development needs” and the criteria used to ascertain these needs lies with the Tribal Authorities.

As the control and allocation of land in the area is under the Chiefs and Tribal Authority, any formal means of residential upgrading and provision of services is subject to their approval. This involves their perceptions of priorities for development of their respective wards as a whole, and of their subjects as a unified group (Rosenberg 1989:30).

Women are not part of official decision making bodies, and therefore make no contribution to development needs and priorities. They are rendered silent. But perhaps more significant is the frustration at the lack of or the incompetent delivery of services. The first signs that I observed of money being spent on infrastructure since 1994 was in Sweetwaters where a small community hall has been built, but that remains locked except for meetings called by the local traditional council, and incomplete pavements that were put on either side of a very small section of the tarred road. When I ask community members why this project was never completed, the reply is almost unanimous, “we don’t know, perhaps they ran out of money”. When probing further, it becomes clear that neither of these projects were seen as a priority of by the women in the community. Since then, money has been spent on upgrading soccer fields and building sport stadiums. While this is an important priority given the complete absence of recreational facilities for young people, it has to be noted that it is needs of *male* youth that have been considered. This is not surprising given the gendered nature of the decision making bodies.

Through my work in Vulindlela, I have come to appreciate afresh the enormous significance of a road system for the development of a community. Roads are the major source of access to resources of the urban complex, and I have often wondered why the meagre financial resources are not being channelled in this direction. In the first years of my work in Nxamalala as I struggled to climb up the hill using an almost insurmountable road with my ordinary vehicle (which at times was literally pushed up or down or out of thick mud during the rainy season) to St Gabriel’s Church, I realised that the Nxamalala community was literally cut off from essential services. Taxis and buses, mobile clinics, welfare services, shop owners never attempt to reach people because it was just too difficult. The western parts Vulindlela, such as Nxamalala, are particularly isolated and “forgotten” partly because of their inaccessibility. This is a direct result of a very poor road system within the hilly

terrain. With one tar road connecting the area to the city, it is at times almost impossible to transverse the small sandy roads up the hills to the homesteads. Most rely on their feet! The Vulindlela Structure Plan report noted in 1989 “that it was imperative that everything possible should be done to improve and maintain the main roads to reduce travel costs and travel time and to increase travelling safety” (Rosenberg 1989:141). This report recommended that

“the transportation network within the area be prioritized and be subjected to a process of road rehabilitation and maintenance. It is recommended that priority be given to the adequate maintenance of the two main east/west transportation axes and the main access roads and bus routes from the two axes to the residential communities. It is strongly recommended that all these main access roads and bus routes should be upgraded to black tarred surfaces as soon as possible” (Rosenberg 1989:175).

Ten years later, these bus routes remain untarred. During 1998, some attempts were made by the local traditional authorities to widen and grade these routes. One year later, because the roads was not properly surfaced after being graded, they had deteriorated to the point where the whole process had to be redone. Needless to say, they remain untarred! The lack of adequate roads remains a barrier to economic survival, forcing women to use the local tuckshops which charge exorbitant rates. Access to the city where goods are not only cheaper, but health services more efficient, and employment opportunities in both the formal and informal sectors more readily available, is severely hindered. Poverty becomes expensive, particularly for women.

Poverty is expensive even without incompetent officials. Not only do poor women of this area have to pay large amounts of money for transport to and from Pietermaritzburg, they also bear the cost of time and effort in obtaining water and firewood for daily use in the household. It is in tasks such as these that the gendered face of poverty begins to rear its head. Women and young girls bear this cost.

One of the clearest images of the nature of poverty [in South Africa] is the sight of a group of elderly women, each carrying home on her head a load of firewood weighing up to 50 kg, passing underneath the high tension-cables that carry the energy between the towns (and farmsteads) of the Republic. South Africa produces 60 per cent of the electricity in the entire continent yet almost two-thirds of the total population (and approximately 80 per cent of all Africans) within the country do not have access to that energy for their household requirements (Wilson and Ramphela 1989:44).

This image certainly holds true for Vulindlela. The community has access to the KwaZulu-Natal State forest which borders both Sweetwaters and Nxamalala where free or low-cost firewood is available. Women and young girls carrying loads of firewood on their head is a common sight. Electrification is slowly taking place through various schemes initiated by the parastatal Eskom since the early 1990s, with the pre-payment meter system being the most prevalent. Consistent with my analysis that linkage with the urban complex facilitates development, many more homes in Sweetwaters are electrified than homes in wards further to the west. Signs of electrification only began to be visible in Nxamalala in 1998. However, it appears that the percentage of households that are able to afford electricity (including the installation costs) remains very small. Most women continue to invest enormous amounts of time and energy in providing fuel for the household, thus also continuing the cycle of poverty because tasks such as these leave no time for economic activities.⁷

⁷ Environmentalist Raymond Auerbach (1993), in his research on maize farming systems in KwaZulu-Natal, makes a similar claim asserting that the major practical problem in producing more maize through small-scale farming is the time it takes for women to go about their basic tasks of survival.

Natural springs provide water which is plentiful in the area. However, in rural and peri-urban areas, as with collecting firewood, keeping the household supplied with water fetched from the streams is a labourious and time consuming task for women. Availability and accessibility are not the only concerns. More importantly from a health perspective is the need for clean water, a concern which was ranked as the top development priority goal by rural women in KwaZulu-Natal (Møller 1996:28). A spring protection programme has been operating in the area for a number of years (Rosenberg 1989:175). In recent years, the parastatal Umgeni Water Board has slowly started introducing water reticulation systems, Sweetwaters being one of the first areas to benefit. Personally, I have witnessed the Vulindlela Pipeline scheme slowly being introduced over the past two years which is funded by the Reconstruction and Development Programme⁸ (GPRP 1995:110). Nxamalala residents have been supplied with water points during August 1999. It is their responsibility to bear the cost of piping to get the water from the boundary of their properties and into their homes. “The Vulindlela scheme is intended to supply approximately 300 000 people with water by the year 2010. This area will be supplied by a new reservoir that will be situated near Mount Michael...” (GPRP 1995:105). But until women find the economic resources to buy sufficient piping to supply waters to their homes, they continue to collect water from the local streams.

The following comments made in September 1998 by Nxamalala women during a Bible study group, prompted by an Eskom van passing the church where the meeting was being held, illustrates how they feel about the above infrastructural issues in their community:

*...ngoba uEskom usuke enze ukuthanda kwakhe nje ngoba uma ufelwe wugesi
uthi uyamfonele akezi ukuzokulungisela manje. Nanokuba nginenkinga kagesi
mina yayincane kabi nje inkinga yami kodwa waphuza. Manje eyi naye
ngokwakhe nje usigcinezele noma kunjalo ngoba...Hayi yonke indawo
nakoEdendale babekhompleina. Thina bantu nje akasisebenzeli kahle hayi...*

⁸ The Reconstruction and Development Programme was introduced by the African National Congress in 1994 as a “coherent socio-economic policy framework” with the final goal of the eradication of apartheid and the building up of a democratic society (ANC 1994). An evaluation of its success in the reconstruction and development of disadvantaged communities is beyond the scope of this study.

Ngicabanga kanjalo uthi uMlungu angahlala izinyanga ezimbili noma ezintathu engenawo ugesi uma kuthiwa ugesi awukho angahlala nje engenawo, ngeke?... Nomgwaqo nanku bawenza abafuni ukuwuqedela uma lina izulu asive sihlupheka wudaka... kwafakwa amaphayiphi nje amanzi awafiki amanzi. Uma sekuna izulu nje wonke lodoti walaphaya uyongena esiphethwini... Kuthuthleka wonke lowayadoti uzongena laphaya emanzini kuyanuka nje kuyanuka. ... kuthiwa amatoilet awakhiwe aqondane nomfula omkhulu, itoilet lingathi libheke esiphethwini ngoba uma uthi ugcwala lapha kulona kuyaphuma kushona le esiphethwini... Siwakhokhele futhi amanzi manje kade abhamba o R100, oR200,00 kade babathatha awekho amanzi...

Eskom does what they want because when your electricity is faulty and when you phone them they don't come to fix it. I had a small problem with my electricity but it took them time to come. Now they are also oppressing us...No, everywhere they are complaining even in Edendale. We as blacks they don't work well with us...I think a *mlungu* [white person] can't stay for two months without electricity. If the electricity is not available, do you think she can just stay without it?... They have constructed the road but they didn't finish it, and when it is raining we suffer... They have put the pipes under it but the water doesn't come. When the rain is coming all the dirt comes down to the spring...All the dirt goes down to the water, it is smelling.... They say that the toilets are to be built near the big river, they shouldn't be near the spring because when it is full, this thing will go to the spring...We have paid for water, we paid about R100, R200. They took that money but there is no water....

In recent months as the pipes have been laid for the water points there has been a growing excitement that at last there are visible signs of infrastructure being put into place. However, the suspicious cynicism detected in the comments above, is always present in conversations with women about these signs of development in their community. Experience has taught them that social services come at a price which in monetary terms they can seldom afford.

Next to clean water, the second development priority goal identified by rural women in KwaZulu-Natal was the need for education and training with better and more available education for their children high on their agenda (Murphy 1995; Møller 1996). This resonates with discussions we had with women in Nxamalala where the high cost of school fees and attempts to educate their children “in town” were often voiced. Schools are few and far between with little resources, are overcrowded, and staffed by ill-equipped teachers. Truancy is a major problem and schoolchildren wander the streets throughout the day. On Fridays, schools effectively shut down with a minimal amount of teaching taking place. While shocking, it is not surprising that “[i]n the Vulindlela area only 8% of the population over the age of 19 have attended high school” (GPRP 1995:133). Needless to say, illiteracy levels are staggeringly high. Based on a consensus of opinion that a level of education lower than Std 4 constitutes functional illiteracy, it is estimated that some 50% of the population of this area would fall into this category (GPRP 1995:134). Low levels of literacy and poor schooling have direct bearing on future employment opportunities. Women struggling to survive see a good education for their children as a way out of the cycle of poverty. Unemployment, however, continues to be a major source of concern. In 1984, the unemployment level was recorded at 24,5% and had risen to 26,4% by 1986 (Rosenberg 1989:76). In 1995 the GPRP report indicated that only 35% of the total 18-64 age group was employed. The social and economic implications of these statistics are enormous for the women that I work with.

Income generated by men living in Vulindlela is usually from within the manufacturing sector (Rosenberg 1989). Women who are employed mostly work in domestic service, one of the most exploited sectors of society (see Barrett *et al* 1985; Cock 1980; Preston-Whyte 1991). Studies (Baden *et al* 1999; Wilson and Ramphele 1989) have shown that for the poor, because of high unemployment, pensions and disability grants are a major source of income for families. Old age pensions provide a regular income which is often used to feed the entire extended family with some studies (Baden *et al* 1999:24) suggesting that these pensions contribute 23% of the total income of poor households. Women that I worked with, many of whom were pensioners, were providing for large extended families from their meagre pensions as they engaged the struggle for the survival of their grandchildren.

There is no doubt that in rural and semi-rural areas, it is women who are left to cope with the

brunt of poverty. In a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)⁹ study (Murphy 1995), women were asked, “If you were talking to the people in government, what is the one most important thing you would say to get them to help you?” Five of the six responses were related to creating places of employment for themselves or their children. When asked, “What are the most important things that keep you struggling [to survive]?” The common responses were a difficulty in getting food, a lack of waged work and therefore money, a dissatisfaction with their housing and a lack of means to do anything about it, no help from husbands or others, and lack of funds to provide education for their children (Murphy 1995:12). While these responses do not state anything but the obvious, what is important to note is the fact that it is women who seem to be carrying the responsibility of tasks traditionally seen as those of the male breadwinner. Explicit in their response is the “absence” of a husband or other male relative to assist with the support of the family. Of course there are now many well documented studies that dispel the myth that the role of the head of household remains the preserve of the men in rural communities, where it is estimated that 44% are headed by women (Neft and Levin 1997; see also Peters 1995).

Health, while not identified by women in the above study, is of course also an issue related to poverty. As Wilson and Ramphela (1989:100-120) show, hunger and sickness are directly related. Malnutrition and infant mortality is widespread in South Africa and yet we are one of the few countries in the world that exports food in large quantities (Wilson and Ramphela 1989:100). During a discussion with women from Nxamalala, it became clear that next to unemployment, “sickness” was seen as a major burden they have had to bear (BSG, 25 September 1997, Nxamalala). The health of their children and the high cost of transport to get to hospitals or doctors is a recurring theme in informal discussion. The few clinics in the area do not operate every day and only treat minor ailments. In fact there are only four clinics and one mobile clinic for the entire Vulindlela area indicating a desperate shortage of health care services (GPRP 1995:166).

⁹ PRA is a participatory research methodology popularised by Robert Chambers (1992) and used mainly in developing rural contexts where the emphasis is on the participants assessing their own development needs. It is popular as an approach among gender and development practitioners (Mayoux 1995; Murphy 1995; Nelson and Wright 1995; Slocum *et al* 1995; von Kotze 1996)

3.5 AIDS - the new crisis

Ten years ago when Wilson and Ramphela (1989) highlighted the correlation between health and poverty, major illnesses discussed included gastroenteritis, cholera, typhoid, dysentery, and tuberculosis. AIDS was not even mentioned in this landmark study. Ten years later, South Africa has the fastest growing rate of AIDS in the world (Pendry 1998:30). Statistics released electronically by the Programme for Development Research (PRODDER) on 1 February 1999¹⁰ indicated that “there are an estimated 3,2 million people in the country who are infected by the disease. 18 out of every 100 sexually active adults in the country are HIV positive, including pregnant and elderly women. The rate of the new infections are estimated to be 1 600 every day. About 9 000 children per year are born HIV positive”.

Studies have shown that the virus flourishes in poorer under-resourced communities (Whiteside *et al* 1995:28). Fifty people die every week from AIDS-related diseases in KwaZulu-Natal, which has one of highest prevalence rates in the country (*Natal Witness* 12 April 1999; Whiteside *et al* 1995). On the national television service during August 1999, it was announced that half the patients admitted to King Edward Hospital in Durban were suffering from AIDS-related diseases, while two out of every three patients with tuberculosis were HIV positive (and that as a result other more specialised medical services were having to be curtailed). The life expectancy rate in South Africa had in one year dropped by almost 10 years from 64.1 years in 1998 to 54.7 years in 1999. While there are currently no fixed statistics for the Vulindlela area, the magnitude of the problem is illustrated by the fact that it is estimated that in the adjoining Edendale Valley, there will be a possible 59 000 AIDS orphans by the year 2004 (*Natal Witness* 13 March 2000). The GPRP has identified Vulindlela as an area where the impact of AIDS will be most severely felt (GPRP 1995:157) in the Greater Pietermaritzburg region. Purely based on weekly observations and contacts through pastoral work in my role as priest, the number of funeral tents pitched on weekends rises by the month.

¹⁰ See www.hsrb.ac.za/prodder.html

The enormity of the crisis is beyond human comprehension. But perhaps what is even more unimaginable but real is the additional horror that the AIDS crisis has brought into the lives of women and girl children. Studies conducted in 1995 by the University of Natal's Medical school at Durban's largest provincial hospitals indicated a 20,13% HIV positive rate amongst pregnant women (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:366). This figure is continually rising with some suggesting that the prevalence of HIV in antenatal clinics throughout the province rose from 9.6% in 1993 to as much as 18.23% in 1995 (Whiteside 1996:18). "KwaZulu-Natal is the province hardest hit by the epidemic. Anonymous population-based surveys conducted in KZN have demonstrated that HIV is about four times more common among young women compared to men..." (Abdool Karim 1998:17).

It is now a well attested fact that there are several biological factors that enhance the transmission of HIV in women (see Abdool Karim 1998). This biological disposition coupled with the disadvantaged and oppressive socio-cultural situation of women means the odds are stacked against them. Given the shockingly high incidence of domestic violence and rape that is now being profiled even in the popular media, the magnitude of women's vulnerability to the disease is overwhelming. Some gender activists are arguing that the increase in violence against women has a direct relationship to the growing prevalence of AIDS (Pendry 1998).

Even more alarming from an ethical as well as socio-economic view is the fact that infection seems to be more common among young women between the ages of 15 and 25. "During recent workshops with teachers in Pietermaritzburg, the general consensus was that young girls, particularly in urban townships, are becoming sexually active by the age of thirteen or fourteen. Often this is coupled with less ability to make informed decisions, and the inability to negotiate safer sex, placing them at high risk of contracting HIV" (Whiteside *et al* 1995:26). With these indications that the disease is spreading most rapidly among young people, researcher Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala (1997) interviewed 100 Zulu-speaking youth from the townships around Durban between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Responses seemed to indicate a disturbing trend suggesting that young people were deliberately spreading AIDS

Contracting the HIV/AIDS virus was seen more or less as a new part of growing up...accepted...as an almost inevitable consequence of being an adult

...The general feeling was that it was just a matter of time if they were not already infected and they were quite confident that many, if not most of their peers had already contracted the virus...However, it is the rare individual who actually wants to have his/her HIV status confirmed (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:367-368).

These young people seemed to suggest that knowing you were HIV positive was not only a death sentence, but also a passport for sexual licence. Spreading the disease appeared to be the most common way of coping.

The boys are spreading this, so we must spread it back to them. You see them at parties picking up as many girls as they can. Why? They don't want to die alone. Neither do we (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:369).

For young women, the fear that men would respond to a positive diagnosis by raping women was cited as the major reason why medical authorities should desist in disclosing one's HIV status (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:372). This fear seems justified as the young men made several references to brutality in their accounts of sexual relationships (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:373). As Campbell (1992) has indicated, young men engage in forced sex as a way of gaining dominance and control over women. Leclerc-Madlala (1997:373) suggests that this view is consistent with her research findings which also show a proliferation of gangs in urban townships since 1994. These gangs of young men are involved in various forms of criminal activity including rape (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:373).

In KwaMashu, Durban's second largest township, a gang called Bhepa Span (*bepha* is derived from a Zulu word for crude sex) walk the streets in the evening looking for girls to rape (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:373)

According to her informants, gang rape, where girls are often abducted at gunpoint has become a commonplace feature of township life (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:373). Estimates of rape country wide show a dramatic increase over the past six years. Leclerc-Madlala (1997) reports that her requests to view police statistics for June 1996 were repeatedly turned down,

with one police spokesperson claiming that if the public knew the actual seriousness of the crisis, there would be “moral panic” (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:374).

Perhaps a little “moral panic” would be appropriate! Rape it seems is not confined to women (young and old), but extends to the rape of very young girl-children. Stories surfacing in recent times warrant not simply “moral panic” but “moral outrage”. Leclerc-Madlala’s (1997) study also indicated that child rape was seen as a preventive measure against contracting AIDS. “Your chances of not getting it [AIDS] are better if you go for 6 or 8 year olds. Not 10 year olds, some are already pretty experienced by that time already” (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:375). This same research showed that virologists at the University of Natal’s Medical School have reported a steady increase in the past few years of the number of HIV positive African female children between the ages of five and fourteen.

The only likely explanation from their point of view was that men with AIDS were raping or having sex with virgin girls, as the girls who were infected through their mothers had usually died before this time, and the ones who picked up the infection while sexually active were usually older (Leclerc-Madlala 1997:375)

Thus it appears that not only is girl-child rape used as a preventative measure, but a myth has emerged within communities that sex with a young girl-child will cure the disease. Horrendous stories confirming this view are slowly being documented (*Natal Witness* 31 July 1999) and are not only confined to urban areas.¹¹

Communities clearly feel desperate about the alarming effects of the AIDS pandemic on the lives of their young people (even when the disease and the magnitude of its effects is not openly acknowledged). It has been suggested that a major reason for the breakdown in sex education between the young and the old is the fact that initiation schools with appointed sex educators no longer function in Zulu society. Parents were never expected to fulfill the role of sex educator. With the demise of these initiation schools, parents are now obliged to fulfill

¹¹ Statistics show that child rape in rural areas is on the increase (e-PRAXIS Inter-Religious E-mail Conference, 30 July 1999, teologie@bigfoot.com).

a role that culturally and educationally they are ill-equipped to handle.¹² One response in terms of trying to educate their children around sex issues has been to reintroduce virginity testing among young girls. During a discussion with women in Nxamalala, the issue surfaced in November 1998 shortly after there had been media coverage of the revival of “this age-old tradition”:

BH: Who suggested that the virginity test should happen, who said that it should start again here?

TM: *Kwakunabafikile nje bakwa ANC babelapha eMaritzburg.*

There were ANC members here in Maritzburg

BH: But was it men or women?

TM: *Abantu besifazane*

Women

BH: Why do they think it's a good idea?

TM: *Babethi zitshelwe nje izingane ukuthi kufanele ziziphathe kanjani zitshelwe nangeAids. Okusempeleni nje kwakuyiloko ukuthi ngoba kunesifo esikhona iAIDS izingane kufanele zifundiswe ukuthi kufanele ziziphathe kanjani kungcono zihlolwe kuzanywe ukupreventa iAIDS*

They said children must be taught how to behave and should be

¹² This was first drawn to my attention in November 1996 in discussion with a group of women in Sweetwaters which included the few professional women from the congregation. It has since been confirmed by a colleague Thulani Ngcobo who works in Edendale, during a clergy gathering in August 1999 where theological reflections on AIDS were discussed.

taught about AIDS. Briefly they were talking about the fact that since there is this sickness called AIDS children must be taught how to behave themselves; they should undergo a virginity test in order to prevent AIDS...

The extent to which this movement is truly led by women rather than by the male leadership of rural communities is not clear. Women themselves seem ambivalent about the practice for themselves, but particularly for their daughters. At a workshop held in Pietermaritzburg in June 1999 on the issue of virginity testing, organised by the Midlands Women's Group and attended by a cross-section of women from rural and urban communities, a decision was taken against virginity testing (*Witness Echo* 17 June 1999). However, this was not a view held by all participants. During an informal conversation I met one young woman who was a university trained teacher living and working in the rural Midlands who believed strongly that virginity testing was important because the practice enabled Zulu women to regain a sense of value and love for their culture which, for her, mitigated it being used as a tool of oppression. She herself actively advocated virginity testing in her community. Generally it seems that gender activists such as Phumele Ntombela-Nzimande, deputy chairperson of the Commission for Gender Equality, are critical of the practice and view it as a form of abuse against young women (*Witness Echo* 26 August 1999).

The attitudes of Nxamalala women in the Bible study group to virginity testing seemed to shift over time and with more factual information being brought to our discussions through two members who attended the workshop referred to above. Mrs Mdluli who had suggested that virginity testing should occur when the issue was first raised in November 1998, was one of the women who attended the workshop in June 1999. As a result her opinion on the matter showed a far more critical attitude and included questioning the advocacy role of men in the practice (Thandiwe Mdluli, 17 June 1999, Nxamalala):

Ngoba kushuthi thina bantu besifazane? Yini njalo sihlale sigcinezelwe kwenzake izinto ezingasile kithina abafana abagadwa ngani, abahlolwa ngani abafana? Yini kungake kuthiwe, "namhlanje uyashada biza omama uKhoza simhlole uGrace" nomfana naye kuthiwe asihambe somthatha naye ukuze

sibone ukuthi akanalutho. Umfana yena akazukwenziwa lutho kodwa konke kuzokwenziwa yithina.

Why are we always oppressed as women? Bad things always happen to us and why can't the boys get their virginity tested and be guided? Why can't we say, 'today Grace is getting married, let us call mama Khoza,' so that we will test her virginity and go and take the boy so that we will see if he doesn't have anything. There is nothing that will be done to the boy but everything will be done to us.

By the end of this discussion, many of the group members were expressing ambivalence about having their daughters tested because it was perceived to be a process in the control of men in the community. The women also began to recognise that, as mothers, they need to find ways of talking to their daughters about sexuality issues, even though they find this difficult.

However, whatever women feel about the cultural practice of virginity testing, as a measure taken to prevent AIDS spreading amongst young people, it appears to be having a disturbing reverse effect. According to Dr Neil McKerrow, a paediatrician at Grey's Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, "a serious cause for concern is that young women are resorting to anal sex as they... still pass their virginity test but it [anal sex] increases their risk of contracting HIV/AIDS" (*Witness Echo* 17 June 1999).

Educating young people about the spread of the disease is clearly of paramount importance, so is providing a sense of hope and meaning in terms of economic opportunities for the future and all these issues need to be tackled simultaneously. While attempts to do this are slowly being made, perhaps most significantly by young people themselves (see *Agenda* (39) 1998:82-86), the reality of the impact of the AIDS pandemic on these young lives is surfacing. It is the girl-children who are carrying the additional burden brought on by the disease. Because so many women are dying, female children being forced through circumstance to care for siblings in the family. In certain rural areas such as Izingolweni near Port Shepstone on the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, reports are filtering through of almost entire villages of orphans (*Sunday Times* 6 September 1998).

Precious Gambushe is just 13, but she cooks, cleans and cares for her 14 orphaned sisters and cousins. She has not become their guardian by choice: AIDS has killed her parents and aunt... At the nearby Murchison Hospital half the patients whose blood is tested are HIV positive... Precious's mother, Ntomfuthi Gambushe, and her father Agrippa Mkhize, went to Durban to work more than four years ago, leaving their five daughters in the care of Ntomfuthi's mother, Mercy Gambushe. Ntomfuthi returned home in May this year, rail thin and weary. Her common law husband, Mkhize, was already dead. "When my mother came home she was very sick," says Precious. "But she was only sick for one month before she died." Ntomfuthi's sister, Mildred, also returned home from Durban two years ago, her body ravaged by AIDS. Mildred died last February leaving behind six children. Precious says she does not know whether her other aunt, Sibongile, is dead or alive. Sibongile, whose four children are also in Precious's care, went to Durban nearly three years ago and the family have not seen or heard from her since. "She might have died already or maybe she will come home sick like my aunt and mother did," says Precious. The children's grandmother, Mercy Gambushe, who is crippled with arthritis, uses her pension of R490 a month to pay for school fees and food for herself and the 15 grandchildren. Despite her hard life, Precious takes her education seriously. "I would like to be a nurse one day so I can help people who are sick," she says tearfully (*Sunday Times* 6 September 1998).

The assumption that AIDS deaths will generate an increasing number of child-headed households is refuted in a recent study conducted in seven peri-urban and urban communities in and around Pietermaritzburg (Marcus 1999). Marcus argues that while they exist, they are the exception. Instead, it is particularly grandmothers who are bearing the brunt of the disease. Of course what Precious Gambushe's story highlights is the fact that the aged, while providing the financial means, are often not in a position to physically fulfill the care-giving role, leaving this task to the eldest girl-child in her care. This provides a sober warning of the magnitude of distress that will be placed on children in areas such as Edendale which adjoins Vulindlela, given the prediction figures of AIDS-orphans quoted above. From personal

experience within the Anglican Church in Sweetwaters, households of women ranging in age from five to seventy-five, all of whom are “sick”, and where a number of family members of have died, is not unfamiliar.

What Marcus’s study does confirm is the profound social and economic consequences that multiple adult deaths have for households in the Pietermaritzburg area, which are already a common occurrence. Young adult deaths “remove income earners and they increase pressures on already overburdened caregivers, many of whom are grandmothers” (Marcus 1999:47). As mentioned earlier, old-age pensions become the crucial source of income for these families.

The findings of the study highlight the disproportionately negative consequences of HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses for women in poor communities around Pietermaritzburg. For the most part it is the women who nurse the chronically ill and dying and who struggle to meet the costs of treatment. Invariably it is they who are left with the children of the deceased, adding to domestic and economic responsibilities that for many are already onerous (Marcus 1999:48).

In my work with women of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, the dilemma I have had to face has been the question of how to provide opportunities to discuss openly the burden they carry (and will do so increasingly) as a result the AIDS crisis, given the immense secrecy surrounding AIDS and the stigma attached to the disease. As Marcus points out,

[p]eople generally do not refer to it by name, often talking about “this thing” (*intoyakhe*), and there is a string of euphemisms commonly used to refer to AIDS... Alternatively, people are said often to refer to AIDS by naming it as a more acceptable illness such as TB, chest pains - or as bewitchment... “Yes, there is *amagobhongo umeqo* (like being bewitched through evil spirits) and others have referred to it as pneumonia. You hear some people say that he has died of pneumonia whereas it was AIDS” (1999:9).

Getting women to openly acknowledge that AIDS exists, let alone that it is the “sickness” that is killing their young people, is a long process. In Nxamalala, the first opportunity to discuss AIDS opened up unexpectedly during a Bible study discussion in February 1998 on the text Mark 5:21-43. This text includes a story of a woman who has been haemorrhaging for twelve years and touches Jesus’s garment in order to be healed. I asked the question as to how the story “could be the same for us women today”? Mrs Ncgongo responded, “*Ingculazi*” [AIDS]. I then asked her to explain a little more what she meant. She replied, “*Ingculazi siyiqhathanisa nayo ngoba phela angithi lesisifo asilapheki manjena kusho ukuthi odokotela bayehluleka wukusilapha sikudla nje njalo uze ufe*” [AIDS is comparable to this because it is incurable that means that the doctors fail to cure it, it eats you till you die]. When I pushed the issue further, Mrs Shabangu continued, “*Wukuthi ngesikhathi sanamhlanjena uma uvelelwa wukopha kuye kuthiwe usunengculazi ngoba nokopha bekungelapheki umuntu ubeze ahambe emhlabeni kungelapheki*” [Its just that in these days if you happen to be bleeding it is assumed that you have AIDS because the haemorrhage also was incurable, a person would die without it being cured].

From these beginnings, the discussion continued as to how the woman with the haemorrhage might be like a woman with AIDS. It was acknowledged that in both instances “bad” blood ran through the veins of the women, suggesting the deeply personal and intimate nature of their illnesses. The Nxamalala women implied that because this was so, they had no-one but God to turn to. This declaration led to the suggestion that in situations of “blood diseases”, it is the “power of God” that also runs in their veins which enables them to have life in the face of these diseases that bring death.

I then asked them to divide into two groups and draw what we had been talking about in an attempt to access more hidden aspects of how they viewed the relationship between the “bleeding woman” and AIDS. From this exercise the women admitted that they knew little about the disease, with the unanimous exception that those who had it, had been given the illness by a man! Towards the end of the discussion I offered the example of an AIDS awareness church service that had been organised in St Raphael’s Sweetwaters a few months before to suggest that perhaps we could learn more about AIDS. It was agreed that we discuss AIDS further the following week.

Despite an educative workshop held the following week, the secrecy, “mystery” and silence surrounding AIDS continues with a few exceptions (as the above example relating to virginity testing indicates). Women *makoti*'s [young married women] and young people continue to die, and group members continue to commiserate about the diabetes or high blood pressure, tuberculosis or pneumonia that they all died from. As I argue in Chapter 7, poor and marginalised women experience a level of surveillance in their lives that extends even to those women closest to them. Silence and secrecy is a strategy of survival. Why then should they employ a different strategy in coping with AIDS, which is yet another death threat to their already fragile existence?

For women of Vulindlela, the daily tasks of survival are onerous enough without the added crisis of the AIDS epidemic. They live with vulnerability all the time that comes in many and varied forms. The current AIDS crisis and the resultant implications for their lives outline above is only a fraction of what they have known of vulnerability in recent years. In just the last decade, the community has experienced two particular incidents of stress and trauma which I will show heightened the vulnerability and sense of powerlessness of the women and children: the floods of 1987 and the period of political violence that spanned the years 1987 to 1994.

3.6 1987 - Floods and the onset of political violence

It started to rain on 25 September 1987 in KwaZulu-Natal and did not stop for days.

At least five people are known to have died in the devastating floods in the Pietermaritzburg area and thousands are homeless. The final death toll in the vast Edendale Valley however is expected to be considerably higher. The Umsindusi River, which surged through the capital for the past two days carving a path of destruction from Henley Dam southwards, began to drop from mid-morning yesterday as heavy rains abated after incessant falls for the past four days. A total of 408mm of rain was recorded in the capital over that period... Residents in Sobantu and Edendale had to be rescued from their

rooftops in boats. Municipal lifesavers were called to assist. Residents in Sweetwaters reported numerous houses collapsed as a result of rain and it was reported that one person died after being buried in mud (*Natal Mercury* 30 September 1987).

Referring to the Vulindlela area specifically, Ian Cowley (1993), who at that time was the Anglican priest at the Hilton parish, reports that

...Graham Beggs¹³ went to Sweetwaters to see the situation there. The reports that he brought back were alarming. In whole areas, houses had been washed away...The damage was appalling. Many houses had partially collapsed, and many were largely roofless...(Cowley 1993:62).

The Weather Bureau referred to these floods as “[p]erhaps the greatest natural disaster in the South African history... More than 900mm of rain fell in just 4 days over parts of the province...more than 300 lives were lost while damage to agriculture and infrastructure of Natal [sic] amounted to many hundred million rands” (Triegaardt *et al* 1988:1). While the cost of the flood is counted by the state in terms of infrastructure and agriculture, the cost to the poor in human and emotional terms (given that they have lost *everything* they materially own) is not often acknowledged. As always it is the poor who suffer the most from natural disasters such as these, and it is clear from newspaper reports (*Natal Witness* 5 October 1987), the people of Sweetwaters and other parts of the greater Pietermaritzburg area were reliant during this time on the charity of institutions such as the Red Cross, civil defence units and “white” churches like the Church of the Ascension, Hilton.

¹³ As mentioned earlier, Graham Beggs was at the time a community worker attached to Church of the Ascension, Hilton, the closest “white” Anglican church to Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, who had been seconded to work there by this church in 1978 (Cowley 1993:48).

Responses to disasters such as floods usually take the form of welfare relief which conjures up images of vulnerability that are not always helpful in understanding the particular problems faced by women in such situations. Often in relief work, women are identified as “the vulnerable group”, but it is important that this vulnerability be seen not as biological or physiological, but “should be understood to be primarily cultural and organizational...” (Wiest 1994:3). Planning a response to the crisis needs to take into account “the responsibilities borne by women related to the stability of the domestic group” (Wiest 1994:3). In the next chapter, I argue that development planning (and in this case, disaster relief) is carried out mainly with men in communities, who are “officially” the leaders and decision makers, yet it is the women who carry out the daily domestic tasks providing the necessary stability and survival. It is often tactical survival strategies¹⁴ employed by women that are destabilised during disasters. Gender planners (Anderson 1994:7) are increasingly making it clear that for effective long-term programming in disaster situations to occur, a nuanced gender analysis that takes into account the invisible roles and strategies of women is crucial (see Chapter 4). However, given that these roles and strategies are generally overlooked, the women of the Vulindlela district must have experienced an additional burden in coping with the 1987 floods.

1987 was not just the year of the floods, it was the beginning of the political violence in the area which wreaked a havoc far worse than floods in the lives of the people of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala (amongst others). “Violence affects flood relief” screamed the headline of an article in the *Natal Witness* on the 16th of October 1987. Three weeks after the floods, 40 people were dead as a result of what was to become known as “the killing fields of KwaZulu-Natal” - a war that lasted well into 1994. The causes of this war are complex and multi-faceted, but it essentially manifested itself within communities as a conflict between the

¹⁴ I discuss these survival strategies more fully in the next chapter. “Tactical” survival strategies include women’s clubs such as *stokvels* where each member contributes to the club on a monthly basis enabling one person per month to make a major purchase. Clubs such as these are set up as a direct response to daily survival and are invariably destabilised during disasters such as a flood. This point was made by women from Slangspruit squatter camp in talking about their recovery from the 1995 Christmas Day flood (Butler 1999). However, it would probably also be true that in certain situations women’s tactical survival strategies are destabilised only for a period, and that the disaster usually generates a new response by women, as in the case of burial societies forming during the political violence in KwaZulu-Natal (*Witness Echo* 11 May 1989). This does not diminish the point that it is crucial that these survival strategies are taken into account when planners respond to and manage disaster situations.

Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC)-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF) (Aitchison 1998). This political interpretation of the violence makes the most sense because this is the “predominant interpretation of the common people (Aitchison 1998:18).

To quote Mrs Clementine Khumalo from Nxamalala who said when asked her opinion of the causes of the violence, “If there were no political parties - or just one - there would be no violence. They just give you labels and then come and kill you (Aitchison 1998:18).

Vulindlela was an area where some of the fiercest and most severe political battles were waged, as newspaper reports indicate.

In September [1987] Inkatha launched a recruiting drive in the Pietermaritzburg region. Apparently in many Vulindlela areas a final date of 4 October was proclaimed by which time everyone had to have joined Inkatha. The drive was met with resistance. Conventionally, it is here that the Midlands war can be said to have begun.

Initially the war was a battle of control of Edendale, a large urbanised freehold area which had never been under KwaZulu-Natal government control, but soon spread to Imbali and Ashdown and to Vulindlela. There were 59 dead in September which steadily rose to a January toll of 161... By the end of December...there was heavy fighting in Vulindlela (45 dead) with tribal leadership in disarray... In January some 79 people were killed in Vulindlela and large numbers of refugees sought refuge in safer areas... With this [police] support Inkatha regained control of most of Vulindlela. There are reliable reports of police handing over captured comrades to Inkatha or tribal authorities who then killed them (Aitchison 1998:5-6).

Newspaper reports also indicate that there is a correlation between the deadline date for recruitment to the IFP and the increase of violence in the area, illustrated in the following examples:

Many more people have died in unrest in the Sweetwaters area... (*Natal Witness* 6 October 1987).

In Sweetwaters a man was shot dead by police when they dispersed a group of people using bird-shot and teargas. An 18-year-old youth was injured. Three men were arrested (*Natal Witness* 19 November 1987).

In Sweetwaters police found the body of a 35-year-old woman with 40 stab wounds. Her sister was also attacked and stabbed once (*Natal Witness* 21 January 1988).

The political conflict between Inkatha and youth affiliated to the United Democratic Front spread in KwaZulu schools in the townships around the city when schools re-opened this week. There have been widespread reports that pupils are being asked to produce Inkatha cards before being allowed into some KwaZulu schools, particularly in the Sweetwaters area (*Natal Witness* 30 January 1988).

Stories from employers of domestic workers, Christians from suburbs of Pietermaritzburg linked to churches in the Sweetwaters area, and from newspaper reporters, were beginning to highlight the enormous toll the violence was having on many thousands of bewildered people caught in the crossfire.

Somewhere in the Sweetwaters township outside Pietermaritzburg an old blind man weeps tears of hopelessness, despair and frantic anxiety. His wife, equally distressed, holds back her own tears and tries to console him. The couple who - cannot be named - are living from hour to hour in the terror which has become the order of the day in most of the townships around Pietermaritzburg. Their offence: the blind man walked to the bus-stop several weeks ago, in the hopes of going to Pietermaritzburg to do chores. Usually he

climbed on, told the people around him where he wanted to get off and they would help him off, guide him to where he needed to go in town, and make plans to assist him in catching the bus back into Sweetwaters. This time, however, buses weren't running, and the old man was offered a lift in a police van into town. He accepted and was grateful for the help. Two days later, word circulated that the "old blind man" was a collaborator with the police, his life was threatened, and his two teenage daughters - for fear of their lives - were forced to go into a place of hiding (*Daily News* 4 February 1988).

This story of a "blind, old man" touched one reporter enough for her to take note. But the stories of thousands of women caught up in the escalating violence through absolutely no will or volition of their own, mostly never made the news.¹⁵ As women from Sweetwaters shared their experiences during the interview process, I was aware that their stories are representative of countless others. They are accounts that reveal the desperation and will to survive as well as the tenacious ability of women to rebuild their lives after the devastation of war which was not of their making or within their power to prevent.¹⁶ I recount three stories in some detail in the discourse of the following pages because the political violence during this period is so indelibly imprinted in the minds of the women I work with. Their experience of the war continues to shape their lives and the lives of their children even today. Importantly, they are stories of literal survival which are key to understanding these women's theologies (see

¹⁵ For recent studies on women and the political violence in KwaZulu-Natal see Bonnin (1998; 2000); Bulman and Ntombela-Nzimande (1998); Padarath (1998).

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that women never overtly resisted what was going on around them. In an interview on the 10th June, 1998 with Mrs Bella Zuma who has six sons all of whom were forced to fight (and survived), she relates an incident where she challenges the local *induna* about not believing it right for her sons to kill. A further illustrative example was recorded in the *Natal Witness* of 3rd February 1989 where it was reported that 40 women from Edendale visited the Progressive Federal Party offices to complain about an incident where a woman was killed and two others injured by police as well as listing a number of grievances and demands.

section 4.2.4; Chapter 7).

Mavis Ndlovu recounts her experience of the recruitment drive and remembers two particular days when her life was threatened (Mavis Ndlovu, 10 June 1998, Sweetwaters):

*...ilanga engilikhumbula kahle nje elalisemqoka kakhulu kimina it was 1987
ngangiselivini ngalelolanga kwakuyilanga lami lokuqala ngiselivini
kunguMsombuluko lapho ngathi ngivuka nje ekuseni kwakhala umbhobho
lapha babekhuluma lapha iziphathimandla bethi asihambe sekudutshulwe
iNkosi ngale kaCaluza. Manje kufuneka sonke sihambe kungasali muntu
ekhaya wonke umuntu yindoda yinkosikazi ithathe izikhali zayo iyohloma
ishone khona ezansi. Ya sahamba ke sonke sifosiwe phela kwakuyifosingi,
sahamba uma sifika lapho kwadutshulwa lelolanga lisemqoka kimina ngoba
inhlamvu eyasuka phesheya eAshdown silapha eCaluza yadlula kanje phezu
kwami yafika yawa nje kanje sasesiyabaleka ke sakhuphuka sihamba
ngezinyawo sisuka phansi laphaya eCaluza sakhuphuka ke njalo ngezinyawo
saze safika lapha. Ya kwakunzima nje ngelinye ilanga ngangingekho
kwakuyisonto, ngangingayile esontweni ngahamba ngayobona umhlobo wami
omunye owayeshonile. Sahamba sithe uma sifika siphuma lapho nje safika
lapha ebaleni sekugcwele kuthe abantu sesaba sangazi ukuthi sizongena
kanjani, kodwa ke noko seza safika kukhona amakhosikazi namadoda ahlomile
aphethe ocelemba kanti alwa nalomuzi olapha ngezansi manje bami lapha
ensimini yami abanye bagcwele lapha ebaleni. Manje lapha ngezansi
bayadubula nabo badubula labantu bavele ngamafasitela. Ngalelolanga
kwakunzima ngoba kwafa abafana abathi(3) bakhona lapha ngezansi, abanye
bengamavizitha bevakashile bephuma eThekwini base beyathutha ke
bayahamba ke. Bashiswa ke nje abanye lapha, ngenhlanhla ke kusho ukuthi
mina ngangingenaye umfana ngoba abafana imvamisa ababengena
kulezinxushunxushu ya impela kwakunzima kodwa ke sahlala ke, hayi ke
sekungcono ke kodwa manje*

...the day that I remember very well which was important to me was in 1987. I

was on leave that day, it was my first day of my leave, it was on a Monday. As I was waking up in the morning the authorities spoke on the loudspeakers telling us to go, the Chief had been shot at Caluza. Now we all had to go, no-one was to remain behind, women and men should take their weapon and we all should go. Yes we all went there, we were forced. When we reached there they were shooting. This day is important to me because a bullet came from Ashdown as we were at Caluza, came and passed a little above my head and it dropped in front of me. Then we ran away from Caluza, we walked upwards on foot coming from down there [pointing] until we came here. Yes it was difficult. One day it was on a Sunday I didn't go to church, I went to where my relative had died. Then we went and as we were coming [back] we saw that there were lots of people in the yard and we became very scared, we didn't know how are we going to get in. But we came along and we discovered that there were men and women who were armed with bush knives. They were fighting with my neighbour so they were standing in my garden and some were standing in the yard. Then they were shooting each other, the people from my neighbour were also shooting while they were peeping through the window. That day was difficult because three boys died and some were the visitors coming from Durban. Then they moved, many people's houses got burnt. Fortunately I didn't have a boy because it was the boys who were mostly getting involved in these things. Yes it was too difficult, but we remained and now it is much better...

Not all people remained in their homesteads, but fled for fear of their lives. By February 1988 there were between 60 000 and 100 000 refugees in the city of Pietermaritzburg needing welfare relief (*Natal Witness* 9 February 1988).

Sipho (17) ran away from his home in Sweetwaters, together with his family, in September last year. "Members of Inkatha burnt my house down while my mother and sister were at home. They told my mother that they were burning the house down because my two brothers and myself refused to join Inkatha," Sipho said. All their belongings - clothes and furniture - were destroyed and

the family now live in Dambuza (*Natal Witness* 16 April 1988).

For many women of Sweetwaters who were employed as “live-in” domestic workers in the city there was additional anxiety, fearing for the life of their children and the safety of their homes and belongings from a distance. This is illustrated as Lilian Ngcobo recounts her story (Lilian Ngcobo, 8 October 1998, Sweetwaters):

*Ngangilapha ngo87 kwasha wonke umuzi wami lona leyandlu
engale yashakwasha konke kwasala into yami
eyayisethawini kuphela lapho ngangihlala khona
abafana nje waphuma nje enje bengenalutho.
Ngasizwa wuMlungu wami ethawini wangicelela
ingubo emajalidini ngibagqokise kodwa ayikho
eyafa... Ngangisebenza ethawini ngilala ethawini
kulala izingane zabafana lapha nentombazane
kwasho ukuthi ke kwakhona oshoyo ukuthi ke
bazongena ngafika ngesonto ngazithatha ingane
zami ngahamba nazo ngaya ethawini. Kwasala
abafana bodwa ke iyasebenza intombazane
yangena laphaya engangisebenza khona,
ngathatha ke ingane lezi zonke ngaya nazo
kwaMlungu bafika ke ebusuku kuzosa kube
nguMsombuluko kungolweSibili bashisa ke.
Abafana ke babaleka ke bathi bangena lapha
emhosheni yena lona nje wangena lapha
emhosheni wayebabuka beshisa sekukhanya
kuthe kwaba khona ohambayo oya ethawini
oyobiza injini faya yahluleka ukungena
injinifaya ngalapha. Kwakukhona uhafudaka
uyabona uhafudaka lo kodwa
kwakungowabafana, kwasha kwaphela ingubo*

zabafana. Kwakukhona indlu lapha engu4 room
lapha yasha yaphela uthayela wonke waba
ngumlotha. Ngalesosikhathi ngahamba
ngayohlala ethawini ke nezingane ngahlala ke
uMlungu wanginika iholo elikhulu igarage
ngahlala ke khona... Kwaliwa ke kwaliwake naye
lo wayeshadile lentombazane. Naye wabaleka
emzini wazohlala kimina ethawini lapha.
Kwaliwa kwaliwa kwasho ukuthi ke lomuzi
ongezansi lo nawo wawulala emhosheni wabuya
wazongitshela ukuthi hayi angibuye manje
angathi sekungcono. Wayengakasebenzi lona
wayesaqedile nje. Kwasha udompasi wakhe
konke kwaba ngumlotha wathi noma esethi
uthola umsebenzi kwasho ukuthi akanadompasi,
saphila impilo ebuhlungu kabi ngalesosikhathi
basala nje bebaleka iNkosi. Ngahlala ngahlala
ke ngaze ngabuya ke wathi lo ongezansi buya
manje angathi sekungcono ngabuya ke
kungulweSine, ngisaba nami ngisaba nabantu
kukhona isikhotha nje lapha ekhaya sekuqhume
utshani sekuyinqaba nje lapha ekhaya. Ngahlala
ngahla kwaze kwaba ngcono ke ngashayela
ngashayela. Umfana lo owashona athi hayi
ngeke ngize ngize nje lapha wabuye wafika emini
kuyiSonto ngilapha ngizohlola hayi ngahlala ke ,
kwakusele konke okwasekhishini bengathintile
ekhishini isitofu samalahle. Ngase ngikuthathile
okunye ngahlala nako ejalidini ngahlala ke
ngasishiya isitofu. Ngahlala ke ngabuya
ngazohlala ke amafasitela ebulewe wonke
ngahlala ke kwafika umfana wami lo omunye

*wafaka ungcwecwe ke lapha emafasiteleni ke
 kulendlu engu4 room lapha... Hawu ngahlala ke
 ngahlala ke abafana besesaba hayi ngisebenza
 ngilala ethawini ngibuya kungolweSine ngiofile
 ngibuye ngibuye ngamaweekend kwaye
 kwaphela ke. Ngase ngazithatha izingane eInye
 sezafunda le kwaZulu sezongena isikole khona
 ngoba washa ngoNcibijane nguNew years
 sasisele ethawini izingane zaqala esikoleni le
 ePhomoroyi ngahlala ke ngahlala ethawini ke
 hayi kwangcono ke ngabuya ke ngisesaba
 ngisesaba ke hayi uma ngibuya ke kungavumi
 abuye lomfana baze babuya nabo hayi ke sahlala
 ke. Hayi ke kwasho ukuthi ke nabo laba
 ababelwa nathi abasekho babaleka nabo kodwa
 besaba ke abafana phela hayi ke kwaphela ke.
 Sanqonqothela ke sanqonqothela ngafuna
 othayela ke sanqonqothela leyandlu engale. Ehe
 yikona impela sahlala ke yonke lento nje
 esithengwa yizingane busha. Leliyakhabethe
 kwasha zonke izituli zakhona netafula lakhona
 kwasha konke endlini nangale edining room.
 Nekhabethe lasala ngoba lalisendaweni encikile,
 kwasha konke okwasedining room. Loku nje
 asebekuthenga busha izingane.*

I was here in [19]87, all my houses got burnt, that other house got burnt,
 everything got burnt except my things which were in town where I was
 residing. My boys came out with nothing. *Mlungu* [white person] helped me
 in town by asking other people to offer me clothes to dress them but none of
 them died... I was working in town sleeping in. Here, my children boys and
 girls were sleeping here. Somebody noticed that they were coming [to kill us].

Then I took the children away to town, only the boys were left behind. A girl is working where I used to work, then I took all these children to my *mlungu*'s. Then they came during the night on a Sunday, Monday, and set the fire on. Then the boys ran out and tried to get to the bush, this one [the one who lives there] got into the bush. He saw them burning the houses. Then somebody went to call the fire engine, the fire engine failed to come closer to this side. There was a square house, do you see, this square house was only for the boys, all their clothes got burnt. There was a four roomed house, its roof got totally burnt. During that time I went to stay in town with the children. *Mlungu* gave us a big hall, a garage, and we stayed there... The fight went on and on. This girl was married, she also ran away from her home and she came to stay with me here in town. The fight went on and my neighbours here used to sleep in the bushes and she came to tell me to come home, it is a bit quiet. This one had just completed [school] he had not started to work at that time. His *dompas*¹⁷ got burnt into ashes, and when he found a job he had no *dompas*. We lived terribly during that time, they ran away Lord. I stayed and stayed there until my neighbour told me to come back because it was a bit better. Then I came back, it was on a Thursday. I was too scared of the people, grasses had grown up here in this home. I stayed and stayed until things became better, I swept and swept. My boy the one who passed on, said, "I will never go there", he came back on a Sunday when I was coming to double check here during the day. Then I stayed. Everything from the kitchen was untouched, the stove. I had taken some of the things with me to town and I left the stove. I came back to stay, all the windows were broken. One of my sons came to fix it in this four-roomed house... Then I stayed and stayed, the boys were very scared. I was working and sleeping in town and came back on Thursdays when I was off or during the weekends. I had taken the children. Some were schooling in Zululand because it got burnt during the New Year's time. We were still in town, the children went to school in Pomoroyi. I stayed

¹⁷ A *dompas* is the "pass book", a form of identification that indigenous African people had to carry on them at all times during the apartheid era. In order to be allowed to work in a particular city, "permission" had to be granted by the authorities and stamped into the passbook. Mrs Ngcobo uses a euphemism which is a play on the Afrikaans translation and literally means "dumb" (as in stupid) pass.

and stayed and when it was quiet I came back. And when I came back this boy was scared to come back until they all came back. Then we stayed and those who were fighting against us were no longer here, they also ran away, but the boys were scared. Then everything was over. Then I looked for the tiles and we mended the roof on that other house. Yes, that is why we remained. All these things are bought by children recently. That cupboard's chair [pointing] got burnt and its table, everything in the house got burnt and the dining room too. This cupboard survived because it was hidden. Everything that was in dining room got burnt, these things have been bought by the children recently.

For refugees to return home was dangerous and took a long time as Mrs Ngcobo's story indicates. People were afraid to return despite assurances from local Inkatha leaders that the violence had been "contained" (*Natal Witness* 17 November 1988). Others had never left and continued their existence of escaping into the bush and nearby forests at night, and praying that they would wake up alive. Survival was deeply connected to a faith in God. Today all women I have spoken to attribute being alive to God. This fact is poignantly illustrated in the following account by Josephinah Nene. She describes her and her family's experience of running to hide in the bush and includes a description of how her sons hid her blind husband in the outside toilet because he could not run fast enough. For Mrs Nene, it was God who undoubtedly enabled her and her family to stay alive (Josephinah Nene, 1 May 1998, Sweetwaters):

Kwakunzima phela ngoba sasilala sinovalo ngoba babekwazi nokungena ebusuku. Abanye babelala endle abanye bebaleka, ebusuku uzwe nje kukhala impempe kulemizi engaphesheya leya uzwe nje kukhala impempe ithi pe pe sivuke sime lapha emnyango silalele. Amemeze umuntu athi yeye athi ingene bo athi wozani, kufiwa kungakabibikho nanemibese kusaliwa ngokugwazana ngemibese kwaya kwaya kwaba khona izibhamu ke manje uzwe siqhuma ebusuku isibhamu ehe sishaywe wuvalo singabe sisalala abanye babaleke bayolala emahlathini uyabona. Ngaleosikhathi ke wena uyazi ke ntombazane phesheya kuleyamizi ua uya lena angathi uya eMkhomazi kwaGezubuso,

kwakuvutha ke khona ke kushiswa imizi yabantu ngempela lena yotshani abantu behambe bebaningi amadoda afike ethungele imizi yabantu eyishisa ishe bangene endlini bathathe izimpahla abazithandayo endlini mande bashise. Ukuba nje nansi iTV uyabona bazongena omunye athathe iTV omunye athatheni kwakhe bakukhiphele ngaphandle bafake umentshisi babaleke abantu bagcwale umfula uMsunduzi ngale bamuka abanye amamnzi abanye bedlambuza phakathi bezisindisa bewelela ngaphesheya bebaleka uyayibona nje leyonto enjalo. Eyi luke lwasiphatha kabuhlungu kabi namanje alukakapheli kahle ngoba manje kuyadutshulwana manje uzwa nje ebusuku qhu qhu hayi siphumele emnyango silalele ukuthi zikhala ngalaphi zikhala ngalapha ehe ezinye zikhala ngalapha ehe ubone nje ukuthi hhm. Uma kwenza ngoba abafana bakho bengakafiki ekhaya ushaywe wuvalo ukuthi ewu mhlambe kungaba wuyena njena kuthi dwi uma usumbona hawu kanti ukhona uthethe uti kodwa yini ukuhamba ebusuku kodwa abafana abakuyeki ukuhamba ebusuku... Wangisiza uNkulunkulu impela ngiyambonga ngoba thina lapha asizange sibaleke, babebaleka abanye bathi bayabaleka bonke lana. Thina njena kulendawo yakithi njengoba ubona kwakhiwe kanje abafana bakithi babenoxolo kabi babengenayo inxushunxushu ehe sasilala nje impela thina singabaleki linye kuphela ilanga kwakusha la kwaNdlovu uyabona lapha ngaseFemini. Sabaleka ke lapho ehe sizwa bani ke ntombazane yami wena ke ngizokutshela sizwa uMrs Mthlane ememeza ethi hawu saze safa sabaleka ke nathi sathi awu kuyafiwa. Kanti sibona kusuka abangaphesheya ebusuku bedlula lapha eduze kwakami nathi ke ngalelolanga ke asisekho lapha endlini sesibalekile nathi sesicashe lapha ngenhla lapha kulelihlathi. Sesticashe khona nezingane ngibeletha izingane lezi zakwami ngiyibelethe emhlane soquba ezikhotheni uyabona. Awazi noma kukhona inkambaphansi yini khona lapho, inkambaphansi yinyoka ke awazi nokuthi mhlambe uhlala eduze kwayo yini ehe uyaquba nje nezingane. Badlula abantu badlula bathi , kanti kusha umuzi lapha ngaseFemini ushiswa ngabantu ebusuku bafika kulowomuzi bafica uNkosikazi bangqongqoza bathi vula yavula inkosikazi bangena bathi uma bengenile babuza indoda ukuthi iphi indoda yakho wathi yena ayikho ayibuyile nagiyazi ukuthi ilaphi. Bathi ke uyabona ke wena phuma ke yaphuma ke

inkosikazi ngokuphuma kwayo ifake loku kokulala yaphuma yathi uma iphuma nje bawuthungela umuzi washa umuzi yamemeza ke inkosikazi iloku imemeza ke ukuthi naku sifa saze safa ngoba naku kuyasha lapha. Sabaleka ke nathi sayocasha endle sacasha kanti sicashe nje kusha lapha ke kushiswa ngabantu ukube indoda bayithola babefuna indoda babezoyibulala kwakhombisa ukuthi indoda ayikho. Hayi sasihleli kanzima kabi lalela ke uyazi uma sibaleka thina lapha lo wakami ikhehla lakami aliboni emahlweni balithatha abafana bathi sizomenze njani umkhulu ngoba manje akakwazi ukuhamba bamtatamisa abafana dade bamtatamisa abafana bamfaka elavathi lapha phakathio bamvalela elavathi thina ke sabaleka samshiya yedwa sayocasha laphayana. Uma ke babefika ke ngoba bayaya emalavathi bayobheka wayezofa, babheka yonke indawo uma befikile ngishophi ayikho indawo abangayibheki ehe... Awu ngangingaseve ngithandaza ngithi Nkoso sisize Nkosi usithe lababantu nje bangasibono Nkosi yami, nabagijimayo uNkulunkulu afake isitha ukwenza ukuthi bangasiboni ngoba phela sasiqubile. Ngempela dade badlula la uyawubona lomuzi uyazi kaMaNzimande lomuzi badlula nje thina siqube nje ngalapha nje sababona thina esiqubile ukuthi nampa bedlula uyabona bona bangasibona bona. Ngambonga uNkulunkulu ngathi kanti Nkulunkulu umkhulu kangaka hawu mkhulu uNkulunkulu ngoba nje kwesinye isikhathi ungadlula nje njengoba sihleli nje uyabona losofa kudlule nje abantu lapha uNkulunkulu asithe singababoni ehe ngambonga ngempela uNkulunkulu ngamdumisa. Kwakunzima ngempela iNkosi

It was difficult, we were very scared when we sleep because they were able to get in at night. Some used to sleep in the wilderness you would hear the t...? blown by the people on the other side at night. You would hear the whistle saying, pe pe [making the sound] and we would wake up and stand outside and listen. Then someone would shout saying, “ye ye the war is in, come on”. People were dying, there was no knives, people were fighting with knives and as time went on there were guns. You would hear them exploding at night and we would be scared that we can’t even sleep, some would run out and sleep in

the forests. During those times you know my girl, that in that place far away at Gezubuso on your way to Mkomaas, people used to burn people's houses which are made of grass. Many men would go and burn people's houses and get inside and take the things that they wanted before burning the house. Like if they see this TV, one will take the TV the other one would take another thing and take those things out before striking the matches and setting the fire. People would run away and get into the river, some got drowned in the Msunduzi river trying to save themselves, do you see that? Ey it troubled us, even now it is not over because they are shooting each other, you would hear the noise to the guns at night saying, "qhu qhu" and we would come out and listen where the sounds are coming from. They are coming from this side and some are coming from this side and you would see that "hhm" if your boys haven't arrived at home, you become very scared because you think that maybe it is him. You feel better when you see him and you scold him saying, "Why are you walking at night"? But the boys don't want to stop walking at night... God helped me, I really thank him because we didn't run away here, all the others ran away they said they were all running away. But we in this area as you see our house buildings, our boys were very peaceful they were not violent. Yes we used to sleep and not run away. There was one day when Ndlovu's house was being burnt, you see here next to the firm, we ran that day I will tell you my girl. We heard Mrs Mthalane saying, "we are dying", then we ran out because we felt that we are dying, and we saw people from the other side passing here next to my house and out. We left to hide in the bush. We were hiding with the children. I used to carry a child on my back and go hide in the bush. You do not know whether there is a snake where you are hiding, you do not know whether you are sitting next to it, you are just hiding with the children. Then people passed moving to this direction [pointing], the people had burnt the house at night next to the firm. They found a woman and they knocked telling her to open. She opened then they asked where her husband was and she said she didn't know where he was, he had not come back. Then they said, "you see you go out of here". She was wearing a nightie. Then she came out as she was crying out, they burned the house.

Then she shouted saying, “we are dying”. She continually shouted because they were burning it. We also ran out to hide in the wilderness but they were burning her house. If they get the man, because they wanted him, they would have killed him. Fortunately he was not in. We had a terrible living here. You know as we were running out my husband an old man was blind, then the boys took him and said, “what are we going to do with him because he can’t walk”? They just took him and let him stay in the toilet, inside it, and locked him there. Then we left him alone and we went to hide. Should they have come because they normally open the toilets, they would have killed him. They search everywhere when they come, there is no place that they don’t search... Aw I was praying hard saying, “Lord help us, make us hide so that these people cannot see us, my Lord, that even those who are running they mustn’t see us because we were hiding”. Of course they passed. Do you see this house [pointing], you know maNzimande’s house, they passed and we were just hiding here. We saw them that they were passing but they didn’t see us. I thanked God so much and wondered how great he was. He is great because sometimes you can pass as we are sitting here, you see this sofa [pointing] people can just pass here and God can make us not see them. Yes I thanked God and praised him, it was very hard my Lord...

These three personal accounts as told by Sweetwaters women provide in specific detail different experiences of the political violence. I have included these stories in full, as a way of giving voice to the subjects of this study, on an issue so directly related to literal survival. The IFP recruitment drive began a spiral of violence in Vulindlela in which women were caught in the crossfire. But the survival struggle did not end with the violence; it has had enduring material implications for their lives (see section 4.2.3; Bonnin 1997; 1998).

While Sweetwaters came under the control of the IFP, Nxamalala resisted this political control and the women there had extremely violent battles to contend with. Aitchison (1998:10) argues that it was areas, such as Nxamalala, that came under heated attack directly after the release of Nelson Mandela, despite his conciliatory attitude and appeals for the cessation of violence in KwaZulu-Natal. A month after Mandela’s release, “Chief

Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the then Chief Minister of KwaZulu, addressed a small crowd of less than 10000 people at a security police financed rally. Two days later massive Inkatha attacks started ... on non-Inkatha areas in Vulindlela...” (Aitchison 1998:10).

A three-day running battle in the Sweetwaters area culminated in a siege of Nxamalala early yesterday morning, with a predominantly UDF-occupied territory boxed in on all sides by three groups of vigilantes. Police reported that they had battled in thick mist and mountainous terrain to disperse the fighting groups... Before the police contingent arrived 14 houses had already been set alight and two people reportedly killed - one from each side... A group of about 300 women and children had gathered by the roadside to wait for transport to evacuate them. But no buses came, and when Inkatha supporters came chanting past on route to Ndawone, they reluctantly dispersed (*Natal Witness* 14 February 1990).

The indelible scarring of the memories of those days and the effects on their current faith is illustrated in a discussion with the women of the Bible study group in Nxamalala. During August of 1999 we were discussing the text Luke 7:36-50 where a woman (of “ill-repute”) anoints Jesus’ feet with perfumed oil. In response to my question, “What does this passage teach us as women in Nxamalala?”, one woman suggested “forgiveness”. In no time at all the others were also applying the text to the period of political violence and its aftermath. There was an elderly woman visiting the group meeting that day, and her neighbour, Mrs Khoza, reminded the others that this woman had been able to forgive the killers of her family (Thembani Khoza, 18 September 1997, Nxamalala):

Ngisacela ukusho okunye okuthile nje ngokuthethelela, kulikhuni ukuthethelela kodwa lomama lona ungumakhelwane wami kakhulu ulaphaya eduze kwami. Lomama lo washiswa ngesikhathi sodlame washiswa yizihlobo zakhe ezashisa umuzi wakhe, babembulala nje eqinisweni wasinda ngoNkulunkulu. Wamuka ke wahamba wayohlala eBulwer zangafa ke izingane kodwa wafa ke umuzi wakhe waphela nya. Kodwa ke uzithethelelele izitha zakhe ababulali bakhe kade ebangcwaba nje ngoba yizona esezife kuqala. Ngamncoma ke ukuthi

unesipho esihle ngoba ukwazi ukuthethelela umuntu okade embulala, besikuxoxa nje khona manje naye unesipho esihle yena ngoba uyakwazi ukuthethelela umuntu. Namhlanjena ke nangu uNkulunkulu usembizele kulenkonzoyethu, bengingezwanga mina utshele uKhambule ukuthi uma sengiza lapha ucela ngimbize size naye. Kuhle ke sikhuluma ngento ebambekayo sikhuluma ngomuntu okhona owenzakalelwa yisimanga, wawuswela umuzi waswela yonke into, wahamba nothayela oshile omnyama eyokwakha eBulwer kodwa wabathethelela. Kodwa kufanele sivume mina angikwazi ukukwenza lokho inhliziyoyami ibuhlungu ngiswele manje imali yokufundisa izingane nayi nengane yendodakazi yami engabe unina iyazifundisela. Manje lomuntu ukhona ngiyamazi manje ngeke ngiqambe amanga ngithi sengimthethelele...

I want to say something about forgiveness, it is too hard to forgive but this woman is my neighbour [referring to a visiting member, an old *gogo*], she is very close to me. This woman got burnt during the times of violence, her relatives burnt her houses. In fact they were trying to kill her and she survived for God's sake. Then she moved to Bulwer. Her children survived but her houses got burnt, but she forgave her enemies. She attended the funerals of the people who were killing her because they have already died. I was happy for her because she has a gift of being able to forgive somebody who has tried to kill her... It's good because we are talking about something tangible, we are talking about someone who is here and to whom wonders have happened. She lost her home and everything. She took with her to Bulwer burnt roof tiles but she forgave them. But we must admit, myself I am not able to do that... Now I know that this person [who tried to kill her] is still alive I cannot lie and say I have forgiven him...

Issues of faith shape and define the women of Vulindlela's struggle to survive. This Bible study discussion reflects this in that a theological concept such as forgiveness is placed squarely in the arena of the struggle for literal survive in the face of war. A central tenet of this thesis is the notion that the "struggle to survive" defines the working theologies of poor

and marginalised women. This central idea is developed throughout the study.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the socio-economic and political context of Vulindlela, the geographic location of the study. Particular focus was on the two wards of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala, where the women subjects reside.

I began the chapter by illustrating, through two stories, the different material reality of a white landowner living close by in Winterskloof, and that of one employee now residing in Vulindlela. The political history of Africans in the city of Pietermaritzburg followed these accounts as a way of providing the background to the marginalisation of the indigenous people of the area through colonial and apartheid forces. Vulindlela is described in terms of its demography, housing and land issues, and social infrastructure. Through this description it became apparent that the area is impoverished with a poor social infrastructure and little employment opportunities. Women, I argued, experience the effects of poverty most severely. In addition to the impoverishment of the area, residents, particularly women, have had a series of crises to face. These included the 1987 floods, the political violence of the late 1980s to early 1990s, and more recently the AIDS pandemic which is visibly affecting families. In addressing these particular crises, I stressed the additional trauma they bring to Vulindlela women who are already in situations of social disadvantage. In setting the material context into which these women's lives are situated, I introduced the idea that in their literal struggle for survival, God is a key constituent of their working theologies of faith. This was illustrated through three accounts by women residing in Sweetwaters of their experience of surviving the political violence.

The women of Vulindlela represent a sample of semi-rural/peri-urban indigenous African South African women. They also represent the most marginalised grouping in South Africa. Addressing the issues facing their lives is crucial to the development of the country as a whole and to the well-being of all women in South Africa. It is the integration of the religious dimensions of this well-being that impacts the women's *theological* project in particular. Poor women of the world have notoriously been viewed as helpless, trapped victims. The

next chapter engages this global discussion by introducing a gendered poverty analysis of the South African situation in which I also show the strategic role religion plays in the struggle for survival by women. In engaging the theoretical gender and development debate, I argue that in the South African context, issues of poverty alleviation need to be linked to gender equity. In doing this, I critically discuss “third world”¹⁸ women (which includes women of Vulindlela) as apparently helpless victims and suggest the contribution of postmodernism to this discussion.

¹⁸ This term has been coined by women from the developing world as a positive self-affirmation based on their struggles against multiple oppressions of nation, gender, class, and ethnicity (Sen and Grown 1987:97). However, because in the field of development it has increasingly become a term that implies inferiority, I do not feel entirely comfortable with its usage. I continue to use it, however, mindful of its origin and because pragmatically I have not found another to adequately describe parts of the world serviced by international donor agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In using the term, I do not want to suggest that women of the “third world” are an essentialist category created as “other” by women from the first world (see Mohanty 1988).

CHAPTER 4

POVERTY, DEVELOPMENT, AND GENDER

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the socio-economic and political context of Vulindlela. I attempted to show that it is an area where, in order for basic human needs to be met, there is a dire need for economic, social, and political transformation. Transformation that effectively changes people's material lives has to occur at the macro level of governance in South Africa. This necessary transformational governance, as I will show, is inevitably rooted in the wider global development debates. While poor women in South Africa seek ways to survive day by day, their harsh existence will not fundamentally change without the structural socio-economic issues being addressed. I wish in this chapter to firmly situate this study within the context of these macro issues, while focusing on Vulindlela generally, and the wards of Sweetwaters and Nxamalala in particular.

The gender and development debate is of particular importance to this study because of its focus on survival. Those practitioners and theoreticians working in the field importantly focus on the necessity of social, economic, and political transformation of macro structures in order for the needs of poor women to met. The debate shows how, more often than not, these women are rendered invisible by development efforts that are executed from the "developed" first world. I thus also wish to introduce in this chapter the notion that the very nature of poverty evokes implications for faith and theology. By so doing, I begin to make the connection between faith, feminisms, and development, the fundamental pivot around which this study hinges.

I begin the chapter by asserting that gender is a development issue and by analysing the gendered nature of poverty. This discussion includes a gender critique of the post-apartheid response to poverty. I also maintain in this first section, that there is an interconnectedness between poverty, gender, and religion. Arguing that theological resources have been

neglected in discussions on gender and development, I suggest my work makes an important contribution in this regard.

Moving to the global context, I outline the theoretical trajectories of the gender and development debate which includes three approaches to development planning, namely, Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD). Implicit in these theoretical stances are different approaches to poverty alleviation and differing emphases on matters concerning gender equity. Woven into these theoretical discussions is an emerging voice from women in the third world, most notably represented in the debate through an organisation known as Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN).

The South African debate is then situated within this global dialogue and I show that the post-apartheid government has adopted a GAD approach in their development planning. This is highlighted through the number of policies implemented and structures established to ensure gender equity. The adoption of this approach has been criticised from certain quarters and I attempt to sketch the terrain of this critical discussion. As a way forward in the debate, I conclude the chapter with a section on the contribution of postmodernism to our theoretical reflection.

4.2 Development is a gender issue

4.2.1 Development introduced

“Development” is an ambiguous concept which is employed with caution in this study. Its usage is usually restricted to poor, “developing” countries within the southern hemisphere corporately referred to as the “third world”. The assumption being that the northern hemisphere, or so-called first world, is already developed and “progressive” and that with some-well meaning assistance, these “backward” countries of the third world will reach the same level of productivity and welfare (Wieringa 1994:829). Further ambiguity exists in the South African context which consists in first world terms of a few highly developed pockets within what is globally understood to be a “developing” country (see Fitzgerald *et al* 1995;

May 2000). Nonetheless, despite these contradictions, theoretically, the development terrain is crucial to this study in which issues of the literal survival of poor and marginalised women are foregrounded.

Development as a coherent practice began after the Second World War (Porter 1999:5). Practically, argues Porter (1999:5), it was built not only on the crumbling edifices of the war, but on the legacy of colonialism which had entrenched patterns of domination and established the concept of the world as a single entity. In the postwar period of the 1940s, a liberal approach flourished emphasising the achievement of development through the adoption of western political and economic systems (Parpart and Marchand 1995:11). Primarily an economic understanding of development dominated the debate during the 1950s and by the 1960s was epitomised in the “modernisation” paradigm expressed in Rostow’s (1960) “stages of economic growth”. Rostow (1960) argued that any society must pass through a number of stages of economic growth along the way to “economic fulfilment” (see Porter 1999:6). Development was seen as a linear process in which a country moved “from underdevelopment, which was characterized as backward/traditional/primitive, to full development, which was identified as modern/rational/industrialized” (Parpart 1993:447).

For the next twenty years, development discourse was peppered with the language of colonial imperialism suggesting that the salvation of third world nations would come with modernization. Problems of development lay with the logistics of how to achieve modernization rather than with the project of modernity itself. During the 1970s, Marxist critiques of international capital and class structures emerged and came to be expressed in what was known the “dependency school” (Amin 1974; 1977; Frank 1978). International capitalism was not, they argued, developing the world, but rather leading to further underdevelopment in impoverished areas. Calling for self-reliant development in the south, or periphery, they stressed the need for a separation from the metropole (or centre) of the north.

However, even these Marxist critiques of liberal capitalism “never questioned the equation between modernization and development” (Marchand and Parpart 1995:11).

In equating modernisation with development, women, if considered at all, were seen as tradition-bound and thus the most ignorant and “backward” members of society which were a

stumbling block to modernity and ultimately to development (Marchand and Parpart 1995:11). Consequently, women were ignored by development planners during the 1950s and 1960s, “on the assumption that they would eventually be forced to adopt a more ‘progressive’ stance towards development once the modernization process had been set in motion and the Third World men had learned how to organize their societies along modern lines” (Parpart 1993:447). Thus all programme planning was geared towards men with the underlying assumption that women played no important function in economic and political matters. In fact, the role of women in the productivity of their communities was rendered invisible.

Currently, the field of development studies remains a minefield of theoretical perspectives that appropriate a variety of approaches and methodologies in response to increasing globalization

of the 1990s and its impact on poor nations. During the 1990s, there was a greater shift away from an economic understanding to an emphasis on “people centred” models which espouse a more holistic view of development (Korten 1990; Max-Neef *et al* 1991; Nussbaum 2000). However, the “development” terrain remains contested with theory and practice defined and appropriated according to the ideological interests of the role players involved. Role players include a range of people from development specialists employed by large corporations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), to field workers employed by international, national, and local non-governmental organisations (NGO’s), to community based organisations (CBO’s) initiated and led by local residents. Amidst the competing and conflicting interests of these various groupings, the issue of gender as a critical factor in the development debate has become the one common denominator. It is recognised by all the various role players that gender construction is crucial to the development process and can no longer be ignored.

4.2.2 Poverty and gender in South Africa

Gender is a key construct of this study. In my understanding gender refers to the socially constructed and culturally defined differences between men and women. As a social construct it importantly identifies the relationship between the sexes in terms of power

relations. Gender influences the differences in poverty levels between the sexes because social institutions such as the family, religion, culture, and education discriminate against women. States in many parts of the world similarly discriminate against women by implementing laws and traditions which are biased in favour of patriarchal power structures. Poverty is thus not a gender neutral issue but rather is circumscribed by patriarchy. This fact is illustrated in the following two stories:

Barrett *et al* (1985) interviewed domestic worker Sarah Khumalo who has four children and lives with her mother and sister and sister's children in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal. Her meagre salary supports them all. When asked how she survives, Sarah Khumalo replied,

For me it is a big struggle every day. My sister doesn't have a husband so she has no money and she is too lazy to work. My husband - he works on the mines - sends some money every four months or so and things are a bit easier. Sometimes I speak to my madam - I say my children have got no clothes, or I must buy new schoolbooks or something. She will give some money, but usually I just don't know what to do (Barrett *et al* 1985:31).

When Julia Kunoane, who lives in a one roomed dwelling together with eight other people, was asked a similar question she had this to say,

My husband he just look! He is reading the paper while I cook. He says he is tired. I am also tired but I must cook. I am used to it because it is our custom. On weekends I am not going anywhere, except to church sometimes, because I must wash and clean (Barrett *et al* 1985:135).

These two stories were recorded during the 1980s. Similar stories have been told in the decades before and stories of African women in South Africa today would be no different, as the material life of women of Vulindlela outlined in the previous chapter indicates. Statistics reveal that African women consistently earn the lowest incomes, have the least wealth, and have far worse jobs than men, and women of other races (Hurt and Budlender 1998; Makgetla 1995).

In post-apartheid South Africa, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a socio-economic policy framework, was introduced by the new African National Congress (ANC) government. “It seeks to mobilise all our people and our country’s resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future” (ANC 1994:1). The RDP was to be implemented through a parliamentary office. One of the first tasks that this office embarked upon in 1995, was to commission a survey on the extent of poverty in the country.¹ The report resulting from the survey estimated that 53% of the total population live on less than R300 a month (Tuschling 1998). Significantly for this study, it also indicated that it was female headed households that were most vulnerable to poverty, and the startling reality is that 41% of all African households are headed by women in South Africa today (Neft and Levine 1997). While almost half of African households are headed by women, customary law severely limits land and inheritance rights of women, resulting in land often being handed over to male relatives on the death of a husband in rural areas (Baden *et al* 1999:22).

¹ Julian May (2000) has recently published updated poverty statistics which do not alter the earlier picture outlined in this section.

The apartheid legacy has further entrenched poverty into the lives of women by denying them formal education with the literacy rate estimated to be a mere 50% in rural areas (Neft and Levine 1997). Health services for women which are crucial to their survival have been totally inadequate in poor communities, Vulindlela being a good example. In assessing the leading causes of death amongst women, Neft and Levine conclude that “the single largest official category of causes of death is simply called ‘ill-defined causes’, probably because so many women have no access to formal health care and their diseases are never diagnosed, let alone treated” (1997:411). Lack of access to economic, educational, and health resources has resulted in a vulnerability exacerbated by the legacy of apartheid legislation such as the migrant labour policy which forced African women to stay in rural areas and care for their children through non-cash or informal agricultural and crafts production (Makgetla 1995:13).² Makgetla (1995:13) argues that the apartheid legislation aggravated the burden of unpaid household labour by relegating rural women’s work to unpaid labour and at the same time ensuring that these communities had an inadequate household infrastructure. Women who did live in the cities worked with little pay, long hours, and within particularly oppressive working conditions as domestic workers³ providing white families with cheap labour and reliable childcare (Makgetla 1995:13). “Even with the end of apartheid, black women [have] remained disproportionately in the rural areas and in domestic labour” (Makgetla 1995:13).

Reconstruction and development must dramatically increase employment opportunities for women, especially by transferring assets to raise incomes of the self-employed. The burden of household labour must be lessened, in part

² Studies have shown that while the informal sector cushions the effect of poverty and is used as a survival strategy by rural women without structural support from the state, this sector of the economy does not provide long-term material security for rural women (Preston-Whyte and Nene 1991).

³ Motsei (1990) and Simpson (1992) discuss the nature and extent of violence that domestic workers experience at the hands of their male employers, a topic otherwise notably absent in analysis of their working conditions.

by improving government services to poor communities (Makgetla 1995:7).

4.2.3 Gender critique of the post-apartheid response to poverty

Gender analysts have been sceptical about whether the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as outlined by the ANC (1995) can actually mobilise the country's resources towards a more gender equitable society. Cheryl Walker, Jenny Schreiner, and the Agenda Collective⁴ have all argued that the conceptualisation of gender and women's advancement is flawed in the RDP (Meer 1997:5-6; Agenda 1995). Walker has suggested that in the document there is an unevenness in the usage of the category "women" and the concept of "gender" resulting in parts of the document appearing to be "gender-neutral" (cited in Meer 1997:5). Schreiner likewise argues that the RDP appears to be pro-woman without being committed to fundamental structural gender transformation (cited in Meer 1997:6).

The Agenda Collective argued similarly (1995:40) and were deeply critical of the fact that women had not been involved in the drawing up of the document. Thus, they argued, it was crucial that structures be established that would monitor the RDP implementation from a gender perspective and were appalled that there was no mention of the establishment of the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) which had been mooted by the new government. "We believe that this is a serious gap in the RDP, as the immediate formation and inclusion of the Commission on Gender Equality is fundamental to its success" (Agenda 1995:42).⁵ While the CGE has since come into existence, their valid concern was the fact that no linkage was made by the state between poverty alleviation and gender equity. I discuss the importance of this linkage for gender and development in section 4.5.

⁴ This group define themselves in the following way, "Agenda, as a feminist project, is committed to giving women a forum, a voice and skills to articulate their needs and interests towards transforming unequal gender relations in South Africa". A crucial aspect of their project is the quarterly publication of the journal *Agenda: empowering women for gender equity* which focuses on a wide range of socio-economic and political issues effecting women.

⁵ The CGE was finally constituted in April 1997. I discuss its tasks, functions, and effectiveness in section 4.5.1.

The above discussion around the effectiveness of the RDP has become redundant with the sudden and unexpected closure of the RDP parliamentary office within two years of its establishment. Issues of reconstruction and development, it was asserted, were not to be dealt with in isolation from other government ministries. Some have argued (ESSET 1996) that this decision taken by the government was a preparatory move towards a fundamental ideological shift away from a people-driven towards a market-driven economic policy with the publication of *Growth, employment and redistribution: a macro-economic strategy* (GEAR) in 1996. In development terms, this ideological shift has crucial implications for delivery and access to services and resources.

While this discussion is beyond the scope of this study, what can be said however, is that GEAR is not good news for poor women (Baden *et al* 1999; Taylor 1997). Vivienne Taylor in reviewing GEAR from a gender perspective argues that “the prescriptions for cuts in social spending and ambitious growth targets spell disaster for nearly 60% of women,⁶ who, earning no income at all, will gain nothing from the formal market economy” (1997:9). She further argues that the critical areas of poverty and inequality in women’s access to the economy have not been addressed; there being neither a comprehensive employment nor rural development strategy. Thus in the final analysis, GEAR continues to afford women low social and economic status (Taylor 1997:17).

Debbie Bonnin (1997) has argued that an economic framework such as GEAR which focuses on economic growth and employment opportunities does little to address contexts of poverty which have arisen out of particular crises such as the political violence of KwaZulu-Natal, let alone adequately dealing with the legacy of apartheid. Conducting research in the township of Mpumalanga, she has shown that 10 years after the civil war in the province, the effects on household poverty have been devastating. Bonnin argues (1997:65) that household poverty happened at a number of levels, initially very gradually until a single attack when all possessions were lost (illustrated in Vulindlela through the personal story of Mrs Lilian Ncgobo in the previous chapter). Goods were lost through theft and looting after attacks, cost of food increased as it was necessary to buy from local outlets, and costs were incurred to

⁶ This includes women who are 15 years and older.

remove goods to safer places (1997:65). As the violence increased breadwinners were increasingly the victims resulting in higher proportions of female-headed households in these affected areas. She argues that currently “[t]he pensions of old women is all that stands between these households and starvation and there is little recovery or improvement” (Bonnin 1997:67). Thus is it necessary for a “specific state-aided economic recovery which targets households affected by political violence...” (Bonnin 1997:68).⁷

Bonnin’s (1997) research demonstrates again the specifically gendered nature of poverty which macro-economic strategies that are market-driven fail to address. So, while the ANC government is committed on paper to a non-sexist society through initiating programmes such as the RDP and entrenching gender equality in the new Constitution, its current socio-economic strategy, GEAR, appears to be making little difference to the material quality of life of poor African women who constitute a major proportion of the South African population. And so they continue their daily struggle to survive.

4.2.4 Poverty, gender and religion

As women wage the struggle against poverty, they employ a variety of survival strategies that have practical, cultural, and religious dimensions. It is particularly the religious dimension of survival strategies that are the focus of this study, but it is difficult to separate off from this religious aspect the practical and cultural dimensions. Earlier (section 2.4.2), I narrated three stories of Vulindlela women which illustrate their view of the world which I argued was a weaving together of a “life in the world” and a “life in the church”. The women of Vulindlela make no distinction between their religious life and their material reality. Because this is so, I argue in this study that these women live by “working” theologies of survival. This being the case, it is crucial for any discussion on the improvement of the material

⁷ An area of research that needs further investigation is the relationship between poverty and violence against women which statistics show is on the increase in South Africa, a country estimated to have the highest level of reported rape in the world (Baden *et al* 1999:14). Callaghan *et al* (1999) have argued that poverty enormously increases the risk for women of exposure to violence.

conditions of poor women's lives that their faith be considered. For poor women in South Africa, faith and the improvement of material life are inextricably linked. It is this interconnectedness of faith to material reality that is a particular contribution that my study offers to the gender and development debate.

The church's involvement in development processes has been at the centre of some theological discussion (Haddad 1996; 1998b; Koegelenberg 1992; 1994; Mugambi 1997; Nürnberger 1999; Phiri *et al* 1996; van Schalkwyk 1996). A particularly optimistic view of the church's role in development is expressed by Wilson and Ramphele (1989). They have argued that the church is better placed than any other institution, religious or secular, to work with poor people (Wilson and Ramphele 1989:303). This magnanimous attitude towards the ability of the institutional church to get involved in the process of social transformation has not, in my experience, been borne out. However, the rationale of their argument is a sound one. They assert that because vast numbers of poor people in South Africa ascribe to the Christian faith, the church is strategically placed in all marginalised communities to address poverty. Within all poor communities, the church as an organisation is extremely resourceful in human and physical terms. While acknowledging this to be true, I maintain that as an *institution*, the church generally has been unable to harness these resources for effective social transformation (Cochrane 1987; Haddad 1998b).

While the institutional church finds it difficult to harness resources, people of faith readily do so outside of the formal structures of the church in their struggle to survive. In a research study on poverty and religion conducted by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (Fenyves *et al* 1998), a number of pertinent ways that women of faith themselves saw religion as a resource for coping with poverty were highlighted. Respondents stated that praying and having faith bore "fruitful results" and they also held the view that non-churchgoers tended to "suffer more" and "they do without" (Fenyves *et al* 1998:v). Significantly for my own research, respondents who were female churchgoers "saw their ability to make a difference in their communities as closely related to their religiosity" (Fenyves *et al* 1998:v). The women understood having faith and helping the destitute with

prayer and love as making a positive difference (Fenyves *et al* 1998:v).⁸

Carol Muller (1994) in her work indicates how closely related faith and overcoming poverty are for women members of the Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*). She recounts a story as narrated by Mrs Mazibuko, a member of the married women's group where there is a transformation in one woman's life from one of material lack to material gain. In this narrative, it becomes clear that for the woman (and for those who heard the story), the transformation of her material state is attributed to faith in the cosmological power of Shembe⁹ and ultimately to God.

After standing up, she told us that one day she had no money. No money to give her children to carry to school. Even her husband hasn't got money. She had only the ticket to go to work. Her husband used to collect her from work to home. That day, her husband came late to collect her.

During the day she [had] failed to get money because even when she went to the bank, they didn't give her money... On their way home, they were not talking to each other because they haven't got money. You know, she said, on the highway next to Diepkloof, the traffic cop passed them. He was running at high speed. He passed them.

⁸ In Marxian terms, religion has negatively blinded those who are poor to their structural oppression and is seen to merely act as a panacea for suffering resulting in passivity. This stance is best summarised in the dictum, "religion is the opiate of the people". My point here is to argue against this stance. Instead I assert that religion for poor and marginalised women in South Africa is not a panacea against their suffering, but rather an active weapon they use in their resistance to their oppression. Survival theologies are acts of resistance (see Chapters 7 and 8).

⁹ Isaiah Shembe founded the African Independent Church known as the Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*) in 1910 (Muller 1999).

Then she saw something like papers coming away from the scooter. Then this lady said, “What is this?” She tried to pick out of the - look at... What was it? What was falling out from the traffic cop? The traffic cop didn’t wait. He just passed.

Then she asked her husband to stop the car. The husband stopped the car, and they got out. Those that were coming out of the scooter was the money. It was in *fifties*! Fifty papers! They picked those - she didn’t say how much. But, she said, it just went away from the scooter like papers. They, they picked it. The husband was picking, she was also picking.

That’s how Shembe helped them, because she said that if it was not because of Shembe, she was not going to get that money. But, because of Shembe... She asked him, “Shembe, can you help me? Because I have got no money”. Then Shembe put the money to this traffic cop, then blew it away. So they got the money (Muller 1994:132).

For the main character of this story, the transformation of her context of need to one of material gain has been transformed through her faith in God who can perform the miraculous. Similarly, I have experienced through my work with the women of Nxamalala that they attribute their literal survival to God. In times of dire need they are unable to “explain” how they managed to provide meals for their children or pay their school fees. For them, God provides these material needs. The following excerpts from our discussions in the Bible study group illustrate their experience:

uNkulunkulu nje ongasisiza uma sibhekisa kuyena mina ngihleli ngingathi ungondlile ngoba anginabani anginangane anginandoda, ngihleli kasisi, nosisi akasekho nendoda yakhe ayisekho ngihlezi nengane, kufana nokuthi ngihleli ngedwa lapha ngoba akukho ndoda ekhaya, ngibhekisa kuNkulunkulu konke ngize ngicabange ngibabone abantu behla benyuka beya esontweni ngingene endlini ngithandaze ngithi Nkosi uyazi wena... Engondla nangomthandazo ngithatha lowo mholo wempesheni engikufunayo ngikugcine

noma kungapheleli konke yindlu ngiyenze idilike, ngiyenze iphele imali yiyo nje engisizayo imali yempesheni ngoba akekho ongisizayo ngempela yimilenze le iyakhathala... uNkulunkulu yena mkhulu impela ngiyambona imisebenzi yakhe ngoba kulokuhlala kwami ngedwa ngabe sengafa.

It is only God who can help us if we trust in him. Myself I am being sustained by him because I have no child, no husband, I stay at my sister's house. She passed and her husband passed. I stay with children. It is just like I am living alone because there is no man at home. I give it all to Jesus and even think I see the people going to church I get into the house and say, "Lord you know"... He sustains me with the prayer also. I take that pension salary and do what I want even if it doesn't fulfill all my needs. I build the house and it falls, it is just the pension salary that helps me because there is none to help me and the legs get tired... God is powerful. I can see his works because for me to stay alone as I do, I am supposed to have died (Phumla Ngema, 25 September 1997, Nxamalala).

Umyeni wami washona ngo1988 ngasebenza waphela umsebenzi kodwa uNkulunkulu uyangipha nje ukudla ngidle... Ngihleli ekhaya angisebenzi... Nazi izingane ziyafunda kodwa uNkulunkulu uyangisiza ukuthi ngikwazi ukuthola ukudla ngidle...

My husband passed on in 1988, I worked and I lost a job but God always gives me food to eat... I am at home I am not working...Here are the children they go to school, but God always help me to get food to eat... (Janet Nzimande, 27 May 1999, Nxamalala).

Sifundile ke manje ukuthi, "Nkosi yami" uma uthi nje hayi ake ngiyekele kuJesu, ngempela imali ebengiyithola ibiyisimangaliso nje ukuthi bengiyithola kanjani angazi, kodwa ngangibona nje hawu, nonesikweleti sami esidala nje ngibone nje hawu ngibone ukuthi hayi ngamandla kaNkulunkulu.

We have now learned that if you just say, "my Lord", let me leave everything

with Jesus, in fact the money that I was getting was mysterious because I don't understand how did I get it, but I found anybody that owed me paying my money back and I realized that it was the power of God (Them bani Khoza, 27 May 1999, Nxamalala).

In this last example, Mrs Khoza makes a direct link between her faith in God to provide her material needs and the network of women in the community who are an important source of survival. Women depend on one another in times of need.

I want to suggest that networks among poor women manifest themselves in a number of ways. Shawn Riva Donaldson (1997)¹⁰ examines the networks used by women to make health-care decisions in the rural community of Tshunyane in the North West Province. Tshunyane, like many rural areas, is economically devastated with high unemployment and an absence of men in the community. In trying to understand how women make health choices for their children in situations where children die from diseases of poverty such as malnutrition and kwashiorkor, Donaldson (1997) shows how women depend upon each other to make these choices. She argues that while the roles and authority of these Tswana women are limited by traditional cultural practices, it is often these very practices that simultaneously provide women “with cultural tools essential for their survival, such as holistic traditional medicine, reverence for elders, sisterhood, and a sense of collective good” (1997:257). .

In the formal interviews Donaldson (1997) conducted with the women, they were asked who had the final word on money matters, rearing the children, and medical treatment for the children. Most married women suggested they shared these decisions with their husbands. During one interview the woman's husband arrived home unexpectedly. She “began to whisper and continued in a soft voice between mischievous giggles, ‘It is really both of us. This is the way it is, but he does not think so’” (Donaldson 1997:267). “Publicly, Tshunyane women would bow to custom, but in actuality they turn to female networks in order to make critical decisions concerning their health and the health of the young children in their charge”

¹⁰ This research was carried out during the oppressive apartheid regime of the 1980s that systematically denied adequate health-care services to the rural areas.

(Donaldson 1997:271).¹¹

Donaldson's conclusion is significant to this discussion on the relationship between women's networks and religion:

The women preserve tradition, but they simultaneously transform culture because of, and in spite of, the state. They pay homage to *Badimo*,¹² while simultaneously infusing fluidity into culture, health practices, and gender behaviour, and by giving kin ties priority in their actions. Surely the *Badimo* and *Modimo*¹³ silently endorse this (Donaldson 1997:271).

The importance of this work is that it highlights the way in which women manipulate cultural systems as they interact with forces of modernity, for their own ends. When faced with a situation of life or death, they prioritise their cultural networks of women which they recognised as their prime source of survival. At the same time, while recognising the value of both traditional and modern medicine and the role of the ancestral spirits and of God, they are fluid in the course of action they follow. This fluid path is strategic to the survival of their children against tremendous odds and it always include religious forces.

¹¹ Donaldson (1997) is making a distinction between how women act in the public and in the hidden realms. This distinction is key to my own arguments in Chapter 8 concerning agency and resistance in the survival theologies of marginalised women.

¹² *Badimo* are Tswana ancestral spirits.

¹³ *Modimo* is the name given to God.

Adequate health care is a particularly pressing survival issue for rural women, hence the focus of Donaldson's (1997) research. In urban and peri-urban situations, while health issues are important, women recognise that in the city survival depends on ready access to credit. Later (section 4.4), I show that in gender and development planning, access to credit as a means to gender equity is a contentious issue in feminist theory. In this section I want to preempt this macro theoretical discussion, and foreground the agency of poor women in devising micro strategies in order to access credit and survive. They do this by forming networks of their own which are constituted into collaborative groups generally known as *stokvels*.¹⁴

Stokvels are small-scale savings clubs or credit unions through which women make financial resources available for projects they would otherwise not afford (Barrett *et al* 1985; Kritzinger 1996). Members enter into an agreement to pay a fixed sum of money into a common pool on a weekly or monthly basis. These informal credit organisations are generally given this umbrella term but are also known amongst others as *umgalelo* [pouring], *ukuholisana* [we earn from one another/ we pay each other back], *masibambane* [let us join hands] (Barrett *et al* 1985; Kritzinger 1996). These organisations take on a variety of forms as the following interviews with women conducted by Barrett *et al* (1985) indicate.

Monica Phadi is a member of a society that buys food co-operatively. She explained her reasons for doing this:

Realising that food was a problem and that we were starving all the time, some of us decided to form a group where we collect R3 each week and buy food in bulk and share it amongst ourselves. This idea helps us a lot because of inflation. We feel it works out cheaper although we buy at the OK Bazaars

¹⁴ It is unclear where the name *stokvel* originated. Kritzinger (1996:114) suggests that it is probably a distortion of the word "stock-fair" which English settlers gave to their rotating cattle auctions in the Eastern Cape in the early 19th century. At these auctions, groups of African farmers probably pooled their financial resources to give each other a turn to buy good cattle.

which is supposed to be not very reasonable on their food prices (Barrett *et al* 1985:216).

To preempt the costs of death in the family, burial societies are formed. Jessy Cindi belongs to such a society and shares her experience:

In the meeting we discuss how to organise a burial and how to fight inflation. In the meeting we collect standby money of R300 that goes to the bereaved. A coffin and buses are paid from the R3 and R5, even groceries. We hold a serious meeting when there is a death (Barrett *et al* 1985:217).

Khosi Ntombela who has been a member of an organisation had this to say about her *stokvel*,

It was a *stokvel* where we used to help each other when there was something like a wedding or a death or birthday parties. This was done by helping to cook and serve. All in all the donation was R20 a week from all. We used to meet for 30 minutes every Saturday. I used to go to every meeting. I didn't want to miss it, because there was a lot of entertainment, such as drinking wine and the discussions and even the dancing (Barrett *et al* 1985:216).

This view of a *stokvel* as a place where women gather to drink and socialise, in opposition to women's religious gatherings, seemed to be held by some women of Nxamalala. When I suggested that we were becoming a *stokvel* in raising money for an end of year party, Mrs Khoza expressed unease with using that terminology. Her response clearly indicated to me that she associated it with a place of "drinking" and "promiscuity". Having said this, my experience with the women of Vulindlela, both in the Mothers' Union and in the Bible study group, is that they always raised money through pooling resources and then distributing them as is needed. This "*stokvel*" method of fundraising is always associated with acts of faith, deeds of charity, and is accompanied with prayer and chorus singing. Indeed, the fundraising that took place in the Bible study group adopted this method.

While little research has been undertaken on the extent to which *stokvels* embody an integration of the practical and the religious as survival strategies, Kritizinger (1996) has

attempted to show the religious significance of *stokvels* as a micro-economic movement for the mission of the church. In so doing, he argues that this movement is an indigenous response to poverty in which women play a significant role (Kritzinger 1996). Kritzinger (1996) shows how African Independent Churches (AICs) employ the *stokvel* principles of fundraising in initiating building and other projects. This, he concludes, enables this indigenous church movement to be financially independent and innovative in initiating other community projects. Juxtaposing the financial structures of the AICs over against those inherited by the mission churches, Kritzinger (1996:122) argues that a “structural conversion” of mission initiated churches is necessary. In adopting this more indigenous form of fundraising, mission initiated churches which would become “financially self-supporting and more culturally recognisable and relevant to their surrounding communities” (Kritzinger 1996:122).

From my experience of St Raphael’s Church in Sweetwaters, Kritzinger’s argument is borne out. St Raphael’s, while being a mission initiated church, has functioned with little oversight from the traditional church structures. Its impoverished isolation has in effect meant that it has largely been left to make its own way. In this process there has been an integration of indigenous practices, “*stokvel*” fundraising principles being one example, which has enabled the church to reflect a more engaged, self-reliant, and culturally relevant form of Anglicanism in the community. The female membership of the constitutes about 80% of the congregation. Women have played a fundamental role in this self-reliant and indigenous form of Anglican Christianity.

Given my earlier discussion in this section on the inability of the institutional church to harness existing resources to deal with poverty, the role of the *stokvel* movement and women as the key members, is particularly significant. While academic theologians, economists, and feminists debate the way forward on the macro theoretical level, religious women on the ground have found ways in spaces they create to make a way in the struggle to survive. The practical ways they survive, whether seeking health care for their children or accessing credit, are an integration of all aspects of their lives. In these integrative strategies, the religious aspect plays a major role.

This study is an exploration of theological resources harnessed for survival by poor women in safe, social sites outside of the institutional church. Women of faith form their own networks, both formally, such as women's church organisations that meet on a Thursday (see section 7.3), and informally, expressed as faith responses to their struggle to survive, or what I have termed survival theologies. It is this exploration of theological survival resources that is a particular contribution I make to the field of gender and development as I attempt to intersect faith, feminisms and development.

Thus far in this chapter, I have introduced development as a gender issue focusing particularly on questions of poverty. I turn in the next section to the theoretical aspects of the gender and development debate in the third world as it has emerged over the past thirty years and conclude by locating the discussion in the South African context.

4.3 Gender and development in the third world

4.3.1 Gender analysis introduced into development planning

As I suggested in section 4.2.1 it is now recognised by all role players that a gender analysis can no longer be ignored on the global development agenda. However, this was not always the case. It was Ester Boserup who first placed gender issues on the international development agenda with the publication in 1970 of her landmark study *Women's Role in Economic Development*. Boserup (1970) detailed the role of women in economic development, assessing their contribution throughout the third world and argued that schemes initiated by development planners were not improving the lives of women, but rather depriving them of economic opportunities and status. Her study was a crucial first attempt to assess the impact of modernisation on rural women around the world by systematically delineating the sexual division of labour that existed in agrarian economies. By analysing the changes that modernisation brought to the agricultural practices of these societies she was able to assess the differential impact on the work done by men and women (Rathgeber 1990:490).

Boserup (1970) focused on the productive functions of rural women as the major food producers. She argued that because women's work revolved around the home, subsistence

farming, and the informal sector, it was not taken into account by the “experts” in their development policies, planning and activities as they tended to only consider the formal economy. Furthermore, with economic development requiring the specialization of labour practices, women were increasingly having to shoulder more work in societies moving towards modernisation.

Boserup (1970) also highlighted the importance of understanding traditional practices from a gender perspective if effective development planning was to be carried out. One such illustrative example was the practice of polygamy in Africa where women were the major cultivators of land (Boserup 1970:37-52). Having many wives and large families ensure that men are able to manage large tracts of land. They practice polygamy partly to ensure a stable female “workforce” on the land. Thus agricultural projects designed to teach skills to men is quite absurd. As is often the case, teaching men how to operate machinery and equipment, leaving women to continue using the old hand tools, has led not only to overall lower productivity, but to a further loss of status for women.

Loss of status for women was further exacerbated by colonial legislation regarding land ownership (Boserup 1970:53-65). South Africa was a case in point. In 1898, the colonial administration of the Union of South Africa issued a proclamation in the Transkei forbidding each wife of a polygamist to have her own plot of land (Boserup 1970:61). This policy of “one man, one plot” resulted in the wives cultivating one common plot which belonged to the husband and which was surrendered to the male heir on his death. The widows were deprived of their livelihood and at the mercy of the son of the deceased. For all these reasons, Boserup argued that the gap between male and female productivity was widening in societies where women had traditionally been the major food producers. Logically, this would result in underdevelopment rather than development.

In urban centres, Boserup (1970:85-103) highlighted the important role women played in the informal sector and analysed why the female rate of industrial employment was so low. She pointed to the discrepancy between the number of male and females with tertiary education, and particularly to the lack of industrial skills training for women. As a result, women lured to the towns from the rural areas often ended up in the sex trade or illegal beer brewing in

order to survive. Boserup (1970:160-173) stressed the importance of subsistence activities of women in towns which included domestic work, production of goods for barter, and services rendered in exchange for goods. By so doing she challenged development planners to account for these activities.

As Rathgeber (1990:490) points out, what was remarkable about Boserup's work was the fact that it was based on an examination of data and evidence that had long been available to social scientists and development planners. She had been the first person to use gender as a variable in her analysis of the existing research. While Boserup was later criticised for oversimplification with regard to the nature of women's work and roles, the literature continues to record her study as seminal in putting gender on the development agenda (Parpart and Marchand 1995; Pearson and Jackson 1998; Rathgeber 1990). Boserup's study, further, inspired the emergence of a new subfield in development circles that came to be known as Women in Development (Parpart and Marchand 1995).

4.3.2 Women in Development (WID)

Boserup was joined by a group of largely western feminists influenced by liberalism who created their own language and preoccupations under the title Women in Development (WID) (Parpart 1993; Rathgeber 1990). The term "WID" was initially used by the Women's Committee of the Washington, DC chapter of the Society for International Development as part of a deliberate strategy to bring to the attention of policy makers in the north, the new evidence generated by the work of Ester Boserup (Moser 1993; Rathgeber 1990). These specialists stressed women's equality, which could be achieved through education, employment, and material benefits such as land and credit.

Under the rubric of WID, the recognition that women's experience of development and societal change differed from that of men was institutionalized and it became legitimate for research to focus specifically on women's experiences and perceptions (Rathgeber 1990:491).

Initially the concerns of WID specialists continued be marginalised. However, increasingly

development planners from the major world institutions recognised that their policies were not working and decided that they needed to include women in their planning in order to curb world population and reach the poorest of the poor. With this recognition came the declaration by the United Nations of the Decade for the Advancement of Women from 1975 - 1985 at a world meeting in Mexico (Moser 1989). As a result, gender research increased and WID policy makers gained recognition within development bureaucracies.

During the period of the decade from 1975-1985, the WID approach continued to emphasise an equity approach in their planning. They lobbied to gain equity for women in the development planning process and to ensure that women were seen as active participants in development (Moser 1989; 1993). Since then, WID planners involved in government and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, have shifted their emphasis from equity to what they term the efficiency model which seeks to ensure that development efforts are more effective and efficient (Moser 1993). While there remains an emphasis in the WID school on the need for women's equal economic participation in the development process, there is now also a focus on strengthening the *capacity* of women to be involved in the development process (Moser 1993).

For Caroline Moser (1989; 1993), an influential gender and development specialist employed by the World Bank, developing women's capacity lies in understanding that in most third world households, women play a triple role. This triple role includes reproduction, production, and community managing functions. Women's work includes not only the reproductive work of childbearing and rearing responsibilities, but also productive work as secondary earners in the agricultural and informal sectors. In addition, in situations where resources such as water and health are inadequate, women in their roles as wives and mothers take it upon themselves to manage their communities. They often initiate and organise local protest groups to ensure the survival of their communities.

There is, however, a spatial division between the public world of men and the private world of women. This spatial division results in only the productive roles of women being valued while their reproductive and community managing work is either ignored or undervalued because it is seen as "natural" and nonproductive (Moser 1993:27-36). In most third world

countries, argues Moser (1993:27), the myth of the male as the primary breadwinner predominates even where the reality suggests otherwise. Also in these situations men do not have a clearly defined reproductive function means that very different roles are undertaken between men and women. In the community, a woman's role is to provide items for collective consumption while men have a community leadership role which is formalised in the political sphere. In contrast to women, men's work is valued either directly through remuneration or indirectly through status and political power. "While the tendency is to see women's and men's needs as similar, the reality of their lives shows a very different situation" (Moser 1989:1801).

In asserting that the development needs of men and women were very different through an analysis of their roles in the sexual division of labour, the WID approach laid the foundation for gender and development planning theory. Moser (1989; 1993) argued that men and women do not only play different roles in society, have distinct levels of control over resources, but they also therefore have very different needs. In defining the needs of women she appropriated the work of political scientist Maxine Molyneux (1985) who had made the distinction between strategic and practical needs of women.

Molyneux (1985) argued against the notion of "women's interests". She asserted that oppression results from a range of structures and mechanisms functioning on a number of different levels and thus even interests shared by women are shaped by class, race, and ethnicity and are therefore sometimes competing and conflicting. Having said this, Molyneux (1985) maintained that women nonetheless had certain general interests. These she termed "gender interests" to differentiate them "from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of women's interests" (Molyneux 1985:232).

Gender interests develop as a result of their social positioning and can be either strategic or practical. *Strategic* gender interests are those interests formulated from an analysis of women's subordination to men in order to achieve a more equitable society. They include the abolition of the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of domestic labour and childcare, the removal of institutional forms of discrimination, attainment of political equality, the establishment of the freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women (Molyneux 1985:232). *Practical*

gender interests are those formulated from the concrete conditions experienced by women as a result of their social positioning within the gender division of labour. They are usually a response to an immediate perceived need for human survival without any long terms goals for structural change (Molyneux 1985:233).

Moser (1989; 1993) popularised this distinction between strategic and gender interests in the development literature. For Moser, distinguishing differing needs is crucial to the planning process which focuses on the prioritised concerns of women. Moser (1989; 1993) defines these prioritised concerns as *interests* which she then translates into *needs*.

With this distinction, gender policy and planning can be formulated and the tools and techniques for implementing them clarified. For example, if the strategic gender interest... is for a more equal society, then a strategic gender need... can be identified as the abolition of the gender division of labour. On the other hand, if the practical gender interest is for human survival, then a practical gender need could be the provision of water (Moser 1993:38).

Moser's appropriation of strategic and practical needs is still widely used today in the literature, particularly in training materials on gender and development (CEDPA 1996; Parker 1993; Slocum *et al* 1995; von Kotze and Holloway 1996; Williams *et al* 1994).

4.3.3 Critique of the WID approach

While the WID approach brought gender concerns to the attention of development planners, it was based on several assumptions that were at odds with trends in the social sciences during the 1970s (Rathgeber 1990:491). Most importantly it was grounded in liberal modernisation theory which problematically saw development as a linear process (discussed in section 4.2.1), and thus it never challenged the existing socio-economic structures (Chowdry 1995; Kabeer 1994). In the early years, emphasis was placed on integrating women into existing development efforts rather than examining why women had not fared well in the development process (Rathgeber 1990:491). Hence WID proponents avoided questioning the sources of women's oppression and rather advocated women's equal

participation in education, employment, and skills training (Rathgeber 1990:491).

Linked to this emphasis, was an almost exclusive focus on the productive aspects of poor women while simultaneously minimising the reproductive aspects which were integral to their lives (Rathgeber 1990:492).¹⁵ This resulted in WID projects typically being characterised by income generating projects with an attached “welfare” agenda where women were simultaneously taught literacy, hygiene, and child care (Rathgeber 1990:492). These projects assumed that with the economic incentive women would simply find ways to juggle their time to fit in yet another activity into their already overburdened day (Buvinic 1986; Rathgeber 1990). It was in response to these critiques that Moser (1989) later introduced her “interests” model discussed above in an attempt to address the structural oppression of women.

¹⁵ I will argue in section 5.4 that this emphasis by white liberal feminists on productive equality to the exclusion of the reproductive qualities of women’s lives has been a source of division amongst women in the South African context. Here, white liberal academic feminists have stressed equality while activist women who have tended not to be white have to the contrary emphasised the reproductive capacity of women as a source of activism in the struggle against oppression. African American feminists (hooks 1984; Collins 2000) have made a similar argument in the North American context.

However, the “interests” model itself has since come under attack. Molyneux (1985) who first discussed “women’s interests” argued for a theoretical framework that acknowledged competing and conflicting interests amongst women themselves. Critics (Kabeer 1994; Wieringa 1994) maintained that the liberal belief in an universal argument for the equality between human beings remained at the heart of WID discourse where “women’s interests” have been popularised.¹⁶ Differences of culture, race and class were negated in favour of the more fundamental belief in the equality of the sexes (Kabeer 1994:27). The stress on the equality of the sexes led to describing behaviour normatively and dualistically with a strong emphasis on the notion of a global sisterhood based on the similarity of “women’s experience” throughout the world. “Global sisterhood” has come under fierce attack by non-western theorists who have argued that it merely serves to disguise and deny material differences in power, resources and interests between women themselves, as well as privileging particular interpretations of women’s needs and interests over others (Kabeer 1994; Mohanty 1988; see Chapter 5).

Wieringa (1994) argues that the theoretical distinction made by Moser (1989) and others between strategic and practical interests does exactly that - it privileges particular interpretations of interests over and against other interpretations. Gender is but one aspect among many (race, class, ethnicity, sexual preference) that influence women’s lives.

¹⁶ Molyneux (1998) has defended her original formulation (1985) of the “interests” paradigm. She argues that it was precisely her intention at the time to nuance and foreground the complexity of “women’s interests” located within a particular historical situation. Molyneux (1998) claims that the appropriation of her paradigm into an over-simplified schematic model leaves her questioning its usefulness at all to understanding “women’s interests”. Its usage in the planning field has resulted in a hierarchy of “interests” and suggests that “practical interests” are not concerned with political transformation”. Furthermore, (Moser 1989), in translating “interests” into “needs” suggests a less fluid and less political construct which Molyneux (1998) objects to. For Molyneux (1998), much of her original formulation in this regard has been lost in translation. Women’s objective interests, she asserts, always need to be located in specific historical contexts which are subject to cultural, historical, and political variation that cannot be known in advance (Molyneux 1998:77).

Interests based on these diverse aspects may contradict each other, may strengthen or alleviate relations of oppression in which they live, and their impact may be felt differently at distinct times or phases in their lifecycle. Women (and men, for that matter) are engaged in a constant struggle of negotiating the different interests with which they are faced: ambivalence, contradictions, clashes with the interests of other individuals or groups are central in these processes. Neither defining women's gender interests nor defending them can be seen as a linear process, starting from a fixed condition. Rather it should be seen as a complex, confusing process, sometimes making advances, sometimes withdrawing, another corner always waiting to be turned (Wieringa 1994:835-836).

This has certainly been my experience in working with women in Vulindlela. Increasingly I have come to realise how important it is for me to be surprised by what they understand as their interests. During the Bible study group process with the Nxamalala women, what I often perceived to be important, such as inviting women involved in community projects to come and address the group, was rejected by them. On reflection, there are ways in which they negotiate the clashing and contradictory interests that make up their lives at home, in the church, and in the community that are outside of my experience. My (clashing and contradictory) interests too are different from theirs which they do not always fully understand. The process of engagement with one another and my presence in that space is most definitely not linear, but is a process that takes many twists and turns (see section 7.5).

As Wieringa (1994:836) points out, categorising "gender interests" is less important than asking questions as to who is defining those interests and what role the "expert" is playing in that process (Parpart 1995). So while being sympathetic to the usefulness of "interest" categories in policy and programme planning, with Wieringa (1994) and Parpart (1995) I assert that there has to be a recognition of the power dynamics in the relationship between the person defining the "interests" and those she works with. There also has to be a "locatedness" in its usage. These aspects are highlighted throughout this study in discussions on feminism and "global sisterhood", postmodernism and its stress on identity and

particularity, and my role as an activist-intellectual in my work with the women of Vulindlela.

The question of who defines “women’s interests” is linked to a further critique of the WID approach. Non-western development practitioners argued that despite shifting emphases in the WID approach over the years, their policies continued to remain squarely within the modernisation paradigm. Because this was so, the western women of WID have remained concerned with “modernising” third world women without understanding their lives and experiences, nor giving them voice (Chowdry 1995; Hirshman 1995; Kabeer 1994).

WID discourse...represents Third World women as helpless victims trapped by tradition and incompetence in an endless cycle of poverty and despair. The possibility that Third World women (and men) might have skills and strategies to protect themselves rarely surfaces. Third World women are characterized as uniformly poor, inadequately prepared to cope with the current economic crisis and desperately in need of salvation through foreign expertise (Parpart 1993:451).

Representing the “third world woman” in the gender and development debate resonates with my own work in the South African context where all too often poor and marginalised women are seen as victims with little resources of their own. This debate has become crucial to the feminist project as a whole and is deeply shaped by the racial divide. Within the theological sphere, issues of representation still need to be placed on the agenda. My work overtly foregrounds representation both in terms of my role as an activist intellectual working with poor women and also in terms of foregrounding the theological resources of women in their struggle to survive.

The critique of the WID approach to gender and development which is rooted within the liberal modernisation paradigm stands as a cautionary reminder that poor and marginalised women, the subjects of this study, are not victims who have no voice, but active agents who take control of their lives in their struggle to survive within particular locations. They know

their needs and how best to navigate the conflicting and competing interests of their lives. This view is central to my work which attempts to add a religious dimension to the resources that poor women contribute and offer to the process of development.

4.3.4 Women and Development (WAD)

While WID was and remains one of the dominant gender and development paradigms, during the late 1970s a neo-Marxist feminist approach grew out of a concern with the limitations of modernisation theory, and particularly with the idea that women had inadvertently been left out of development strategies (Rathgeber 1990:492). This approach came to be known as Women and Development (WAD). It has never played a dominant role on the agenda, but has been an important voice in the debate. Drawing on dependency theory¹⁷ that called for self-reliant development, WAD theorists argued that women had always been part of the development process and “did not suddenly appear in the early 1970s as the result of the insights and intervention strategies of a few scholars and agency personnel” (Rathgeber 1990:492).

Its [WAD approach] point of departure is that women always have been important economic actors in their societies and that the work they do both inside and outside the household is central to the maintenance of those societies, but that this integration serves primarily to sustain existing international structures of inequality (Rathgeber 1990:492-493).

WAD theorists thus focus primarily on the relationship between women and the development process rather than on strategies for the integration of women into development as WID proponents had done (Rathgeber 1990:492). Together with a commitment to self-reliant development based on a class analysis, the WAD approach was also influenced by the growing movement of radical feminism (Daly 1978) that asserted that women could only develop outside patriarchal power structures. The two trajectories of dependency theory and radical feminism “served as a backdrop for a new approach to the development of women,

¹⁷ Dependency theory, like most Marxist analysis, has actually given very little specific attention to gender subordination.

one that built and celebrated women's culture, emphasized women-only projects, and warned against close cooperation with male-dominated institutions" (Marchand and Parpart 1995:13). The WAD approach mostly influenced the policies and programming of women-only Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) that emerged in the late 1970s (Marchand and Parpart 1995).

These organisations were rooted ideologically very differently from the multilateral agencies where the majority of WID practitioners worked. However, Rathgeber (1990:493) argues that while the WAD approach offers a more critical view of women's position, it too pays little analytical attention to social relations of gender within classes. While WAD theorists foreground issues of class in their theoretical approach, Rathgeber (1990:493) argues that in actual project implementation this approach is no different from that of WID. In their project design and implementation, both perspectives group women together with little analytical note of race, class, or ethnic divisions which would effect social status and power relations (Rathgeber 1990:493).

Furthermore, according to Rathgeber (1990:493), WAD also fails in its implementation to make fundamental shifts in the social relations of gender. Rather, there is an implicit assumption that women's position will improve if and when international structures become more equitable (Rathgeber 1990:493). In the meantime, the issue of women's under-representation in social, economic, and political structures is tackled by carefully designed intervention strategies not dissimilar from the WID approach (Rathgeber 1990:493).

The WAD approach was never a major player in the debate and with the final meeting of the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women in Nairobi in 1985, another more powerful forum for third world women with neo-Marxist leanings began to emerge.

4.3.5 Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

Delegates from the third world attending the final meeting of the United Nations Decade for the Advancement of Women in Nairobi in 1985 gathered separately at a pre-conference meeting in India. While there had been much critical debate at a theoretical level on "global

sisterhood”, this pre-conference meeting was the first practical expression by third world development practitioners of their need to take control of the development agenda . This meeting was an attempt to forge south-south linkages through a formal forum. As a result of this gathering an international organisation, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), was formed (Sen and Grown 1987).

Significantly, DAWN became a space that third world women had created for themselves in which they could give voice and articulate their own development concerns. Through the birth of this forum, the gender and development terrain shifted significantly. The development agenda of western, northern-based women no longer remained the yardstick by which gender efforts were measured. This particular shift of power from one group of women to another is of crucial significance in South Africa where race and class issues define relationships between women. My work in Vulindlela is an attempt to explore power relations between myself and the women who live there as well as the consequent implications for the role of the activist-intellectual in working with poor women. The voice of DAWN is therefore important to the broad parameters of this study.

DAWN practitioners were concerned that any analysis that needed to be carried out should be from the vantage point of poor women (Sen and Grown 1987). They argued from a socialist perspective that poor women’s contributions, as workers and managers of human welfare, were *central* to the crisis and struggle for survival in the developing world (Sen and Grown 1987). It appears that DAWN practitioners were keen to strengthen the WAD approach by not simply taking into account international relations of capital, but by also focusing on the social relations of gender. In so doing, they called for a perspective that was rooted in the concrete realities, experiences, and wisdom of third world women and their indigenous grassroots movements (Sen and Grown 1987).

Building on this experience members of the DAWN group outlined what they understood as alternative visions, strategies, and methods to development (Sen and Grown 1987:78-96). Their visions are rooted in feminism as a political movement and as defined by women from the third world (Sen and Grown 1987:79-80). This feminism cannot be monolithic but must represent concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and

ethnic backgrounds (Kabeer 1994:80; Sen and Grown 1987:79). One of the goals of this feminist movement must be the alleviation of poverty which is the result of “unequal access to resources, control over production, trade, finance, and money, and across nations, genders, regions, and classes” (Sen and Grown 1987:80). The DAWN vision statement boldly proclaims a commitment to a world where peace and justice prevail:

We want a world where inequality based on class, gender, and race is absent from every country, and from the relationships among countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women’s values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships (Sen and Grown 1987:80).

Recognising that to make this vision a reality, strategies of intervention are required, DAWN asserted the need for both long and short term strategies. Long term strategies that effect structural change and short term ameliorative goals are both necessary to the task of assisting women in gaining economic control of over their lives (Sen and Grown 1987:82). DAWN’s approach unequivocally argues for the participation of women from grassroots organisations in the process of strategic planning (Sen and Grown 1987:82).

...[S]trategies... must be debated, first of all, within the women’s movement and among grassroots women’s organizations. Such discussions can help to genuinely incorporate the experiences and concerns of poor women, to discern and identify regional and local variations, and to articulate a consolidated body of analysis and programmes to ourselves, as well as to national governments and international agencies (Sen and Grown 1987:82).

Key to this task, is the strengthening of existing women’s organisations. DAWN argued that in the networking of these organisation knowledge could be shared and methods of empowering women developed which would facilitate the realisation of the vision of a just and peaceful society (Sen and Grown 1987:89). Much of DAWN’s work has continued to be in this area of developing institutional capacity in order to equip women to take economic

control over their lives. To this end they have analysed existing organisations and their potential for change (Moser 1993:198-203; Sen and Grown 1987:89-96).

As I have already suggested, the birth of DAWN significantly shifted the gender and development terrain into the hands of development practitioners from the south. However, some have argued (Hirshman 1995; Parpart 1995) that theoretically the DAWN group, despite claiming to provide an “alternative” theory to the WID approach, have remained trapped in the modernisation paradigm.

Hirshman (1995:52-53) argues that while the WID paradigm ignores cultural and historical specificity in its efforts to push “modernization” and “capitalism”, the DAWN paradigm erases the complexities and concreteness of ethnic, class, and racial barriers amongst third world women *themselves* in order to bring about “progressive” social change through a broad-based women’s movement. Hirshman (1995) is correct in asserting that this erasure of the complexities between third world women themselves is a serious theoretical flaw in DAWN’s discussion on organising for structural change. I will argue in this study that the women of Vulindlela are not a monolithic group, but have their own competing and conflicting interests as a result of differing access to resources through educational level, status in the community and so forth. The fractured nature of “Vulindlela women” is, I will also argue, one of the major reasons why organising for collective resistance against oppression does not occur frequently or easily.

Both Hirshman (1995) and Parpart (1995) also indicate that the DAWN group, like WID theorists, continue to portray third world women as vulnerable, helpless, trapped victims who need to be saved from poverty and backwardness. So while Sen and Grown (1987) foreground the important role that women’s organisations have played in development efforts, they nonetheless construct an image of passivity in speaking about the situation of poor women (Parpart 1995:236). This implies that “expert” help (albeit that of other third world women) is still needed by poor women to get them out of their oppression (Parpart 1995:236). My own work makes a particular contribution to this debate. I argue that the role of the activist-intellectual is not to conscientize women into active organising, but rather to open space for women themselves to explore ways of resisting their oppression which might

not always be consistent with “expert” opinion.

Having said this, I do not want to suggest that I am not sympathetic to the DAWN paradigm with its stress on women networking and organising for change. I am, however, also sympathetic to the critical voices that want to highlight the complexity of this task. An important foundational premise in this task must be the presupposition that poor and marginalised women are not passive recipients of their oppression, but resist it in ways that are not always obvious. I will argue that poor women have developed strategies of survival which render them anything but passive, but are sometimes not carried out in the public realm. A particular contribution that I make to this aspect of the debate is my argument that these strategies are deeply rooted in women’s Christian faith. In the South African context, this dimension is, I contend, not taken seriously enough in the gender and development debate. To date little research has been undertaken regarding the impact of faith on survival strategies as acts of resistance. This study is an attempt to make this theoretical contribution.

4.3.6 Gender and Development (GAD)

While critics have suggested that the DAWN group did not provide a genuine theoretical alternative to mainstream development, their collaborative efforts with western socialist theorists did have an impact on the planning efforts of western-based development agencies. As Parpart (1993) points out, DAWN members participated in joint initiatives with western socialist feminists that resulted in the production of a number of important gender and development texts (Afshar 1987; Agarwal 1989; Robertson and Berger 1986; Stichter and Parpart 1988). These collaborative efforts between women of the first and third world gave impetus to an approach to gender and development which emerged during the late 1980s as an alternative to the WID focus. This approach has come to be known as Gender and Development (GAD) and situates itself squarely within both socialist feminist scholarship and in writings of third world feminists, particularly the DAWN group (Parpart 1995:235).

GAD as with the WID approach, has had major influence on development agencies working across the north-south divide. At times the WID and GAD terminology is used synonymously in institutional planning, but in fact their theoretical underpinnings are very

different (Moser 1993:3). The underlying rationale of the WID approach remains that women would be better served if they were incorporated into existing development processes (Moser 1993:3). Women are focused on mainly in isolation with measures such as access to credit and employment seen as the best strategy towards integration (Moser 1993:3). GAD on the other hand resists focusing on women in isolation, asserting that this ignores the real issue which is patriarchy (Moser 1993:3). GAD researchers thus focus their planning efforts on gender relations.

Proponents of the GAD approach (Rathgeber 1990; Young 1993) argue that it is a holistic approach that does not focus exclusively on the productive and reproductive aspects of women's lives to the exclusion of the other. Primarily, the GAD approach "acknowledges the need to understand gender relations on the ground, and to investigate the specific ways gender ideology and relations contribute to women's subordination and the sexual division of labor and power" (Parpart 1995:235). This approach consciously seeks to understand women's subordination in terms of political, economic, and ideological forces. Influenced by third world perspectives (Kabeer 1994; Sen and Grown 1987), GAD places emphasis on poverty and global inequalities (Parpart 1995:235).

From this perspective the basic problematic is not women's integration into development, or their invisibility, or their lack of training, education, credit, self-esteem, but the structures and processes that give rise to women's disadvantage (Young 1993:134).

Rathgeber (1990:494) suggests that the GAD approach rejects the private/public dichotomy that has been used to undervalue family and household maintenance work carried out by women. Rather GAD theorists enter the "private" sphere of the family and analyse structures of oppression in the family (Rathgeber 1990:494). Having said this, Rathgeber (1990:494) argues that the state has an important role to play in promoting the emancipation of women and to provide adequate social services.

For both Rathgeber (1990) and Young (1993), women are not seen as a homogenous group. Divisions of class, race and ethnicity between women are recognised while simultaneously

acknowledging the importance of both “class solidarities and class distinctions” (Rathgeber 1990:494). Ultimately, “the ideology of patriarchy operates within and across classes to oppress women” (Rathgeber 1990:494). However, Parpart (1995:236) continues to maintain that, as with the DAWN group, in the GAD literature women in the south remain “victims” trapped in their poverty and needing salvation. This salvation lies with the “expert” whose expertise comes from her northern-based training (Parpart 1995:236). Hence, for Parpart (1995), in GAD practice, planning, and policy formulation there is no acknowledgement, let alone use of, the indigenous knowledge of the so-called “victims”. Short-term planning strategies of GAD include education for women, credit availability, and improvements in the legal system. These strategies, Parpart (1995) argues, sounds very similar to the language of WID and adopts the same modernist stereotypes.

While I too am not convinced that the arguments of Rathgeber (1990) and (Young 1993) around issues of difference and solidarity are nuanced enough, they nonetheless provide an important counter to WID planning which tends to erase difference and de-emphasise solidarity amongst women. My own conviction in working with the women of Vulindlela, is that despite, and perhaps even in spite of, the class and race divisions between us we share a solidarity in our experience of patriarchal oppression. It is this reality that provides motivation to my work with women and, I suggest, is what ultimately “matters” in the feminist project in South Africa. The rootedness of the GAD approach in collaborative efforts between first and third world women offers this study in particular and the broad feminist debate in South Africa in general, potential possibilities to build solidarities based on shared experience of patriarchy without our differences being erased.

Building alliances between first and third world women does raise the question as to the basis on which such alliances are built. The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995 focused world attention on women’s rights. Women from the third world challenged development practitioners from the north adopting the GAD approach about their emphasis on gender equity rather than on poverty alleviation (Baden and Goetz 1998). Nonetheless, GAD practitioners in the north have continued to argue for an emphasis on gender equity through the mainstreaming of gender in all institutions and state structures (Baden and Goetz 1998; Jackson 1998).

As I will show in the next section, the GAD approach has been broadly adopted by the South African state in its approach to gender and development and underlies the current emphasis on ensuring gender equity throughout the society.

4.4 Gender and development in South Africa

4.4.1 Ensuring gender equity

The Fourth United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, China in 1995, came in the wake of the election of the new democratic government in South Africa. In addition to representatives from NGOs, prominent women who held positions of authority within the new government structures also attended the conference. These delegates returned and made use of the platforms their positions in government afforded them to raise the gender concerns of Beijing. These included issues such as poverty alleviation and unequal access to economic opportunities and education, as well as inequality in power sharing and decision-making at all levels of society (Taylor 1997:13). The Beijing conference was concerned with a broad understanding of women's rights and the necessary mechanisms for promoting women's advancement.

Politically, since the Beijing conference, women in South Africa have been afforded more status than ever before. The South African Constitution (1996) includes a Bill of Rights which entrenches gender equality into all forms of public and private life of the country's citizens. It also states that where there are conflicts between the Constitution and customary law, the Constitution must rule (Baden *et al* 1999:11). The South African Parliament ranks favourably in relation to the rest of the world with regard to the number of female members, currently 24% of the membership (Baden *et al* 1999:7). This a vast increase on the pre-1994 figures. Furthermore, within the office of the President, an Office on the Status of Women (OSW) was established in early 1997 to ensure that government departments are developing and implementing gender policy (Baden *et al* 1999:5).

Since 1994, legislation has been passed that further entrenches the rights of women. This

includes the Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1997 which provides for abortion on demand, the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998 which provides for women married under customary law full majority and citizenship rights, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 which makes provision for marital rape, and the Maintenance Act of 1998 which entrenches the rights to financial maintenance of a child by both biological parents.

The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) was set up in April 1997 as provided for by the new Constitution. While commissioners are appointed by the President, the CGE is independent of government and the commissioners are not civil servants (Baden *et al* 1999:4).

From a government perspective, the tasks of the CGE are to include: monitoring and evaluating government and the private sector; public education and information; making recommendations about laws, policies and programmes to government; resolving disputes through mediation and conciliation; investigating inequality and commissioning research (Baden *et al* 1999:4). Visioning their task the CGE stated in their first annual report:

The Commission on Gender Equality is committed to creating a society free from gender discrimination and all other forms of oppression, in which all people will have the opportunity and means to realise their full potential, regardless of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability or geographic location (CGE 1998:3).

In approaching their task, commissioners understood their prime constituency as marginalised women living in the rural areas, in peri-urban areas, in domestic employ, and in informal settlements (CGE 1998:3). By focusing on this constituency, the CGE committed itself to endeavouring “to bring to the centre the voices and experiences of the marginalised, to become part of, and to inform, the nation-building and transformation agenda of South African society (CGE 1998:3).

From the above discussion, there is clear evidence that the South African government has adopted, at least in theory, an approach in development planning that mainstreams gender equity. Some (Pandy *et al* 1997:5), would go so far as to assert that the government has

adopted the GAD approach as our official development paradigm because of the implementation of structures and legislation that mainstreams gender. Pandy *et al* (1997) are sceptical about this move by government. Others (Agenda 1995) express similar sentiments and question the efficacy of integrating gender analysis into the heart of structures introduced by government to bring about social transformation.

4.4.2 Critique of the GAD approach in South Africa

The experience of the CGE suggests that this scepticism is not unfounded. After their appointment, commissioners found themselves floundering for many months with no office space or funds to operate. When a budget was finally finalised, it became clear that the CGE was grossly underfunded given the enormity of its task in bringing about equity in the face of the legacy of patriarchal colonialism and apartheid.¹⁸ Commissioners have found the work to be demanding and frustrating as they have attempted to encourage government officials to take gender concerns seriously in their departments with very little support from those who wield the power.¹⁹ Thenjiwe Mtintso, the first chairperson of the CGE, in her first annual report, had this to say:

The authors - Commissioners and staff - place this report before the nation with a sense of achievement that we did what we could within our capabilities and constraints. We present the report with a sense of sadness, that we were denied a better chance to do more. We present it with the commitment to ensure that all of us begin to taste the fruits of freedom; with an understanding that those living on the periphery - particularly the women in the rural and farm areas and in the informal settlements - deserve special focus because of

¹⁸ This was certainly the view of Phumele Ntombela-Nzimande, one of the eleven commissioners from KwaZulu-Natal, as she expressed it to me in personal discussion a few months after her appointment in 1997.

¹⁹ I attended a CGE organised workshop held at Botha's Hill, KwaZulu in 1997 to which provincial head of departments were invited. It was poorly attended by this group of participants, the majority of whom excused themselves and sent representatives in their place, many of whom were junior women from their respective departments. This confirms the view that key male leadership in government structures believe "gender equality" to be "women's business" and of no concern to them and is a blatant display of a lack of commitment to structural gender transformation.

the socio-economic, cultural and many other obstacles in their path to freedom (CGE 1998:14).

While women in South Africa have more human rights on paper than ever before, as Mtintso alluded to above, the crux of the matter is whether the most marginalised women are benefiting on the ground. After two years in existence Joyce Seroke, the second chairperson of the CGE, stated that “gender equality remains a distant dream for the majority of South African women...[and thus]...the CGE constantly asks itself how it can be more strategic, more economic and more effective in undertaking the mammoth responsibilities with which it has been entrusted” (Public speech June 1999).²⁰

Given the legacy of patriarchy throughout society, the task of translating existing gender equity structures and legislation into real social change for women on the ground is a complex task. In my opinion semi-rural/rural women of KwaZulu-Natal continue to experience curtailment of human rights and freedom of political expression through customary law and authoritarian male traditional leadership. In my experience, women in Vulindlela continue to be excluded from speaking at community meetings called by the *amakosi* [chiefs] and are denied direct access to key resources in the area such as land which remains in the hands of male members of families.²¹

Ensuring that the majority of women are actually benefiting from policies and structures that have been implemented by government prompted Fatima Pandy, Laurie Watson, and Vainola Makan, who describe themselves as feminist activists to write a letter to the women’s journal *Agenda* (1997:4-8). Their direct concern is the employment of the GAD approach to development by government and argue that this approach is fundamentally flawed (Pandy *et al* 1997:5). Their major concern is that GAD employs a “top-down” approach which “de-links” national gender structures from the organic process in civil society (Pandy *et al*

²⁰ The CGE has attempted to address issues of local concern to rural women. In Mtubatuba, KwaZulu-Natal, women were being killed by crocodiles while fetching water from the river. The CGE convened a meeting between villagers and officials of the Nature Conservation Service in an attempt to find an equitable solution to the situation (*Sunday Times*, 11 October 1998).

²¹ Further to this and an interesting perspective on how culture and traditional leadership can define women’s space in the political sphere, see Hassim (1993a).

1997:5).

Suddenly the weakening of women's organisations and the slackening of the women's movement comes as no surprise! GAD has ensured that it is a demobilised political sector (Pandy *et al* 1997:5).

(Pandy *et al* 1997:5) are arguing that while gender structures are introduced by government to gain credibility but women's civil structures are being de-mobilised in the process. They are suspicious of government's true intentions because while promoting the national machinery for gender equity, they are simultaneously implementing economic policies, such as GEAR, that further marginalise poor women (Pandy *et al* 1997:5). A similar point was made earlier (see section 4.2.3) by Vivienne Taylor (1997) and Debbie Bonnin (1997). Grounding their assertion in a discussion of theoretical approaches to gender and development, Pandy *et al* (1997:4) conclude that both WID and GAD approaches are "imported development discourses, sugar-coated and readily packaged" that are hampering the "feminist project" in South Africa.

Pandy *et al* (1997) are raising important theoretical concerns that have serious practical implications for South African women. Researchers working with poor women specifically and those working within national gender structures, have confirmed their concerns. The issue remains as to how marginalised women best experience a freedom from oppression. Pandy *et al* (1997) resolve the dilemma by proposing that the solution is an adoption of the WAD approach to gender and development. While sympathetic to their arguments thus far, I find their analysis at this point flawed. They define WAD as an "empowerment" approach articulated by third world women in the 1970s with the explicit purpose empowering women through creating greater self-reliance" (Pandy *et al* 1997:6). In so doing, they collapse the dependency theory underpinnings of the WAD approach (see section 4.3.4) with the DAWN group's stress on empowering women (Kabeer 1994; see section 4.3.5). This is an unfortunate conceptual error. DAWN was at pains to address the critique of dependency theory, which Pandy *et al* (1997) have not done. This lack of nuanced theoretical analysis weakens their arguments substantially.

Having said this, the important point that Pandey *et al* (1997) are raising is the question of poor women's agency in the process of development, which could get lost in the morass of prevalent "gender" language. They correctly argue that national gender structures should not be an end in themselves. Rather, a strong, autonomous women's movement on the ground must hold these structures accountable (Pandey *et al* 1997:7).²² Their call for a renewed mobilisation of organised political activity by marginalised women is an important voice at this juncture in our history. It acts as a corrective to a lethargy that could exist generally among women now that democracy has been achieved, believing that patriarchal oppression will disappear with more gender equitable policies and structures.

My concern with this view, however, is linked to the earlier critique made against the DAWN group (see section 4.3.5). Underlying Pandey *et al's* (1997) arguments is the assumption that the agency of poor and marginalised women can only be awakened by activist-intellectuals who assist the process of organising women for political change. My work with the women of Vulindlela is an attempt to show that marginalised women seldom stop resisting their oppression. Their resistance, however, is often covert and shaped by ideological, religious and cultural systems that impinge on their lives. This being the case, I would want to argue that the current gender equity climate propagated by the government machinery is necessary (see Agenda 1999; Hendricks 1993; Samuel 1999). Statutory and structural validation of their equality is necessary to help build confidence and momentum amongst grassroots women themselves.²³ As long as women still have to operate under threat to their life and dignity, there is a place for "mainstreaming gender" institutionally.

For women under severe surveillance by patriarchal cultural and religious forces, as are the women of Vulindlela, the equitable macro climate enables more safe social sites to be opened up and activist intellectuals, such as myself, can play a role in this process (see section 8.5.4).

²² Friedman (1999:4) has pointed out that policies within different state institutions are not necessarily coherent, and thus when assessing the extent to which gender has been mainstreamed, it is futile to look for a co-ordinated set of policies. She suggests that it is important to assess specific state sectors and the extent to which in each sector civil society has enabled or been constrained in addressing gender issues.

²³ To this end, there is a growing emphasis on gender training workshops which provide activists with skills in gender advocacy work with grassroots women (Benjamin and Walters 1994; Friedman 1992; Sexwale 1994; Shefer and Friedman 1998; Taylor and Conradie 1997).

Furthermore, it opens up greater possibilities for the activist-intellectual to act as a link between issues transacted at a macro level (national and international) and the micro issues being transacted by poor and marginalised women themselves.

The role of the activist-intellectual in providing the linkage between these macro and micro development issues is a complex task. Earlier, in critiquing the liberal WID paradigm (see section 4.3.3), it became apparent that competing interests of race, class, and culture between women themselves become crucial to this debate. Questions of who speaks for whom and with what authority are foregrounded when women of different race and class work together across national and international divides. This has resulted in a problematising of the notion of a “global sisterhood”. Yet, as I have just argued, in the gender and development debate (and indeed in the broader feminist debate), finding ways of relating to one another across these divides is vital if we are to promote rather than hinder our political project. As I have already alluded to, I want to suggest that a strategic engagement with postmodernism offers a way forward in this task.

4.4.3 Contribution of postmodernism to the debate

Increasingly development theorists from both the first and third world who emphasise women’s empowerment are drawing on insights from postcolonial/neocolonial writings and postmodern feminist thought (Barriteau 1995; Kabeer 1994; Marchand and Parpart 1995; Parpart 1993; Wieringa 1994; 1995).

Postmodern feminist thinking, with its scepticism towards Western hegemony, particularly the assumption of a hierarchical North/South divide, provides new ways of thinking about women’s development. It welcomes diversity, acknowledges previously subjugated voices and knowledges(s) and encourages dialogue between development practitioners and their “clients” (Marchand and Paraprt 1995:17).

Marchand and Parpart (1995:17) suggest that the intersection of feminism, development, and postmodernism “reminds us of the close connection between control over

discourse/knowledge and assertions of power”. In so doing it becomes a critique of the claim of the “expert” to know and allows a recovery of poor women’s voices and knowledges (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18). This recovery of the voices and knowledges of poor and marginalised women, they assert, is no easy task (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18).

The post-colonial literature, with its focus on the discourse of the powerful, offers important insights into the forces silencing women, but it has less to say about the way women actively construct their own identities within the material constraints of their lives (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18).

My study is partially an attempt to undertake the latter task. I argue, using postmodern notions, that poor and marginalised women in South Africa actively construct their identity within the material constraints of their lives through their faith in God who helps them in their daily struggle to survive.

Postmodernism’s contribution to the gender debate extends further. Those theorists employing this paradigm, “emphasise the need to situate women’s voices/experiences in the specific, historic, spatial and social context within which women live and work” (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18). They are also wary of an unproblematised “third world woman” and recognise the need to foreground the multiple axes of race, class, age, and culture that shape women’s lives (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18). Wieringa (1994) in arguing against categorising gender interests, as discussed earlier (section 4.3.3), makes a similar point. She asserts that “woman are located at the crossroads of many intersecting and at times contradictory relations of oppression, engaged in a process in which their identities are constituted by these relations while they are at the same time reproducing them...” (Wieringa 1994:837). My work employs an understanding that women in Vulindlela construct their identities “in complicated and often shifting material and discursive environments which are both difficult to understand and change” (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18). This understanding of “women’s experience” has important implications for the South African feminist project generally and for the theological women’s project in particular (section 8.6).

This emphasis on the celebration of difference and multiple identities “has provided a

welcome plurality and richness to feminist analysis (Marchand and Parpart 1995:18). However, as I will show in the next chapter, many feminists are concerned about the implications for women's solidarity and the implications for political mobilisation when this "celebration of difference" is taken to the extreme. Development practitioners from the third world have expressed similar concerns (Nzomo 1995; Udayagiri 1995). As Marchand and Parpart (1995:19) point out, this emphasis on difference and multiple identities offers both insights and dangers. Through this emphasis glib assumptions about global feminist solidarity are avoided but at the same time it could potentially exacerbate divisions between women to such an extent that possibilities for collective action are undermined. This would simply reinforce the power of patriarchy and do little to change gender constructions in society and so keep women in their subordination. The next chapter is an extended dialogue with this debate, in which I will argue for a strategic engagement between postmodernism and the feminist project.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter the survival struggle of the women of Vulindlela were situated generally within the gender and development debate, and particularly, within the post-apartheid South African context. I began by briefly introducing gender as a development issue and analysed the gendered nature of poverty in South Africa. Arguing that African women remain the "poorest of the poor", I illustrated the structural effects of poverty on all aspects of their lives. Together with a number of gender activists, I argued that while the 1994 government Reconstruction and Development Programme offers a vision for poverty relief, the current macro-economic strategy, GEAR, spells greater socio-economic doom for poor women.

Having said this, I showed how poor women, nonetheless, employ micro survival strategies in their fight against poverty. I did so by indicating that poor women are actively intersecting their faith with their gendered poverty and suggest that religion is a key survival resource. Because these and other potential resources have not been harnessed by the institutional church in the fight against poverty, women employ faith resources in spaces they create for themselves outside of formal church structures. These faith resources, I argued, must be integrated into the gender and development debate which has thus far neglected to do so. My

study is an attempt to make a contribution to this end.

While women themselves employ micro socio-economic strategies, the macro strategies that effect structural change cannot be ignored. Because the ideologies lying behind macro-economic strategies deeply influence the approach adopted by planners and researchers in the field of gender and development it is important to situate my discussion in the global context. I did this by critically discussing various theoretical approaches to the gender and development planning. The first major school of development specialists to put gender on the development agenda came to be known as Women in Development (WID) and emerged in the 1970s. This school is firmly rooted in a liberal modernisation paradigm and tends to adopt an integrative approach whereby the emphasis is on incorporating women into existing development structures. WID is particularly critiqued for the essentialist way in which third world women are presented in its approach. The liberal, modern, educated women of the west is seen as the yardstick by which development is measured. Women and Development (WAD) as an approach, arose in response to the WID school and is undergirded by a Marxist analysis. It too has come under attack for not taking issues of race, culture, and ethnicity seriously enough. While the debate remained in the hands of women from the first world, third world women met and formed an organisation known as Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN) during the mid-1980s. DAWN sought to provide a platform for the voices of third world and has formed alliances with socialist feminists from the first world.

In the “human rights” climate that followed the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women held in Beijing, there has been a marked emphasis on gender equity which is expressed in the Gender and Development (GAD) approach that had begun to emerge in the early 1990s. GAD is concerned with the transformation of structures and insists on the necessity of mainstreaming gender into all levels of society. This approach has been adopted by the South African government as expressed in a number of policies and structures that monitor gender equity. Some feminists have critiqued the adoption of GAD in our context, arguing that while it has given government credibility, it masks the real issue of poverty alleviation which is being hampered by the simultaneous adoption of GEAR. While sympathetic to this analysis, I argued that given the severe oppression that poor and marginalised women face, this emphasis on structural equity is important at this juncture of our history. Furthermore,

there exists in such a climate the possibility that poor women's micro strategies of survival, which include the religious aspects, will potentially impact macro policy and procedures.

As a way forward in the debate, I showed the contribution of postmodernism and argued that it is imperative that postmodern analytical tools be employed in critical engagement with the political feminist project. This critical engagement is a key, I suggested, to understanding possibilities beyond the daily survival struggle of poor and marginalised women such as those of Vulindlela. It is this strategic engagement between postmodernism and feminism in the South African context that is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

5.1 Introduction

The literal survival of poor and marginalised women is a key concern of gender and development practitioners and theorists as was discussed in the previous chapter. In analysing the gender and development debate, I attempted to show that women's work which crosses the first/third world divide in the field of development needs to account for "difference" among women themselves and the resulting power relations. In concluding the chapter, I suggested that postmodernism made a contribution to theorising this aspect of the debate. In this chapter I turn to a discussion on the necessity for a critical dialogue between postmodernism and feminist theory for the women's project.

My attraction to a postmodern approach to feminist work with poor and marginalised women lies in its embrace of women's diversity and in its acknowledgement of previously subjugated voices and knowledges. Exploring the contribution of postmodern feminism with its stress on subjectivity, agency, and particularity is my way of trying to understand the voice of poor and marginalised indigenous African Christian women. The agency of these women as they struggle to survive is crucial to my work. As a South African African woman who is "almost white" working across cultural, racial, and class divides, a theoretical framework that encourages dialogue between equal subjects is an important entry point for my practice and theoretical analysis.

Having said this, I do not believe this is the whole story. Deconstructing our identity as women, while important, has to be part of a process that helps us to understand more clearly what re-constitutes our solidarity. It is through this re-constitution, as we actively seek to be partially constituted by groups of different women at particular moments in located spaces, that we must wrestle to find a solidarity that enables the social transformation of unequal gendered relations. Within the South African context, liberation must remain the key

visionary motif which is at the heart of the political agenda of feminism(s). The challenge then is to chart a theoretical inquiry that uses tools of deconstruction, and yet leads to a broad, complex and multilayered feminist solidarity. This inquiry, I contend, needs to combine “a postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:34).

I begin this chapter by problematising “feminism(s)” and show that it is deeply contested terrain. Defining feminism without accounting for issues of race, class, and culture is deeply problematic and has led to a vociferous challenge by third world feminists and black feminists from the first world to the notion of a “global sisterhood”. Through this discussion, the fractured nature of the women’s project is highlighted, particularly as it pertains to the South African context. Race and class have been defining features in the South African women’s liberation project which has in the past been divided between “activists” who tended to be black women and “academics” who tended to be white women. The legacy of this division remains, and race continues to be a contentious issue within the women’s project in post-apartheid South Africa. I will show how this reality manifests itself in current debates in the naming of ourselves and the work we do, as well as in the question as to the basis on which we organise as women. Motherhood has been a key rallying point for black activist women during the liberation struggle, while white women have continued to argue against motherhood, viewing it as a conservative factor in women’s politics.

Social identity becomes an important issue in this debate and I argue that because of our diversity as South African women, it is crucial that we recognise that constructing identity is a multi-faceted and fluid process. As I have already suggested, postmodernism with its stress on identity, subjectivity, and historical locatedness is useful to an inclusive women’s project that acknowledges difference and particularity. In this second half of the chapter, I will introduce postmodernism(s) and indicate how feminists from the first and third worlds have reacted to postmodern ideas. Thereafter, I will show the potential of postmodernism for new possibilities of post-apartheid theorising, particularly with regard to the issue of representation. Crucial to this post-apartheid agenda are the voices of poor and marginalised women, such as the women of Vulindlela. I will argue that in giving voice and agency to these women through *collaborative* work, there are personal implications for the identity of

the activist-intellectual herself. In this engagement, she needs to recognise her privilege as loss and in so doing actively seek to be partially constituted by those she works with.

5.2 Defining feminism(s)

“Feminism, both as a discursive formation and as lived practice and struggle, is a highly contested terrain” (Pillai 1996:230). Attempting to define “feminism” is therefore a complex process. In broad terms, however, it is understood to be an “awareness of women’s oppression on domestic, social, economic and political levels, accompanied by a willingness to struggle against such oppression” (Wieringa 1995:3). Issues of race and class add to the magnitude of women’s oppression and are often focal points of struggle amongst women themselves. These struggles are between western women and those from other parts of the world, but also between women of different races and classes within particular contexts such as the United States and South Africa.

Exactly when feminist movements began in various parts of the world is also contested territory. In the United States, the most commonly held view is that the first wave of feminism, as manifested in the Suffragette Movement, died in the early 1920s and was only resurrected in the mid-1960s, as a second wave of feminism.¹ This “second wave of feminism” has since spanned three decades and embraced both liberal and socialist ideological stances during this time (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:26-34; Rowbotham 1996; Wieringa 1995:7-18). While “feminism” has traditionally been associated with western women, Jayawardena (1986) has argued that women’s political movements were neither western nor recent and she shows how these non-western movements were one of the important forces for social change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In analysing women’s movements, scholars such as Jayawardena (1986) and Wieringa (1988; 1995) are alerting us to the fact that throughout the world during this century, women have been organising around particular local issues of oppression. It is therefore important that the myth be dispelled of a “feminist movement” that originated in the west three decades ago.

¹ Taylor and Rupp (1991) refute this view of two distinct waves of feminism, arguing that feminist activity has continued throughout the twentieth century.

In dispelling this myth, Wieringa (1995) has also wanted to dispel another commonly held view that women's political activism in the non-western world has been limited to anti-colonial struggles and "bread and butter" issues. Together with women from countries such as Peru, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Somalia, Wieringa (1995) has shown that activism in these parts of the world has also challenged sexual norms and male-dominated unions, has demanded social and economic rights, and protested against labour discrimination (Wieringa 1995:18). In some contexts such as Somalia (Bashir El Bakri 1995) and Peru (Vargas 1995), scholars have pointed out that because there is a political dimension to feminism, it can sometimes be politically too dangerous and life-threatening for women to come out and call themselves "feminist". Others like Bryceson (1995) and Mikell (1997) would want to argue that women in Africa are currently involved in feminist practice through the subversion and collective organising within the domestic sphere of the home and subsistence farming. While this is not the public domain but private space, they would argue that these African women are nonetheless engaged in "feminist practice".

This debate has particular relevance to my own work with women of Vulindlela who, I argue, are engaged in hidden forms of struggle against oppression which are not easily recognised or understood (see Chapter 8). These practices are related to their survival struggle within the private domain. Their resistance practices are not often overt, nor do they address the gender equity on a structural level. Most are forced underground because these women are under constant surveillance by particular forces of oppression that operate in their community (see section 8.3) The hidden forms of resistance by the women of Vulindlela do not operate in the public realm, precisely because this would threaten their survival. Even though they would not consider themselves "feminist", their resistance *is* resistance nonetheless. These forms must be accounted for by the South African women's project in general, and the women's theological project in particular as the majority of women would consider themselves Christian. My study is a contribution to this debate on the nature and the agenda of the "feminist" project in South Africa.²

"Feminism" is problematic in describing all forms of resistance activity by women

² I problematise "feminism" in the South African context in section 5.4.

throughout the world, including Vulindlela. Particular groups of women have chosen to name themselves differently. African American women, for instance, have taken their cue from Alice Walker (1983) and defined themselves as “womanist” (Hudson-Weems 1998); (Charles) 1997). This self-naming is a deliberate affirmation of their blackness, which circumscribes their project. Wieringa (1995:2), a first world scholar working with women from the third world, has suggested that because of the ambiguity of the term “feminism” and its association with the west, the terms “women’s movement” or “women’s organizations” are more useful. The exception would be where women belonging to movements or organizations specifically call themselves feminist (Wieringa 1995:3). In the South African context, this suggestion is not that useful as the “women’s movement” has existed alongside the “feminist movement” as two racially divided movements. Black activist women allied to the liberation struggle have seen themselves as part of the “women’s movement”, while white, liberal, academic women aligned themselves to the feminist movement (see section 5.4.1). Because of this historical legacy, it has become important that we move beyond these categories to find an alternative way of describing our resistance activity in South Africa. My preference in this study is to refer to our work together as the “women’s project”.

This discussion highlights that there are many “feminisms”, each located within particular contexts and particular moments in history, taking many forms, and named differently by women themselves (Wieringa 1994). This is also true because women are located at the crossroads of many intersecting and at times contradictory relations of oppression, even amongst themselves.

Feminism is...a discursive process, a process of producing meaning of subverting representations of gender and re-creating new representations of gender, womanhood, of identity and the collective self. As such, feminism carries multiple meanings, limited neither to recent movements, nor to western contexts. Feminism is located both in public outbursts and in struggles in the private domain, for these private struggles are always expressions of the external collective processes (Wieringa 1995:5).

Describing feminism as a discursive process reveals the influence of postmodernism on the

women's project. As with the gender and development debate, postmodernism has made a particular contribution to understanding the complex and contested terrain that is "feminist studies". Through its emphasis on subjectivity and agency in specific, particular, and localised moments in history, it offers tools to understand the women's project in a creative and more nuanced way. During the 1990s, there has been much debate around the contribution of postmodernism to the feminist project. No consensus has been reached on the efficacy of postmodern notions for social transformation. Concern has been expressed that the influence of postmodernism will weaken the political dimension of the women's project.

Before turning to this theoretical discussion in more detail, it is necessary to understand how issues of race and class divide women in their project, and thus weaken its political impact. In the next section I outline the critique by "other" women of the western feminist project.

5.3 "Other women" critique western feminism

5.3.1 Race and class - absent indicators in feminist discourse

The global vision of women uniting across the world to fight a "common cause" upheld by western feminists was challenged in contexts within the first world such as Britain and the United States where women of colour began to speak out about the racism they endured at the hands of their feminist sisters.

Particularly during the 1980s, there was a strong drive by African American women "to unearth and eradicate the assumption that women share an essence that transcends socioeconomic location, historical location, and other variables..." (Armour 1999:16). Feminist theory, argued African American scholars, did not speak for "women" because it did not include race in its analysis. Race, they argued, indelibly shaped "women's experience" and had to be accounted for.

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate from black men, or as a present part of the larger group "women" in this culture.

When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against the recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women. Nowhere is this more evident than in the vast body of feminist literature (hooks 1981:7).

African American women have spent the past two decades trying to socialize themselves back into existence through texts that affirm who they are in the present and the contribution they have made to the women's movement in the past in the United States. It was the damning critiques in the landmark texts of Angela Davis (1981) and bell hooks (1981) that alerted white feminists that all was not well within the feminist movement. Both Davis (1981) and hooks (1981) showed that being a woman meant significantly different things for white women and black women - they shared a different history in which they were exposed to different kinds of social control (Armour 1999:17).

Slavery poignantly highlighted white women's lack of sympathy and in fact complicity in black women's oppression. When black women were exposed to extreme forms of sexual exploitation by their white masters, plantation mistresses aligned themselves with their husbands over and against black women for economic gain. "In most slaveholding homes, white women played as active a role in the physical assaults of black women as did white men. While women rarely physically assaulted black males slaves, they tortured and persecuted black females. Their alliance with white men on the common ground of racism enabled them to ignore the anti-woman impulse that also motivated attacks on black women" (hooks 1981:39). There was passive collusion in the sexual exploitation of black women by white men, and the active torture, ill-treatment, and persecution by white women, during slavery.

Davis (1981) shows how this inherent racism amongst white women continued into the Suffrage Movement which potentially could have united women across race and class (see also Aptheker 1982; Giddings 1984). Instead, the Movement embraced racism which was evident throughout its history, yet in spite of this, black women "supported the battle for

suffrage until the very end” (Davis 1981:145). This does not mean that black women took a passive stance towards this racism by their white sisters. They used the suffrage campaign to which they were committed as a public platform to comment on the existing racism amongst women themselves. Davis (1981:60-64) poignantly describes the incident at the Women’s Convention in Akron in 1851 involving Sojourner Truth who boldly stood up when even white women were afraid to do so. In response to the argument by a leader of the provocateurs that it was ridiculous for women to desire the vote since they could not even walk over a puddle or get into a carriage without the help of a man, Sojourner Truth made her famous “And ain’t I a woman?” speech (Davis 1981:61):

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen most of them sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (Stanton *et al* 1881:52).

In making this speech, she was refuting the assertion that female weakness was incompatible with suffrage as well as making a scathing comment on the white women in attendance at the Convention for their the racist attitudes and complicity in her sufferings as a black woman (Davis 1981:62). This powerful commentary on the vastly different socio-historical location and experience between white and black women laid the foundation for the contemporary critique of a global vision for all woman across race and class.

This damning critique is extended by Davis (1981) and hooks (1981) who in these landmark texts “exposed solidarity amongst women across racial lines as a rarely realized romantic idea” and importantly argued that the racist legacy in which white women colluded has crucial implications for the second wave of feminism in the United States (Armour 1999:17). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has more recently reinforced this point and argued that because of their very different histories, black and white women experience very different stereotyping which has to be considered in attempting to forge alliances across race and

class.³

Within the British context, issues of alliance across race and class have also been substantially addressed by black feminists. However, the history of the dialogue is different from and more recent than that within the United States. In Britain, concerted black feminist activity “reaches back only over the last 50 years, over the relatively short time of postcolonial migration and settlement...” (Mirza 1997:6). More importantly, postcolonial settlement brought together women of colour from various contexts - Africa, Asian-Indian, and the Caribbean. During the 1980s, these marginalized groupings within Britain joined forces in collective political action to counter racism they were experiencing. And so “[i]n naming the shared space of marginalization as ‘black’, postcolonial migrants of different languages, religions, cultures and classes consciously constructed a political identity shaped by the shared experience of racialization and its consequences” (Mirza 1997:3). Mirza (1997:3-4) argues that as “a political articulation, it appeared strategic,...[but] in terms of community and personal identity ‘black’ remains contested space”. Struggles of who could or should be termed ‘black’ raged for over a decade in multi-cultural Britain. There is of course a parallel debate in the South African context which has taken a variety of twists and turns through the various stages towards political liberation (see section 5.4).

However, in the early stage of black British feminist activity, there was a strategic articulation of critique by women who were not white against white socialist feminists, the most vocal academic feminist voice during the 1980s. They were criticised for their lack of recognition of the very different experience in the home and in the labour market of women “other” than themselves. Hazel Carby (1982) focussed her argument around the family, patriarchy, and reproduction which were key areas of the then current feminist discourse challenging white feminists theoretical claim to universal womanhood, while at the same time excluding in their analysis and practice “other” women (Mirza 1997). Likewise, Amos and Parmar (1984) addressed three “critical areas” of feminist discourse: the family, sexuality, and peace movements, where black women’s experience was seen to be very different from that of white women. They argue that white feminism lacked both critical

³ In the North American Canadian context these issues are dealt with by Agnew (1993).

engagement with issues of imperialism and a challenge against racism in these three areas of critical concern. Western women valorized and prioritised their cultural experience, speaking as if it were global (Mirza 1997:10). This led Amos and Parmar to distance themselves from this brand of feminism and declare:

For us there is no choice. We cannot simply prioritize one aspect of our oppression to the exclusion of others, as the realities of our day to day lives make it imperative for us to consider the simultaneous nature of our oppression and exploitation. Only a synthesis of class, race, gender, sexuality can lead us forward, as these form the matrix of Black women's lives (Amos and Parmar 1984:18).

Mirza (1997:10-11) argues that white feminists were reluctant to relinquish the authority to name the social reality of the gendered subject, but black feminists continued to resist being "named" by what they saw as an overarching imperial mission of white feminism. "They invoked their agency by challenging stereotypical images of black women as passive victims through studies and research, and writing that revealed the hidden world of migrant and black British women" (Mirza 1997:11).

Women's agency that resisted "colonizing discourse" was also a crucial concern for women of the third world. As was discussed in the previous chapter, collaborative projects between white socialist feminists and scholars from the third world were initiated during the late 1980s around gender and development concerns. Undoubtedly, the ground for this collaboration must have been prepared as a result of the dialogue that was taking place between black and white feminists within Britain. The multi-cultural, postcolonial nature of black British feminism raised not only issues of race, but was also vocal in its resistance to being "colonized". It was these linkages that increasingly forced feminists from the first world to reassess not only the way in which the absence of race and class from their analysis essentialized "women" throughout the world, but also the way in which their discourse contributed to the project of colonialism. It is to this debate that I now turn.

5.3.2 Feminist scholarship as colonial discourse

“Beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism” (Mohanty 1988:77). The words of this statement by Chandra Mohanty recorded many years ago, continue to ring throughout the feminist world. Mohanty’s article *Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses* was first published in 1984, revised for the 1988 edition used in this study, and has since been republished a number of times (in Ashcroft *et al* 1995; Mohanty *et al* 1991; Visvanathan *et al* 1997).

Her work was and remains the seminal critique of feminist scholarship as colonial discourse. Building on the work of Amos and Parmar (1984) who identified feminism with race and imperialism, Mohanty’s (1988) particular concern is women in the third world and is critical of how they are re-presented by women from the west as a single monolithic subject - “the third world woman”. She argues that colonization in discourse is about applying economic and political hierarchies to the third world (Mohanty 1988:61). When western feminists present the “third world woman” as a composite and singular image, an undifferentiated “other”, they are creating a construct that does not exist through their exercise of power. This image usually depicts women of the third world as uniformly poor and powerless and is juxtaposed against an image of modern, educated, and sexually liberated western women.

The image of a modern, educated, and sexually liberated women results from employing a monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance in analysing “sexual difference” in western feminist scholarship. Mohanty (1988) goes on to argue that this image

leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I shall call “third-world difference” - that stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all women in these countries. It is the production of this “third-world difference” that western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systemisation of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised...this power needs to be defined and named (Mohanty 1988:63).

The process of re-defining and re-naming power relations between myself as activist-intellectual and the women of Vulindlela is at the heart of my work. In redefining our relationship I endeavour to give these women voice and show their agency so that their agenda is recognised in the women's project and reflected in its discourse (see Chapter 8). But as Mohanty (1988) warns, my work runs the risk of becoming just another colonial discourse in the South African context. It is a risk I take because of my theological commitment to creating space for the voice of "others" to be heard where they would not otherwise matter. I take the risk fully conscious of the dangers of constructing a discourse that potentially exacerbates power relations and reveals my own limitations as an activist-intellectual working in a multi-cultural context (see sections 5.5.5; 8.5.4).

Mohanty (1988) also addresses the issue of scholars from the third world who write about their own cultures. She warns that they too are in danger of assuming their middle-class culture as the norm and thus end up codifying the peasant and working class communities they work with as "other" (Mohanty 1988:62). This is pertinent to our own context where research by women on women is such contested terrain (see 5.4.1). However, in spite of her critique and caution, Mohanty is not attempting to silence western women from feminist scholarship. Rather, it comes as a challenge for scholarship to be situated and accountable to the wider global and political context (Mohanty 1988:63). She rightly points out that there is "a particular world balance of power within which any analysis of culture, ideology, and socio-economic conditions has to be necessarily situated" (Mohanty 1988:63).

In the previous chapter it was argued that postmodern feminist thinking provides new ways of thinking about women in development. I want to further argue here that postmodern notions also provide new ways of understanding power relations amongst women themselves across race and class, and across the first and third world. Mohanty (1988) in attempting to show how these power relations operate to reinforce colonial discourse, embraces Foucaultian (1980) notions of power. She argues with Foucault, that it is unhelpful to structure power relations "in terms of a unilateral and undifferentiated source of power and a cumulative reaction to power" (Mohanty 1988:79). This is precisely what western feminist scholarship does when it presents third world women's struggles as a unitary category with opposition presented as a response to power which is possessed by certain groups of people.

“The major problem with such a definition of power is that it locks all revolutionary struggles into binary structures - possessing power versus powerless” (Mohanty 1988:79). This analysis which “homogenises and systematises” the experiences of different groups, “erases all marginal and resistant modes of experiences” (Mohanty 1988:80). And hence third world women are rendered powerless.

Similarly, I argue that the resistance strategies of the women of Vulindlela are marginal and often misunderstood. Their experience needs to be analysed using critical tools that locate their struggles historically and also understand their response to power as diffuse and operating in both the hidden and public realm. Mohanty (1988:81) argues when images are presented of third world women in “universal and ahistorical splendour” colonial discourse exercises “a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third-world connections”. African women remain coded and defined in much of western literature as they live with the legacy of first/third world colonial connections which perpetuates a form of cultural imperialism.

5.3.3 Cultural imperialism and African women

Women have borne the brunt of Africa’s colonial past with colonial laws contributing amongst other things to the denial of rights to land and inheritance through a systematic policy of domestication and the codification of customary law (Donaldson 1997; Manuh 1997; Mbilinyi 1997). During the past decade, African women scholars have begun voicing their critique of western feminist writings and their implications for Africa more strongly (Amadiume 1997; Imam *et al* 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Imam (1997) argues that

theories should be criticised not *because* they are western, but to *the extent that*, having developed in cultural, historical, class, racial and gender realities in the west, they misrepresent African realities and obscure analysis of Africa *sui generis* (Imam 1997:17).

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) asserts, together with other scholars, that in the final analysis African women must theorise their own feminisms. When African feminists engage with their

western sisters, they must do so “with a critical sensitivity to their relevance or non-relevance, to the complexity and differences in our history, sociology and experience as different peoples” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:208).

Theorising African feminisms has been a fairly recent development in African scholarship and this study is offered as a contribution to the debate. Awa Thiam (1978) was one of the first African women to tackle issues she understood as being “feminist” such as clitoridectomy, infibulation, polygamy, sexual initiation and skin lightening. In so doing she began to define the terrain of African feminist discourse. While not a very penetrating analysis, her work was significant as an early African Muslim woman’s voice. Since then other African Muslim scholars have contributed to the debate (el Saadawi 1987; Mernissi 1987).

Important current work from a North African perspective is that of Marnia Lazreg (1994). She stresses the importance of de-colonising feminism and makes a case for the resistance strategies of Algerian women throughout their history of oppression. Her work is an attempt to understand why Algerian women during colonisation produced traditional concepts of femininity on the one hand, and yet got involved in the revolution on the other. Exploring what appeared to be silence in the face of oppression, she argues that while there was no public voice, “silence” did not mean an absence of talk or action by these women. Thus western feminists labelling of Algerian women as “oppressed” lacks understanding of their lived struggles. This is similar to my own argument concerning the women of Vulindlela.

Lazreg (1994) also asserts that as an Algerian intellectual, a “third world feminist”, she is constantly under pressure to choose between “feminism” and culture and ethnicity. This would parallel what some South African women feel (see section 5.4.4).

Third World female intellectuals find themselves either defending their culture against feminist misrepresentations or revelling in the description and practices deemed disreputable, but always sensational, in an attempt to reaffirm primacy, validity and superiority of Western feminism”(Lazreg 1994:11).

Culture, as a marker in defining “feminist” practice, is stressed by groups such as the Association of African Women Scholars which meets annually in conference. The publication of *Sisterhood: feminisms and power. From Africa to the diaspora*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka (1998b), marks an important step in the process of African women defining feminist issues in their own terms. A “major flaw of feminist attempts to tame and name the feminist spirit in Africa is their failure to define African feminism *on its own terms* rather than in the context of Western feminism” (Nnaemeka 1998a:6). Arguing for a pluralisation of feminisms in Africa, Nnaemeka asserts that the “feminist spirit that pervades the African continent is so complex and diffused that it is intractable” (1998a:5). African feminists are not so concerned about how they conceptualise their feminisms, but are rather concerned about what they do and how they do it (Nnaemeka 1998a:5). Scholars such as Steady (1987), Nnaemeka (1998a), and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) maintain that the defining mark of African feminism is a more holistic understanding of “feminism” than that of their western sisters. It is the total humanity of African women in the face of a lack of basic human rights that defines that African feminist spirit.

Nnaemeka (1998a) even suggests that African feminism is what western feminism is not. African feminism “establishes its identity through its resistance- it *is* because it *resists*” (Nnaemeka 1998a:6). There is, for Nnaemeka (1998a), a strong resistance to “radical feminism” which she sees as often excluding men from debates on women’s issues, western women’s stridency against motherhood, and their over-emphasis on sexuality.

The much bandied-about intersection of class, race, sexual orientation, etc, in Western feminist discourse does not ring with the same urgency for most African women, for whom other basic issues of everyday life are intersecting in most oppressive ways. This is not to say that issues of race and class are not important to African women in the continent...Rather, I argue that African women see and address such issues as they configure in and relate to *their own lives and immediate surroundings*” (Nnaemeka 1998a:7).

Nnaemeka (1998a) objects to the universalising of women’s experience by western women.

Using the example of the 1929 Igbo Women's War in Nigeria, she objects to the dismissal by some western feminists of the war as a feminist issue because, as they misunderstand it, it was not motivated by the demand for gender equality but rather out of economic considerations. Nnaemeka (1998a:8) points out that when the Igbo woman who started the uprising was asked by the colonial official to count the number of people and livestock in her compound, she shouted back that he should go and count his own people. This response arose out of the woman herself feeling that her human rights had been violated because in her context, counting people is taboo. In as much as the woman was objecting to the violation of her human rights it was and is for Nnaemeka (1998a) a feminist issue. Implicit in this argument is the view that is consistent with my own, that because women themselves might not name their resistance as "feminist", it is nonetheless resistance, and thus in broad terms consistent with the feminist spirit that infuses women throughout the world.

In my work with women of Vulindlela, I have come to understand that resistance is carried out in more covert forms than I have traditionally understood feminist practice to be. I have been forced to reassess my understanding of what being "feminist" really means, and more importantly to ask the question as to whether only overt forms of resistance constitute feminist practice.

5.4 The South African women's project

5.4.1 "Feminism" versus activism

The debate within women's political project in South Africa is perhaps different from the rest of the continent of Africa. In our context, there are resonances with the experiences and views of women expressed in the previous section, but our discussions are also strongly shaped by our apartheid history and hence race and class divides prescribe the parameters. This has resulted in a schism between academic feminists who have tended to be white, middle class women who have to a large extent been inactive in the political liberation

struggle, and activists deeply committed to this struggle who have tended to be black and working class. Human rights and political liberation issues, strong on the activist agenda, hardly featured on the academic agenda which instead focused on equality as understood by first world feminists.

In the early 1990s tensions between these two groups of women erupted most notably at the first conference on “Women and Gender” held at the University of Natal, Durban, in 1991, but also at the “Gender and Development” workshop held in Pietermaritzburg in 1992 and the seminar on “International Perspectives on Gender and Popular Education” held in Cape Town of the same year (Agenda 1991; Horn 1991a; Lewis 1993; Serote 1992). These tensions were carried into the international arena when at the conference convened by Women in Africa and African Diaspora (WAAD) in Nigeria in July 1992, a controversy sparked by African American delegates arose as to whether white South African women should be afforded the opportunity to read their papers (Fouche 1993; Funani 1992;1993; Gouws 1993; Hendricks and Lewis 1994). The South African delegation met in caucus and produced a public statement given clear reasons as to why the white delegates should be allowed to participate (see Nnaemeka 1998b:479-480).

In encountering one another, vociferous debates were sparked between women of different racial groupings concerning “difference”, “sisterhood” and the representation by white women of African women’s experience (Benjamin 1995; Fester 1998; Hansson 1992; Hassim and Walker 1993; Kadalie 1995). The South African debate often continues to expose the activist/academic divide along racial lines, expressing the different social and racial locations and alluding to the different histories of resistance that have informed women’s project. The apartheid legacy haunts South African women in their dialogue and in their activist and academic practice. Today, there is a recognition that if all forms of oppression are to be eradicated, this divide needs to be overcome in order for women across race and class to work collaboratively for a gender just society (Fester 1998; Holland-Muter 1995). Hendricks and Lewis (1994:72-73) argue that for this to occur, it is crucial that white women face their history of complicity in white supremacy and deal with the problems this raises for them as researchers.

While dealing with racism within the women's project is crucial, there are other implications that arise from the academic/activist divide amongst women. As has already been suggested, women from the third world often are involved in resistance struggles that women in the first world have ignored. Wieringa (1988; 1995) and Jayawardena (1986) have shown that women's resistance is not a recent or western phenomenon as is suggested by a great deal of first world scholarship. So too in the South African context, there is a long legacy of resistance by black activist women which, for too long through wilful ignorance, has been ignored by many white scholars. This history needs to be recovered and acknowledged as a key trajectory that continues to shape the women's project today.

In the next section, I deal briefly with this history of organised resistance by women in South Africa over the last century. Implicit in this discussion is the notion of resistance as overt, public, and organised en masse. Later in the study, I will problematise this understanding of resistance when discussing in more depth my work with marginalised women (see section 8.3).

5.4.2 Women's resistance in South Africa

The history of women's resistance in South Africa over the past century has been carefully documented as a response to the echoing silence of women's voices and presence from the dominant historical discourse (Fester 1997;1998; Meer 1999; Meintjes 1996; Obery 1980; Seidman 1993; Walker 1982; 1990; Wells 1983; 1993).⁴ However, it is impossible to speak of this history without being aware that race was always a factor that circumscribed the agenda. For African women, resistance to the pass laws in Bloemfontein in 1913 was particularly significant for its scale and intensity and generated a militance that surpassed their male counterparts (Walker 1982:31; Wells 1993:1). There appears to be little evidence of the involvement of white women in this campaign.

⁴ Throughout the discussion of South African feminism, there is a glaring absence of indigenous African women scholars recording their history or engaging in the theoretical debates. Yet as this recorded history attests, it is these women who have consistently resisted their oppression in significant numbers. This is precisely the critique made by activist women against white academic researchers.

White women who were politically involved gave their energy to the Suffrage Movement which climaxed in the 1920s, an issue that had no priority in the black community who had no political rights to speak of. As Walker notes, the significance of the involvement of white women in the Suffrage Movement is that it “clearly illustrates how class and colour divisions have interacted to shape the political consciousness of South African women” (1982:20). The following account of an incident at the 1926 Select Committee hearing on women’s suffrage echoes the incident at the Women’s Convention at Akron, USA in 1951:

When [suffragist Aletta Nel was] asked if she favoured extending the vote to black women, she replied, “As a woman, sir, yes...but as a South African born person, I feel that it would be wiser if we gave the vote to the European women only” (Walker 1982:24)

It was during the 1950s that two significant women’s organisations emerged: the African National Congress Women’s League (ANCWL) and the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). In 1955, FSAW organised a march on parliament in Pretoria in which 2000 women participated, protesting against the introduction of passes.⁵ Today, the annual commemoration of this day remains the focal point around which women across the board organise to air grievances that have taken on a wide focus in the post-apartheid climate. Efforts of resistance by women continued throughout the decade of the 1950s, giving rise to the slogan still in use today, *Malibongwe igama la makosikasi* [Let the name of women be praised] and producing the landmark document *The Women’s Charter* (see Walker 1982:279-282). This decade was a turning point in the history of women’s resistance and marked the beginning of an organised political women’s movement that formed part of the broad struggle for liberation (Obery 1980; Walker 1982; Wells 1993).

When African women took up the pass issue once more during the 1950s when the Natives (Urban Areas) Act was passed, generally speaking, there was little participation of non-African women. There were a few notable individual white women involved such as Helen Joseph, Hilda Bernstein, and Ray Alexander who were driven by their commitment to the

⁵ See footnote 24 in Chapter 3.

broad Congress Alliance which had been strengthened by the Defiance Campaign of 1952. This campaign had resuscitated forms of mass action and employed strategies of passive resistance. Involvement in resistance struggles by white, coloured, and Indian women largely took place within the context of the politics of the non-racialism of the African National Congress and the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) until liberation in 1994. The exception was perhaps the liberal white women's organisation, the Black Sash, who though small in numbers, were able to focus public attention and demonstrate against the infringement of human rights from its inception in 1955 until liberation. However, as Walker (1982:173-175) points out, the Black Sash was wary of organisations such as FSAW which was seen as too radical.

Resistance politics in South Africa had to go underground in 1960 with the banning of the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). The effects were devastating on the FSAW and by the end of that year, despite valiant attempts to regroup, leaders such as Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi were banned and others such as Florence Matomela were arrested. Ngoyi was isolated and a "listed" person until her death in 1980; Matomela was imprisoned for five years and died shortly after her release in 1969 (Walker 1982). The FSAW was never banned as an organisation and continued to function, but by the mid-1960s its membership had declined rapidly (Walker 1982).

There is little written about women's mass based political activity during the 1970s. However, Walker (1982:275) asserts that after apparent dormancy during the late 1960s, women drawing on the inspiration of the *Women's Charter* and the broad aims of the FSAW began to regroup during the mid 1970s. A small group formed the short-lived Black Women's Federation which aligned itself with the Black Consciousness Movement, but it was banned together with other black consciousness organisations in 1977.

Early into the 1980s, women's organisations clearly committed to the non-racialism of the 1950s began to emerge. FSAW was re-established, but because it was seen to be politically tied to the banned ANC, it later had to change its name to the Women's Alliance (WA). Most of these emerging organisations functioned at grassroots level in an attempt to resist state repression and were affiliated to the MDM. They included the Federation of Transvaal

Women (FTW), the United Women's Organisation (UWO) later absorbed into the United Women's Congress (UWCO) in the Western Cape, and the Natal Organization of Women (NOW) (Fester 1997; Kemp *et al* 1995; Madlala-Routledge 1997). It is this period of women's activism that has given rise to the tensions experienced in the 1990s between activists and academics. Some have argued that the formation of these organisations was motivated by a commitment to the broad liberation struggle rather than to women's liberation *per sé*. Fester (1997:47), from her experience with these organisations in the Western Cape, disputes this arguing that while there was a commitment to the broad liberation struggle, four out of eight issues listed by the organisation specifically related to women's inequality. In her analysis of this period of women's resistance in the Western Cape, Fester (1997) foregrounds the tensions inherent between women of different race groupings. In 1984, one branch from a white area raised the concern that the programme of the organisation did not include enough "women's issues", which promptly sparked a discussion as to what was exactly meant by "women's issues" (Fester 1997).

The majority agreed that women's issues were numerous and included apartheid, housing, poverty, violence in general and against women, etc. The distinction between what are women's issues and what are national issues was a question which was raised intermittently in middle-class branches and at public meetings in middle-class areas. This reflected the tension between women's liberation and national liberation and women's liberation as part of national liberation (Fester 1997:48).

However, having foregrounded these tensions, Fester nonetheless argues that non-racialism *was* built and that "[d]espite the very real class and race differences amongst us, UWO/UWCO succeeded in building a comradeship amongst us as women and mothers" (1997:52). She argues that while power relations between black and white women were always an issue,

many members started to learn the meaning of democracy. Many new affiliates [to the WA] never thought political change necessary. Through the WA they were politicised and exposed to the lives of oppressed and exploited

black women. Many whites and some coloureds visited African townships for the first time (Fester 1997:55).

Of course what is not reported is that there was a large sector of white women at the time who considered themselves feminist but who were not committed to the MDM and therefore not exposed to the above debates and experiences fostered in that environment of non-racialism. This is the inherent tension that has continued to be played out in the debates as they have emerged in the 1990s. Nothing can erase the history that is so evident in the women's political movement throughout the century that shows a lack of will by many white feminists to prioritise basic human rights for all and the racial discrimination experienced by the majority of South African women. The suspicion, anger, and antagonism experienced between women of differing race and class backgrounds during the 1990s has a long history of betrayal that has to be addressed and acknowledged particularly by white women.

5.4.3 Race and the post-apartheid women's project

The politics of non-racialism amongst women forged in the 1950s, and continued and strengthened in the 1980s, laid the foundation for the launching of the Women's National Coalition (WNC) in 1992. The WNC was spurred on by unbanning of the ANC and PAC two years before and came into existence with the express purpose of drawing up a Women's Charter of Equality (WNC:1994) based on the original Women's Charter of the 1950s. Sixty national organisations and four regional coalitions were affiliated at the launch. "By February 1994, when it presented the *Women's Charter for Effective Equality* (hereafter referred to as the Charter) to a Women's Convention, 90 national organisations and 14 regional coalitions were members" (Meintjies 1996:59).

The WNC was an attempt to draw women together from different backgrounds of race, class, religion, and political persuasion.⁶ But racial tensions persisted. Fester (1997:55) suggests

⁶ From discussions with women involved in the launching of the WNC in KwaZulu-Natal, what was most remarkable was the opportunity it afforded and its ability to embrace women from both the ANC and IFP during the height of the political violence in the region. Women, anxious for the killing to stop, forged links that they saw as enhancing peace, despite what the male leadership of their respective political organisations were advocating.

that the WNC had a more strongly white and middle-class ethos than did FSAW, WNCO, and the WA because many more academics were involved.

This enhanced the quality of the debates but increased tensions about domination and insensitivity. New ways of working were introduced which some of us found difficult. In building new alliances and new organisations, a new culture emerged. There was an air of “professionalism” and a very fast pace. When delegates had to be elected, confident white women (not with UWO or FSAW history) would quickly nominate their colleagues. There was no awareness of the strategic importance of electing delegates, e.g. having specific and/or representative delegations for specific tasks (Fester 1997:55-56).

Meintjies (1996) in her analysis of the WNC does not make reference to these tensions. While providing a useful discussion of the work carried out by the WNC during the years leading up to liberation, it in fact corroborates Fester’s assertion that white academics were nominated into key positions that undertook the necessary research in drawing up the Charter (Meintjies 1996:58-62). Fester (1997:56) pursues her argument by personalising her frustration that there seemed to be no awareness of race amongst the white women. Racism was only ever raised as an issue by delegates from other race groups. Meintjies (1996) in her assessment of the effectiveness of the WNC since 1994 suggests that its continued existence was hampered by the lack of funds and a lack of leadership. “The leadership capable of drawing women together on a national level have been sucked into Parliament, where energies have been dispersed in national politics and the tasks of the moment, rather than fighting the gender struggle” (Meintjies 1996:61). While there is some validity in this argument, it is an argument that does not raise questions about the representation of the leadership, the very point Fester (1997) is arguing. Meintjies bewails the fact that “the WNC has not turned out to be the long-hoped-for women’s movement which could sustain the struggle for women’s emancipation” (1996:62). There is no recognition that issues of race and class also underlie many of the leadership problems.

This resonates with my own experience of meetings in cross-racial gatherings of women in an

number of different contexts including religious gatherings, academic meetings, or political celebrations. Race is seldom mentioned, at least not by white women. If it is raised, white women tend to act defensively while black women are at pains to explain (or often remain silent) the racial undercurrents and contradictions that exist between them. White women's refusal to acknowledge their incipient racism remains a stumbling block in the women's project. During this post-apartheid period, power relations throughout the society are undergoing enormous transformation. White women academics and researchers wanting to work with women who are "other" than themselves have to take seriously their history of privilege and supremacy in their ongoing theorising and praxis. This, I suggest, means a re-constitution of self, foregrounding their race and class, and being willing to let "other" groups set the agenda for the women's project. If not, I believe, indigenous African women like their African American sisters, will simply ignore white women and get on with theorising about their praxis in ways that are relevant to their life experience. As women, our South African experience is unique to the African continent. Being able to forge a collaborative women's project in our fractured context, potentially offers the women's project throughout the world a model for our work together as women in all our diversity.

Confronting "whiteness" and its implications, has not been totally ignored by white women in the difference debate in South Africa (Bennett and Friedman 1997; Holland-Muter 1995). Holland-Muter attempts to explore the various ways in which white women as individuals and as groups need to respond to the charges of "racism, ethnocentrism, and white domination" as presented to them by black women (1995:55). She boldly asserts in keeping with my own view that as white women:

we need to interrogate what it means for us to be told to address our racial privilege and we need to explore the racism that exists because of our reluctance to be conscious of how our views and assumptions are shaped by our whiteness and specificity...we have to interrogate our critique and relationship to our positions within the system of white privilege and supremacy. As a group, we have a level of skills and expertise that provide us with a degree of power in relation to other women. We have been the group that has mainly done the writing and the theorising (mainly about black

women); we are the group dominating feminist politics and the organisations that have been established, like the WNC (Holland-Muter 1995:58-59).

Holland-Muter (1995:61) is arguing for the importance of “placing differences and inequalities firmly on the agenda in the construction of political programmes and analyses”. She asserts that means being willing to recognise the nature and extent of the divisions in the women’s project, even in the “new” South Africa. Liberation has fostered a culture of reconciliation not division. But, as Holland-Muter (1995:61) argues, the fear of what divides us as women has to be dealt with before it is possible to move forward to begin creating “inclusive visions and practices” that have integrity.

Creating inclusive visions and practices is not merely an academic exercise, but has crucial implications for an authentic, indigenous, and contextual women’s project that is effective in transforming oppressive structures, especially for poor and marginalised women. Of particular importance to me in my work, is how I as activist-intellectual use my privilege in working with women who are struggling to survive. My work is an attempt to deal explicitly with issues of the re-constitution of identity which I believe is important for the creation of inclusive visions and practices. I contend that this re-constitution and re-shaping of the activist-intellectual is necessary to *collaborative* work with poor and marginalised women, which in turn enables the women’s project to become more authentically South African (see sections 5.5.5; 8.5.4).

In the search for an “authentic” women’s project, race continues to dominate the post-apartheid agenda. But there are an additional two areas of contention which need to be addressed. The first of these concerns naming the work we do as women and whether or not the incipient racism of white women necessitates the continuation of the academic/activist divide, as some would argue. The second area of contention is the basis on which women organise. Motherhood has been a key rallying point for activist women during the liberation struggle. White academic feminists have, on the other hand, tended to see this as a conservative move that inhibits the liberatory potential of the women’s project. These divergent views have raised the question as to the legitimacy of using motherhood as a basis for organising in the post-apartheid women’s project. Both these points of contention arise

out of, and are informed by, the above discussion. In the next two sections these debates are outlined.

5.4.4 Feminism and the “women’s movement” - naming ourselves

Women cannot agree as to what form the women’s project should take in post-apartheid South Africa. During apartheid, women’s activist organisations were often corporately referred to as “the women’s movement”. “Feminism” as a movement was seen to be the terrain of white, liberal academics. Some women choose to retain these distinctions from the apartheid era. Hassim (1991) has argued for this retention based on her reading of Wieringa (1988).⁷ She suggests that “women’s movements” organise on the basis of their identities as women and do not necessarily question the power relations within society (Hassim 1991:72). Women’s movements can thus contain within them, conservative elements that organise women from a particular social base but do not question the power relations within that base. Her prime example is a movement such as the Women’s Brigade of the Inkatha Freedom Party, which she understands to be culturally and politically conservative (Hassim 1993). Feminism, on the other hand, has, for Hassim (1991:72), a direct political dimension where there is an overt awareness of women’s oppression and a willingness to actively confront patriarchal power in all its manifestations.

Benjamin (1995) also argues for a distinction between feminism and the women’s movement, but for very different reasons to Hassim. She understands “the women’s movement” to refer to the progressive activist struggles of the past and emphatically declares that she does not wish to be called a feminist. Rather as a “gender activist”, Benjamin (1995) chooses to be engaged in the women’s movement where “real” struggles are waged. “This means that I define myself in terms of what I do, rather than what I believe in or advocate, in the context of an ongoing struggle to realise gender equality” (Benjamin 1995:90). She attacks “feminists” who “stereotypically” are “graduate, well-read, often white, English speaking women” for their emphasis on advocacy rather action (Benjamin 1995:91). Benjamin concludes her article, however, by admitting that there is room for both “feminism” and

⁷ For my alternative reading of Wieringa (1988) see section 5.2.

“gender activity” provided “the former activity is not restricted to a group of people limited by race, class, educational level and geographic location” (1995:93).

Kadalie (1995) typifies yet another position. She argues against a distinction between feminism and the women’s movement and suggests that all women’s activity is feminist. For Kadalie, the feminist movement is “not homogenous but is characterised by different historically developed trends, each trying to explain the subordination, exploitation and oppression of women within different theoretical frameworks and socio-political contexts” (1995:74). Acknowledging that some have objected to the term “feminist” when referring to the resistance struggles outlined in section 5.4.2, Kadalie argues that research evidence shows that they were “feminist in content” (1995:74). In fact, she asserts, black women in democratic organisations have begun to name their struggles as feminist and are realising that they have much to lose by ignoring the contribution feminists have made internationally (Kadalie 1995:75). In defence of academic feminism, Kadalie argues that academics have been sidelined because they have been regarded by activists as elitist (1995:76). This has been alienating for academics who also have to wage a range of gender battles within their academic institutions. While not entirely sympathetic to Kadalie’s argument, I think she is correct in suggesting that feminist analysis is crucial to “keeping alive the debate between feminist activism and the construction of knowledge” (1995:78).

A group of black women have attempted to merge competing women’s voices in the post-apartheid era into a re-definition of South African feminisms (Kemp *et al* 1995). Kemp *et al* argue that because of a clash amongst South African women over “perceived interests and very real differences”, the lack of unity and “apparent failure to identify and struggle together against a single patriarchy have led to a perception that South African women’s struggles lack a feminist consciousness” (1995:133). They suggest that this view is but one perspective.

In assessing the past decade of women’s struggles they argue that through the space created by liberation, new South African feminisms are emerging that differ from “South African-adopted western feminisms”. Assessing the transition years leading up to national liberation, they suggest that black women have been particularly challenged to shape South African

feminism based on what they identify as three central assumptions.

First, our identities as women are shaped by race, class, and gender, and these identities have moulded our particular experiences of gender oppression. Second, our struggles as feminists encompass the struggles for national liberation from a brutal white state. Third, we have to challenge and transform Black patriarchies even though Black men have been our allies in the fight for national liberation. These three concerns are of equal importance and are often inextricably linked that a theoretical perspective that insists on isolating certain issues as feminist and others as not is alienating (Kemp *et al* 1995:133).

So for Kemp *et al* (1995), stressing the academic/activist divide in current debates on the women's project is unhelpful. This is one of the few occasions where a group of black women make no distinction between "feminist" struggles and "activist" struggles. They instead insist that *all* their struggles have been feminist with an overt challenge to "black patriarchy". Unfortunately, Kemp *et al* (1995) do not explore what it means to challenge black patriarchy in any depth. They do importantly point out, however, that given the "seemingly invincible white nationalist party-state" black women made a strategic choice to "confine their disputes with Black men to a sphere knowable only to their specific communities" precisely because any sign of division was used by the state to repress black communities further (Kemp *et al* 1995:142).⁸ "Theorizing a single patriarchy without regard to a multiplicity of experiences created by race, class privilege, and oppression has effectively caused feminist discourse to marginalize Black women's resistance" (Kemp *et al* 1995:142). The choices made by black women have not lacked a "feminist consciousness" but, it is argued, "strategic decisions had to be made about how and when they could afford to make gender issues public given the real threat of a genocidal state to their very lives" (Kemp *et al* 1995:143).

This is not suggest, argue Kemp *et al* 1995, that black patriarchy was never overtly

⁸ African American scholars make the same point in their context, an argument most clearly articulated by bell hooks (1984).

challenged by black women.

In the Qwa Qwa Bantustan in the 1980s, for example, when unemployed male migrants who had returned from urban areas protested against the employment of women at a small local factory, the women resisted this effort to deny them their livelihood and won their battle for employment. Though they are fully aware of the role of the apartheid state in limiting the options for Black men, the Qwa Qwa women chose to fight for their own interests (Kemp *et al* 1995:143).

Earlier in the discussion on the establishment of the WNC (section 5.4.3), Fester (1997) asserted the domination of white women in this move towards coalition politics. Kemp *et al* (1995) provide an alternative view to Fester (1997) and want to give more agency to black women. They cite an example where one participant in the WNC negotiations took issue with the suggestion that the right to clean and accessible water be included in the charter, as this was not a “women’s issue”. “Rural women, however, argued that this was a critical women’s issue because water for cooking and cleaning was the responsibility of women in rural households. In effect, the rural women did not allow their class and gender to be separated. The demand for clean, accessible water remained in the charter” (Kemp *et al* 1995:143).

For Kemp *et al* (1995), black women have been engaged in feminist struggles throughout this century. Within this post-apartheid period, they argue that the fluidity and dynamism of the socio-political context has provided the space and opportunity for black women, including rural women, to build constituencies and organisations that centre on their interests. This assertion has to be tempered by the experience of the five years since the publication of their article. They were perhaps more optimistic about women’s coalition politics than experience has borne out, particularly with regard to rural women. Nonetheless, the stress on the agency of poor and marginalised women in the analysis of Kemp *et al* (1995) is a timely contribution to the debate. It is their agency which, in my view, is crucial to the re-definition of South African feminisms in the post-apartheid era.

Earlier, I suggested that Kadalie's (1995) argument for a retention of feminist analysis was crucial to the women's project. However, unlike Kemp *et al* (1995), in defending academic feminism, Kadalie (1995) says little about the agency of poor and marginalised women. Neither does she make a clear reference to the necessity for a *collaboration* between the intellectual and marginalised women in the "construction of knowledge". My naming of myself as an "activist-intellectual" is precisely because I believe that academics need to locate their work *in* the community and *in* dialogue with poor and marginalised women who are in the majority in our country. This self-conscious naming of myself within the women's project also clearly indicates my commitment to a position that cuts across the academic/activist divide, gives agency to *all* women, and points to the importance of *collaborative* work as women in our struggle against gender injustice. As I have earlier suggested, for those of us privileged through race and education this requires a re-constitution of our identity in our work *with* women who are different from ourselves.

The debate on "feminism" versus "activism" has emerged in the 1990s precisely because this decade has been a time of reassessment of women's struggles of the past. Reassessment is necessary in order to understand and map the boundaries of the contested terrain of women's coalition politics that has emerged in the post-apartheid context of reconciliation and reconstruction. Conflicting notions of motherhood have surfaced in this discussion and thus will be the focus of the next section.

5.4.5 Motherhood as contested terrain

"Sisterhood" in South Africa is deeply fractured along the more obvious lines of race and class. A less obvious fracture concerns the role of motherhood in defining the women's project. Surveying the literature on women's political organisation in South Africa during the twentieth century, it soon becomes apparent that women often organised themselves out of their experience as "mothers". During the liberation struggle when protesting, for instance, the pass laws, women would use rallying cries such as "we are the mothers of the nation" and "we need to protect the rights of our children". Focusing on motherhood as a basis for organised resistance has come to be known in the literature as "motherism".

Fester (1997:57-58) in pointing the way forward for the women's project argues, that uniquely South African forms of feminism need to continue to include organising on the basis of motherhood. Fouché on the other hand asserts that the "myth of the commonality of the motherhood experience is really an attempt to concretize the sisterhood myth" (1994:80). While acknowledging that women of different race and class have worked together in organisations such as the FSAW, "biological motherhood does not, any more than being female, guarantee solidarity among women" (Fouché 1994:81). Hassim and Gouws (1998) concur. Finding seductive Fester's argument that motherism is a more fertile ground for the development of a women's movement in South Africa than is western feminism, they suggest that her argument does not take full account of the tensions between conservatising aspects of motherism and the project to transform gender relations (Hassim and Gouws 1998:66). Their views highlight conflicting notions of motherhood between women of different race and class which becomes apparent in this discussion.

A paper presented in 1991 by Julia Wells at the "Women and Gender in Southern Africa Conference" (later published in 1998) seems to have sparked the theoretical debate about whether motherhood (or in her terminology maternal politics) can be a legitimate "feminist" basis of action. Wells (1998) argues against this view.

Maternal politics are clearly not to be confused with feminism. Women swept up in mother-centred movements are not fighting for their personal rights as women but for their custodial rights as mothers (Wells 1998:253).

She argues that the resistance to the pass laws in 1913 and in the 1950s were prime examples of organisation that was primarily a spontaneous response by women in defence against the threat of their capacity to function effectively as mothers and homemakers (Wells 1998:260). Politically, Wells argues, "motherist" movements such as the anti-pass laws campaigns are "limited in scope, duration, and success in achieving their goals and, above all, should not be mistaken for political maturity" (1998:253). Walker (1995) asserts that for Wells (1998), "the failure of political organisations to distinguish between 'women' and 'mothers' is seen as particularly regressive, with the emphasis on motherhood characterised as a patriarchal

ploy to limit and control women” (Walker 1995:420).

Walker (1995) points out that other scholars such as Campbell (1990) and Posel (1991) give a more nuanced assessment of the role of motherhood for women. These scholars argue that motherhood is empowering for women but, because the empowerment takes place within the confines of patriarchal authority, it has limited value as a basis for challenging gender oppression. Posel’s (1991) argument stresses motherhood as a patriarchal construct which constrains its liberatory potential. Similarly, Campbell (1990) shows that while African women living in townships are accorded respect and authority as mothers, their power should not be exaggerated, as ultimately “township ideology” dictates that the man/father is the head of the household. This remains so even though the social context is increasingly making it difficult for families to conform to this “ideal”.

Similarly, other scholars (Horn 1991; Seidman 1993) in attempting to show the ambiguous nature of motherhood in resistance activity have used the “practical” and “strategic” gender interests framework of Molyneaux (1985) (section 4.3.2). Seidman (1993) in her analysis of the mobilisation of women in South Africa, argues that women’s organisation before 1970 took place around “practical” interests (focused around the home, children, and their role as mothers) while in the period leading up to liberation, women increasingly organised around “strategic” interests (human and political rights). Thus, she concludes, the women’s movement has the potential now to become more “effective” in gaining support for “women’s economic independence and personal autonomy” than ever before (Seidmann 1993:316). Horn (1991b:39) also using Molyneaux’s (1995) framework argues, shortly after the unbanning of the liberation organisations, that until “strategic gender interests” are high on the post-apartheid political agenda, women’s organisations will not be seen as independent political players, but rather be used by political organisations for their own ends.

Walker (1995) would classify the writings of all of these scholars as encompassing the first dominant theme within the motherhood debate, namely “collusion with patriarchy”. Walker (1995) suggests a second dominant theme in the motherhood debate, that of “difference” in black and white women’s experience and constructions of motherhood (Gaitskell and

Unterhalter 1989; Lewis 1992; Schreiner 1986; Fester 1997).⁹ Walker (1995:421) asserts that these scholars offer diverse analyses of the differing racial constructions of motherhood, but are nonetheless bound together by their view that motherhood and patriarchy are not necessarily linked in the South African situation.

Schreiner (1986), writing from a Marxist perspective, praises the “correct” emphasis on motherhood and community politics that informed the organisational strategies of the Food and Canning Union in the 1950s, which she contrasts with the restrictive constitution of motherhood in “bourgeois ideology”. Fester (1997; 1998) in analysing women’s political organisations within the Western Cape adopts a similar position.

Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989) in analysing the treatment of women as “mothers of the nation” in Afrikaner nationalism and in the African National Congress (ANC), assert that any apparent similarity between the two is a superficial one and that historically the two formulations have developed very differently. For Afrikaner nationalism, motherhood was “home-centred”, while within the ANC motherhood is conceptualised as “a dynamic force for change” and thus has liberatory and emancipatory potential. They seem to suggest that motherhood is a conservative and oppressive force for white women while it is a progressive and liberatory force for black women.

In a different vein, through employing postmodern and post-colonial constructions of identity,

Lewis (1992) according to Walker (1995) delineates an equally stark contrast between “western” and “black” concepts of maternity and motherhood. While Lewis (1992) accepts that black motherhood has been constrained and shaped by patriarchy, she insists at the same time that black women’s own understanding of motherhood must be treated with respect. She argues that motherhood is a source of power for black women in their fight against colonial and racial oppression which is an experience that white women can never fully understand. Therefore white women should not presume to define the political goals nor

⁹ As I will show in section 6.9.3, conflicting notions of motherhood between African American and white American women is also central to the debate in the United States.

judge the identifications of black women. Lewis (1992) and Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989), through extensive critiques of “motherism” and euro-centric interpretations of women’s struggles, set up “an oppositional discourse of motherhood in South Africa, which is broadly ‘black’ (rather than ANC) and independent of the dominant western one” (Walker 1995:422-423).

Walker (1995) finds the motherhood debate, characterised by the two dominant themes of “collusion with patriarchy” and “differing racial notions of motherhood”, academically dissatisfying, historically flawed, and unhelpful in moving South African feminist practice forward. The “collusion with patriarchy” theme, she asserts, reduces motherhood to a patriarchal institution. Its discourse pays too much attention to dominant ideologies, “and not enough to the multiple and complex meanings mothers themselves attach to their experience, and how these may shape their identities and political behaviour” (Walker 1995:423). On the other hand, she finds the way in which the different notions of motherhood is mapped strictly along racial lines, problematic.

In attempting to bring greater clarity to notions of motherhood, Walker (1995:424) suggests that there are three dimensions that need further exploration: practice, discourse, and social identity. She argues that in the South African debate, the practice of motherhood has been neglected while discourse has been privileged. There is an “implicit assumption that an analysis of the discourse of motherhood (dominant or otherwise) constitutes an analysis of motherhood” (Walker 1995:425). Walker (1995:426) also argues that political organisations have privileged motherhood discourse for strategic political purposes without taking seriously the self-image and meaning that women create for themselves in negotiating their daily lives. Because this is so, she stresses the importance of social identity when theorising motherhood.

Social identity then, “allows us to address women as agents, as well as probe the interplay between individual and collective processes in the construction of subjectivity and the determination of behaviour” (Walker 1995:426). This form of analysis importantly recognises the fact that women might embrace multiple identities that may or may not be in conflict with each other. Identities such as “worker”, “Christian”, “African”, may co-exist

with the identity of mother and may also be restricted or refashioned by this co-existence. In addition, “they have their own discourses and practices, which are different from those of motherhood, and may in turn, restrict or refashion the expectations, attitudes and behaviours associated with being a mother” (Walker 1995:426). This may happen at both the conscious and the unconscious level. While acknowledging that some psychoanalytic feminists such as Nancy Chodorow (1978) place emphasis on the unconscious structuring of being “mother”, it is for Walker (1995) the conscious dimensions of social identity that are useful. For, says Walker, it is here that “the possibility of degrees of creativity, reflection and choice in the way people construct and relate to their social roles can be located” (1995:427).

Thus, for Walker (1995), the dichotomous and oppositional relationship that is set up between a white, western, oppressive understanding of motherhood, over against a black, non-western, emancipatory discourse, “is overly simplistic”. What is needed is a more “interactionist understanding of subjectivity and social identity” which is necessary when attempting to “understand why and when and the degree to which women might ‘collude’ with patriarchy” (Walker 1995:428).

It is the focus on the construction of identity in Walkers’ analysis that is a particular contribution to the motherhood debate and to my own work with women of Vulindlela. For those belonging to the Anglican Mothers’ Union (MU), “motherhood” is such a central construct (see section 7.3.4). In fact Walker (1995) points out, through the work of Deborah Gaitskell (1981; 1982; 1990), the important role African women’s church organisations had in the early twentieth century in shaping collective social identity for Christian mothers. Walker (1995:427) asserts that it was these church organisations that became significant in shaping the political agenda of activists within the ANCWL and the FSAW in the 1950s (see section 8.4.5). This is a crucial point of connection with my own work. As I will argue later in this study, the MU is a site of disguised resistance practices of poor and marginalised women (see section 8.4.4). With Walker (1995) I would argue that to “understand why black and white women put convergent notions of motherhood to very different political uses, one would need to look beyond their identity as mothers to incorporate a more complex understanding of social identity as multi-faceted” (Walker 1995:434).

Understanding social identity as multi-faceted and fluid is critical in the process of “giving voice” to the agency of poor and marginalised women which lies at the heart of my own work. For me, it their context of survival which is foundational to our work as women in overcoming oppression in its “endless variety and monotonous similarity” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990). As I have already suggested, postmodernism with its stress on identity, subjectivity, and historical locatedness is useful to an inclusive women’s project that acknowledges difference and particularity. It is thus that I turn in the next section to a critical dialogue between postmodernism and feminism, and its usefulness to the South African debate generally, and my work as an activist-intellectual specifically.

5.5 Postmodernism and feminism in critical dialogue

5.5.1 Introducing postmodernism(s)

Postmodernism, in broad terms, could be described as a reaction to a body of knowledge that arose during the Enlightenment period of history. These optimistic western philosophies grew out of and expressed the expanding relations of capitalist societies and contributed to the development of ideologies that supported colonialism, the slave trade, and the expansion of western patriarchal relations (Hartsock 1990b:17-18). “Enlightenment political thought was characterized by a denial of the importance of power to knowledge and concomitantly by the denial of the centrality of systematic domination in human societies. The subject/individual and power were held to be distinct” (Hartsock 1990b:17).

Having said this, it was primarily epistemological features in this tradition that postmodern feminists reacted to. Enlightenment thought suggests “that one can see everything from nowhere” and that disembodied reason can produce accurate and “objective” accounts of the world (Hartsock 1990b:17). Donna Haraway (1988) refers to this reasoning as the “god-trick” which assumes human universality and homogeneity and sees differences as epiphenomenal” (Harsock 1990b:17). The rallying cry of postmodern thinkers is an “incredulity towards metanarratives” and a call for the abandonment of universalist knowledge. So-called “truth” is constructed by thinkers convinced of their invincibility which, postmodern theorists argue, is simply privileged discourse.

Aspects of the work of leading French postmodern thinkers such as Jaques Derrida and Michèl Foucault have been borrowed by some feminists. The focus has been on Foucault (1980) who understands “truth” as “simply a partial localized version of ‘reality’ transformed into a fixed form in the long process of history” (Parpart and Marchand 1995:2). In the postmodern feminist reading of Foucault by Parpart and Marchand (1995), “the false power of hegemonic knowledge can be challenged by counter hegemonic discourses which offer alternative explanations of ‘reality’”(Parpart and Marchand 1995:3). These alternate explanations of reality are attractive to feminists wanting to foreground marginalised voices. “Other” realities imply a subjectivity of experience that recognises the contingent nature of the subject.

The subject as constructed and contingent is another aspect of the work of postmodern thinkers that has been appealing to some feminists because it “has drawn attention to the power of language/discourse and its impact on the way people understand and assign meaning to their lives” (Parpart and Marchand 1995:3). A focus of Derrida’s (1976) work, according to Parpart and Marchand (1995), has been on the deconstruction of texts (both written and oral) and has particularly emphasised the role played by binary opposites. These opposites, such as truth/falsity, unity/diversity or man/woman, on which, Derrida argues, western philosophy largely rests, give rise to the premise that “the nature and primacy of the first term depends on the definition of its opposite (other) and whereby the first term is also superior to the second” (Parpart and Marchand 1995:3). The process of the deconstruction of texts is important because it allows for a greater focus on the way difference(s) embedded in this binary thinking are constructed and maintained (Parpart and Marchand 1995:3). “The search to discover the way social meanings are constructed has highlighted the importance of difference and the tendency for people to define those they see as different (“other”) in opposition to their own perceived strengths” (Parpart and Marchand 1995:3-4). It has been particularly postmodern feminists from the third world such as Chandra Mohanty (1988) and Gayatri Spivak (1988; Landry and MacLean 1996) who have employed these insights in their work.

It must be recognised however, that postmodernism has spawned extremely diverse thinkers,

and as postmodern feminist Judith Butler (1992) has pointed out, any attempt to place postmodernism under a unifying sign, in fact renders it a project of modernity. Hence the necessity to speak of “postmodernisms”.

If postmodernism as a term has some force or meaning within social theory, or feminist social theory in particular, perhaps it can be found in the critical exercise that seeks to show how theory, how philosophy is always implicated in power, and perhaps that it is precisely what is symptomatically at work in the effort to domesticate and refuse a set of powerful criticisms under the rubric of postmodernism (Butler 1992:6).

Having said this, in broad summary, it can be asserted that postmodern thinkers

reject universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena, which, they argue, essentialize reality and fail to reveal the complexity of life as a lived experience... They emphasize the need for local, specific and historically informed analysis, carefully grounded in both spatial and cultural contexts (Parpart and Marchand 1995:4).

The appeal of postmodernism, particularly to some feminists in the third world, has been its emphasis on the importance of encouraging the recovery of silenced voices and its acceptance of the partial nature of all knowledge. The search of postmodern feminists is thus a search for these silenced voices, and in so doing, takes into account the power of language in relation to knowledge, context, and locality (Huysen 1990; Nicholson 1992).

5.5.2 Feminist reaction to postmodern ideas

Feminists have reacted to postmodern ideas in a number of different ways. Those who employ the critical tools of postmodernism are implicitly challenging the notion of a global sisterhood that adheres to one all encompassing vision that mobilises women and transforms their lives. Deconstructing women’s lives using the analytical tools of identity, subjectivity, and locatedness, has sparked a debate amongst western feminists themselves. Many

feminists are deeply concerned about the implications of deconstruction for the solidarity amongst women in their struggle to change the patriarchal relations that exist around the world.

Jane Flax (1992:447) has argued that one, global, “feminist vision” has in fact been “dreams of innocence” - a hope that there is some form of innocent knowledge that tells us how to live in the world and once our actions are grounded in that knowledge, transformation will occur. Instead, she argues, these “dreams of innocence” are politically dangerous and need to end. “Operating within the Enlightenment metanarrative, these feminist theorists confuse two different claims - that certain kinds of knowledge are generated by gender-based power relations and that correcting these biases will necessarily produce ‘better’ knowledge that will be purely emancipatory (that is, not generated by and generative of its own relations of non-innocent power)” (Flax 1992:457).

Standpoint feminists¹⁰ such as Nancy Harstock (1990a) have reacted strongly against this criticism. She is deeply suspicious of the fact that the emergence of a postmodern critique that calls into question the ability to theorize about the world, the stress on difference, and the nature of the subject has come at this particular time in history. “Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic” (Hartsock 1990a:163)?

However, as Flax (1992) points out, this suspicion of the postmodern feminist project is more complex than Harstock suggests. “As much if not more than postmodernism, the writings of women of color have compelled white feminists to confront problems of difference and the relations of domination that are the conditions of possibility for the coherence of our own theorizing and category formation” (Flax 1992:459). Hence, any criticism of the postmodern feminist project, she asserts, cannot ignore the racial sub-text (I would also add the sub-texts of class, culture, and colonialism) which force an exploration of the power relations amongst

¹⁰ Standpoint feminists privilege in their epistemology “women’s ways of knowing” as a consciously chosen political and social vantage point.

women themselves in the construction of knowledge (see also Armour 1999).

Like standpoint feminists, some Marxist feminists have also expressed opposition to postmodern ideas. Sylvia Walby argues that postmodernism “has fragmented the concepts of sex, race and class, denying the pertinence of over-arching theories of patriarchy, racism and capitalism” (1992:31). Because, in her opinion, this fragmentation has gone too far, there is a denial of the significant structuring of power in society, which has led to “mere empiricism” (1992:31). Postmodernists, thus move central theoretical concepts away from “structure” into “discourse”. As a result power is conceptualized “as highly dispersed rather than concentrated in identifiable places and groups” which hinders the transformation of social structures (1992:48). Walby (1992:48) argues that in the face of the complexity of the social order, postmodernism denies the possibility of causality and macro-social concepts in an attempt to take gender and ethnicity seriously. For Walby, this is a misguided abandonment of the modernist project in explaining the world, “rather we should be developing the concepts and theories to explain gender, ethnicity and class” (1992:48).

Standpoint feminist Hartsock (1990a), critiquing Foucault, is similarly perturbed by his categories of power that are “insurrectionary”, “disordered”, “fragmentary”, “lacking autonomous life”. For Hartsock, categorising power in this non-systematic way, “negates the fact that they rest on organized and indeed material bases” (1990a:167). Despite Foucault’s stated preference for resistance discourse, his thought, argues Hartstock (1990a), is still deeply embedded in the dominant perspective. Furthermore, she argued that Foucault focuses on the individual’s perception of power, with a call for resistance and exposure of power relations rather than transformation. The task of intellectuals, in Hartsock’s reading of Foucault, “is less to become part of movements for fundamental change and more to struggle against the forms of power that can transform these movements into instruments of domination” (Hartsock 1990a:167). She concludes her critique of Foucault’s notion of power by paraphrasing Marx, “the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or reinterpret the world yet again” (Hartsock 1990a:172).

The need to change the social structures of the world lies at the heart of the feminist project, and it is the political implications of postmodern ideas that concerns feminists such as Alcoff

(1988), Hartsock (1990a; 1990b), Walby (1992) and others. Because postmodernism has little to say about the material constraints on the lives of women and the implications of these constraints for the deconstruction of identity, they argue, this stems from a refusal to shape and accept responsibility for these constraints. This ultimately leads to political paralysis that inhibits collective action among women within their own contexts and across the world. An overemphasis on difference, it is argued, can lead to political fragmentation and the dissipation of feminist consciousness and activism (Bordo 1990; Stefano 1990). Thus for Bordo (1990:154), postmodernism is only useful in so far as it offers interpretative *tools* and *historical* critique, and not as a theoretical framework for wholesale adoption.¹¹ Alcoff (1988) argues similarly. She acknowledges that postmodern thought gives a critical warning against an essential notion of “woman” that explains gender across time, culture, and locality, but, if the feminist project is to retain its transformative agenda, it needs to retain an epistemologically significant, specific subject (Alcoff 1988:421). “The solution lies... in formulating a new theory within the process of reinterpreting our position, and reconstructing our political identity, as women and feminists in relation to the world and one another” (Alcoff 1988:436).¹²

It is this pointer towards an “alternative” form of theorizing that has inspired postmodern feminists such as Fraser and Nicholson (1990). They argue:

Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anaemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism.

¹¹ On the other hand, Anna Yeatman (1990) has argued that postmodernism has an orientation towards the agentic quality of our socio-cultural worlds which underlines its significance as a political-ethical project.

¹² Nicholson (1992) engages and critiques the work of Alcoff (1988) and Bordo (1990) in formulating her argument that the epistemic, and not just the personal, is political. The postmodern project, argues Nicholson (1992), is useful to this end.

For Fraser and Nicholson, their search is for a postmodern feminism that combines “postmodernist incredulity with the socio-critical power of feminism” (1990:34). They argue for a theory that is explicitly historical, attuned to cultural specificity, and non-universalist. It needs to replace unitary notions of gender identity with “complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation” (1990:35). The emphasis in feminist politics should be on *alliances* of women, rather than on “unity around a universally shared interest or identity” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:35). This view would be consistent with my own commitments in work together as women. Fraser and Nicholson (1990:35) conclude that it would therefore be best to speak in the plural, “as the practice of feminisms” which embraces “a multilayered feminist solidarity”. It is this form of solidarity that offers the greatest potential to the women’s project in South Africa.

These ideas of the pluralism of feminisms and a feminist solidarity that is multilayered have resonated with the work of postmodern feminists from the third world and black feminists from the first world. As I have already pointed out, some feminists in the field of gender and development argue for a critical engagement with postmodernism in understanding gender relations across the first and third worlds (section 4.4.3). In the next section, I discuss how postmodern notions have been employed positively in “other” feminisms and also suggest some of the concerns raised for feminists in the third world by the postmodern project.

5.5.3 Postmodern notions and “other” feminisms

Parpart and Marchand (1995:6) argue that one of the most appealing aspects of postmodernism to many feminists has been its focus on difference. With the growing critique by feminists from the third world and women of colour from the first world, of being prescribed as “other”, this emphasis on difference has provided space that legitimises the search for the voices of the displaced and marginalised.

In the work of African American bell hooks (1984; 1993), there is a strong emphasis on “difference” in order to explore the realities of the black experience. Resisting any attempts

to homogenize oppression, she asserts that the basis of solidarity for white and black women is vastly different. For white women, according to hooks (1984), their solidarity in fighting structures lies in their “victim” status. Black women, on the other hand, cannot afford to see themselves as “victims” as their survival depends on the harnessing of their inner resources, and they thus base their solidarity on shared strengths and resources rather than on victimisation. For hooks (1984), it is exploring this difference and otherness of experience that is crucial to the feminist project because experience, not universal categories, is the true arbiter of knowledge and it is only when this is acknowledged that the voices of the marginalised and displaced will make a contribution to the liberation of all women.

Her work is not devoid of criticisms of the postmodernist project which she sees as rooted in white, male intellectualism as it employs “coded” language that is exclusionary particularly to black women for whom it potentially “gives voice” (hooks 1993). Having said this, she nonetheless argues for a “postmodern blackness” that provides useful insight into the black experience. “Postmodern critiques of essentialism which challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency” (hooks 1993:425). This view would be consistent with the emphasis in my work with the women of Vulindlela. Suggesting that in the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are both oppositional and liberatory, it is important that there be a re-inscribing of an “authentic black identity”. Recognising the resistance by some African Americans to do this out of fear that sight will be lost of their unique history of struggle, and arguing for a multiplicity of “black experience”, she asserts:

An adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of ‘the authority of experience’. There is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black ‘essence’ and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle (hooks 1993:426).¹³

¹³ It seems important at this point to refer to the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1989; 2000) who engages with the work of bell hooks extensively. While not explicitly addressing hook’s position on postmodernism, she employs her notions of “black experience”. As a black standpoint feminist, Collins also does not explicitly critique postmodernism. She clarifies her use of the term “subjugated knowledges” in a footnote which she argues is not in the Foucauldian sense (Collins 2000:291).

However, her arguments concerning the importance of “black experience” albeit as a standpoint feminist, are not dissimilar to that of hooks. In defining black feminism, she argues that “black experience” must not be reduced in an essentialist way, but must, nonetheless, at the same time be grounded in a materialist analysis (Collins 2000).

Turning to the black intellectual's role in the cultural production of knowledge, she says it is important that there is an occupation of the space provided by this discourse so that it becomes more inclusive. In order to change the exclusionary practice of postmodern critical discourse, it is important "to enact a postmodernism of resistance" (hooks 1993:426). My study is an attempt to delineate the contours of what it might mean to enact a postmodernism of resistance.

Concerns, however, have been expressed about postmodernism's attempt to move beyond essentialism, by "pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic categories of race, class, gender and sexuality" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997a:xvii). This strategy, it is argued, often "forecloses any valid recuperation of these categories or the social relations through which they were constituted. If we dissolve the category race, for instance, it becomes difficult to claim the experience of racism" (Alexander and Mohanty 1997a:xvii). So while there is a recognition of the potential of a postmodern approach that understands difference and the power of discourse in empowering women to articulate their own needs and agendas, there is a concern that it has little to say about the material constraints on the lives of women and the implications of these constraints for the deconstruction of identity. This results in a refusal to shape and accept responsibility for these constraints, which ultimately leads to a political paralysis that inhibits collective action among women within their own contexts and across the world.

Caribbean feminist, Eudine Barriteau (1995), is undeterred by this critique. Celebrating the postmodern emphasis on difference and ambiguity, she argues for a simultaneous recognition of the need for political action. She suggests that the fluidity of postmodernism in the political arena means that sites of resistance can be constantly relocated, multi-faceted strategies adopted, and a theoretical framework based on a multiplicity of relations of subordination constructed (Barriteau 1995:151).

Mridula Udayagiri (1995), an Indian feminist, is not convinced. She argues that postmodernism as a social critique is seen by its proponents as the only legitimate genre of social critique, but in reality is confined to the academy (Udayagiri 1995:171). In fact, for decades outside of academic institutions, "social movements and resistances against

modernization or colonialist projects have provided a powerful attack on essentializing discourses about the South”(Udayagiri 1995:171). For Udayagiri (1995), these movements which have often organised across national and international boundaries are based on a shared understanding of oppression and subject status. “Mobilization without this meta-understanding is hard to imagine” (Udayagiri 1995:175). Udayagiri does concede that there are impulses within postmodern feminism that could be potentially transformative. One such example would be the work of Scott (1992), who calls for political action based on carefully situated, partial knowledges which “may provide an opening for a postmodern feminist political action to avoid false generalizations” (Udayagiri 1995:175).

In the South African context, there has been little debate around these theoretical issues both within the academy and without. This is perhaps as a result of the particular post-apartheid context in which we find ourselves with the strong activist/academic divide within the feminist movement, as I argued earlier. Much energy has focused on the basis of our organisation as South African women in this period of post-liberation. While allusions have been made to the need for a new paradigm that is able to embrace our differences, it seems to me that the exploration of sound theoretical frameworks for the construction of such a paradigm has hardly begun. I thus now turn to a discussion of the usefulness of postmodern notions for the South African women’s project.

5.5.4 Postmodernism and the South African women’s project

South African society encapsulates “the endless variety and monotonous similarity” of women's oppression (Fraser and Nicholson 1990). It is at once third and first world, African and western, rural and urbanised, and is ripe for an exploration that deconstructs the old and re-constructs the new. Much is being said about the need for new theoretical underpinnings to meet the challenges that transformation has uncovered, but there seems to be little work being undertaken on constructing these theoretical paradigms.

Postmodernism(s) which emphasises deconstruction potentially offers new possibilities for our post-apartheid theorising.¹⁴ Arnott (1998) and de la Rey (1997) have argued that

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that critiques levelled by first and third world feminists discussed in section

postcolonial work that appropriates postmodern notions provides a way of theorising our difference as women in the South African context. As a theoretical framework, it embraces the notion of multiple identities and truths, subjectivities and relativism, so crucial to our situation (de la Rey 1997:7). I have already suggested the importance of these theoretical markers for the gender and development debate and for feminist theorising by women who are not white or western (sections 4.5.3; 5.5.3). In the South African climate of transformation, issues of difference, otherness and representation are foregrounded whenever women of different race and/or class, gather (section 5.4). Questions of who speaks for whom and with what authority linger in the shadows of the discourse of the women's project. These essentially postmodern issues and questions can no longer be ignored by academics who until recently have controlled the discourse and have tended to be white, middle class, and western in orientation. Based on a perceived shared experience of oppression, this group has stressed the solidarity of all women and the necessity of collective action.

The challenge to women's solidarity during the 1990s has given prominence to the question of whether only indigenous African women researchers can theorise about their own communities from their specific cultural and linguistic insights (Hassim and Walker 1993; Mbilinyi 1992; Nkululeko 1987). Issues such as the nature of African patriarchy and the social construction of gender identity and sexuality in African communities largely remain uncharted theoretical territory. Given the educative marginalisation of indigenous African women in the past, academic discourse might remain in the hands of those women who have been racially advantaged for awhile longer. Within our context of transformation, questions of who speaks for whom and with what authority have to be addressed and placed firmly on the agenda of our theoretical inquiry. Representation has become crucial to the South African debate (Arnott 1996; 1998; de la Rey 1997; Hassim and Walker 1993; Sunde and Bozalek 1993).

5.5.2 are absent in our context. Postmodernism has been seen by some standpoint feminists as a threat to the political feminist agenda in South Africa (Gouws 1996).

It is impossible to address this debate without making reference to the influential work of Gayatri Spivak (1988; Landry and Maclean 1996). Spivak (1988) argues that there are two ways of understanding representation of the voice of the subaltern.¹⁵ Firstly, representation is a “speaking for”, a speaking on behalf of the subaltern. This understanding reifies and objectifies the subaltern as “other”, presuming as intellectuals to know her better than she knows herself (Cochrane 1999:98). In so doing, Spivak (1988) argues that problematically the intellectual is rendered transparent and her own interests “disappear” while the subject status of the subaltern is denied altogether. In this instance the intellectual masquerades “as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (Spivak 1988:292). “Speaking for” or on behalf of others thus denies the role the intellectual plays in constructing the subjectivity of, and re-presenting, the other. For Spivak (1988), representation can also be seen as a “listening to”, a hearing and reporting of the subaltern’s voice. This position Spivak also sees as problematic. “Listening to” presupposes the speaking voice of a wholly self-knowing subject free from ideology, which, for Spivak (1988) the subaltern is not. The subaltern is seldom “represented knowingly even to herself, let alone to others, and cannot therefore be taken to be sovereign, and cannot therefore *knowingly* speak” (Cochrane 1996:113). When one “listens to” the subaltern, the factors and forces that make up this fractured subjectivity are not accounted for.

Spivak (1988) offers another understanding of representation. The intellectual representing the subaltern needs to “speak to” the poor and oppressed woman, rather than “listening to” or “speaking for” her. “Speaking to” constitutes communication between two strongly present subjects and is possible when the intellectual ensures that the communicative process is always visible. This requires the intellectual to always remain “alert to and interrogative of” her own position and of that of the woman with whom she is in dialogue “so as to ensure that

¹⁵ I use this term following Jill Arnott’s (1998) discussion of how Gayatri Spivak appropriates the term in her works. Arnott analyses Spivak’s usage as follows: Subalternity is defined “as a space, rather than a fixed identity. To the extent that it functions as an identity it does so in relational terms, as a relationship, or non-relationship, to capital development and to the discourses of political independence, democracy, justice and national identity with the modern state. Subalternity is a space of difference, of otherness, not a strict class position” (Arnott 1998:108).

the mediating process of representation remains visible” (West 1996:25).

Jill Arnott (1996; 1998) support’s Spivak’s analysis and offers it as a means through the quagmire of the contentious representation debate in the South African context. Arnott (1996) suggests that representation of poor and marginalised South African women by intellectuals, although important, is not simply an issue of race.¹⁶ Ideological and historical factors have to also be considered, together with a recognition that self-representation is no guarantee of the “truth” of one’s experience. Hence, any argument that, for instance, simply suggests that black intellectuals are in a better position to represent the subaltern than white intellectuals is deficient and lacks nuance (Arnott 1998). With Arnott (1996;1998), I suggest that the notion of “speaking to” is a useful contribution to the South African debate on representation. Spivak (1988) alerts intellectuals to their own subjectivity and to the subjectivity of those with whom they dialogue.

While Spivak’s argument is persuasive, with Cochrane (1999:98) it is my view that she holds to too strong a view of the hegemonic power of dominant discourse. Spivak (1988) contends that because the subaltern is ideologically constituted, she cannot knowingly represent herself or “speak”. The silence of the subaltern has become ontological in its force. To illustrate her argument, she tells the story of a young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, who hanged herself in her fathers’s modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926 (Spivak 1988:307-308). At the time the reason for her suicide was a puzzle; although one possible reason was ruled out: she was not illicitly pregnant. She had waited for the onset of her menstruation period to ensure that her suicide would not be interpreted in this way. A decade later it became clear that she committed suicide for political reasons. However, when asked about her death, her nieces continued to interpret her action as an act of unrequited love. Spivak (1988) concludes that, in the final analysis, the woman was not heard and her “speech” became silence.

Hegemonic forces, for Spivak (1988), constrain the speech of the subaltern and the silence can only be broken by the intellectual. Hence the need for representation. “Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which

¹⁶ De la Rey (1997) would argue that it is primarily a race issue.

she must not disown with a flourish” (Spivak 1988:308). This circumscribed task of the intellectual is to reinscribe and analyse the text of the subaltern without denying or disguising the process of representation (Arnott 1998:232).

Arnott (1998:125) argues that the “positing of subaltern silence is not the same as denial of subaltern agency...” I am not convinced. Spivak (1988) in holding too strong a view of hegemonic forces, diminishes subaltern agency. Bhuvanewari Bhaduri spoke in her suicide; her act was an act of resistance. Even though the results of her action remain partly hidden, it was nonetheless a discursive act. Hidden aspects of resistance might even have extended to the responses of the women close to Bhuvanewari Bhaduri as they continued to report that her act was an “illicit act of love”. It is possible that these women knew all too well the significance of her action, but it was just too dangerous to admit this knowledge openly. Collusion between women within the family network might have played a role in their acts of speech. For poor and marginalised women actions that appear not to be overt political acts of resistance are only part of the story. The subaltern can speak and she does, but often in ways that are not necessarily a “self-conscious capacity of articulation through language” and in ways that are often hidden to those in the public realm where the hegemonic forces are strongest (Cochrane 1996:115).

It is for these reasons that, with West (1996:25), I choose to refer to my work with poor and marginalised women as a speaking “with” (see Haddad and Sibeko 1997). Unlike “speaking to” which may suggest intellectual arrogance and infer diminished subaltern agency, “speaking with” recognises the subject status of both myself and those I work with, and also expresses the collaborative nature of our relationship. In the next section I extend this discussion to a theoretical exploration of the personal implications of this “speaking with” the subaltern.

5.5.5 Re-shaping the activist-intellectual through collaborative activity

In telling my story in section 2.3, I wanted, in the early stages of this study, to indicate aspects of my personal journey that led me to a commitment to collaborative work with poor and marginalised women. I narrated how I moved through a process of a confusion of identity, to recognising its complexity, to my chosen identity as a South African African

woman who is “not quite white”. My Lebanese ancestry particularises my experience of patriarchy within the South African context and adds to the ambiguities of my racial identity as a woman. Given this history, I have recognised that I have had to make a choice in constituting my identity and in locating myself within the women’s project. I have chosen to actively seek to be constituted by *women* who are “other” than myself through collaborative work. Working *with* the women of Vulindlela is part of a life-long process that continues to define and re-shape who I am. Theoretically, I have found three notions useful in understanding the process of re-shaping and re-constitution of identity: to “unlearn one’s privilege as loss”, “collaboration is more than conversation”, and “actively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups”. I will discuss each in turn.

Spivak (1988; Landry and Maclean 1996:4-5) has argued that one of the tasks of the intellectual who works with women who are “other” than herself is to “unlearn one’s privilege as one’s loss”.

Our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender, and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge... (Landry and Maclean 1996:4).

Landry and Maclean argue that unlearning one’s privilege “means working back critically through one’s history, prejudices, and learned, but now seemingly instinctual, responses” (1996:4). My story reflects some of this necessary critical work that has gone on in my own life over the years. They also suggest that if this “unlearning” does not take place, there is a closing down of creative possibilities, of other options, of other knowledges (Landry and Maclean 1996:4). Herein lies the loss. For myself, it is as I have begun to work *collaboratively* with poor and marginalised communities, that I have begun to understand this loss more fully. It has been as I have opened new possibilities that I have experienced new knowledges and thus understood my privilege as loss.

In gaining new knowledges through collaborative work and seeking to represent these, it is ethically important that as activist-intellectuals we situate and locate ourselves within our

work. If we do not, we run the risk of commodifying the “other”. However, simply “situating ourselves” is not enough. What is crucial is, “what we do with who we are” (Patai 1991:150). Our collaborative efforts need to effect social transformation within ourselves and within the project as a whole. Effective social transformation, I suggest, requires that collaborative alliances between the activist-intellectual and those she works with and represents be more than just conversation between equal subjects.

Sylvester (1995) has referred to this collaborative activity as “empathetic cooperation” in which the identities of both subjects are relationally autonomous. “They exist separately and yet inform and draw on each other, shape each other with irony, poignancy, jealousy, and a wisdom that defies colonial efforts to inform all of us of where to take our proper places” (Sylvester 1995:946). While this understanding of collaboration goes some way towards explaining the potential of the relationship between the intellectual and those with whom she works, it is flawed. From my perspective, it does not sufficiently account for the power dynamics operational in this relationship and it seems to me that there is a need for greater accountability by the intellectual. This understanding also places little stress on the *work* we do in this collaborative relationship so runs the risk of being another form of conversation.

Collaboration understood as communicative praxis is more useful for attempts to understand the role of the activist-intellectual in working with groups who are other than herself (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989). Schüssler Fiorenza (1989:7-8) suggests that theoretical models that simply stress the plurality of voices do not account for power relationships within the discourse and give the impression that all parties enter the conversation on equal terms. She argues that in any attempt to include previously silenced voices, it is important to shift from a hermeneutical model of conversation to a practical model of collaboration (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989:9). This critical collaboration or communicative praxis links knowledge with action (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989:5). So while critical inquiry is important, so is an overt practical commitment to liberating praxis (Cochrane 1999:103).

Within the South African women’s project, the academic/activist divide has been marked along race and class lines (section 5.4.1). I have consciously chosen to name myself as an activist-intellectual out of this commitment to *practical work* across the divide. Much of the

discussion thus far, while suggesting the importance of collaborative activity, does not emphasise the actual work that this might involve. I am an activist-intellectual by choice, and I am also a woman-priest by vocation. My commitment to liberating praxis as an activist-intellectual is given expression through my actual work as a priest in poor and marginalised communities. There is a stress in Gerald West's (1999) work on a committed engagement between trained scholars and poor and marginalised communities. West (1999) argues that this engagement is a mutual sharing of resources through liberating work together. It is through an active re-location that the scholar chooses to become partially constituted by this collaborative work. It is because of the emphasis on mutual engagement in actual work together and on the choosing to be partially constituted by groups "other" than ourselves, that I find West's theorising useful to my own understanding of my work with the women of Vulindlela.

"[A]ctively seeking to be partially constituted by work with different groups" was first suggested by Sharon Welch (1990:151). For West (1999:121, 169-170), this *work* differs from traditional notions of research. It is an active re-location and engagement with groups different from ourselves and a choosing to become partially constituted by this relationship. This relationship is not forged through mere reflection together, but through an active action-reflection cycle which involves all strongly present subjects in actual works of social transformation. It is in these transformative collaborative acts that we too are changed in the process. But this involves a choice. West (1999), drawing on postmodern impulses, argues that individual and communal selves are always in the process of being constructed and negotiated. Identity is not static but is constantly being negotiated and re-created (Weiler 1991:467). Hence, we have a choice in what constitutes us. We can choose to be partially constituted by the "life struggles" of those "other" than ourselves (West 1999:121). As we collaborate and build coalitions "from a recognition of the partial knowledges of our own constructed identities" (Weiler 1991:469-470), we are offered "ways of becoming other than we are" (West 1999:122).

Recognising the constructed nature of my identity, I have chosen to become other than I am through my work as woman-priest and activist-intellectual. The women of Vulindlela have profoundly shaped my understanding of the women's project in South Africa, and the women

themselves have been shaped by our work together (section 7.5.5). As I re-present them in public forums in the church and the academy, I do so with caution, recognising that this representation is always mediated through my own subjectivity. Alliances forged across race, class, and culture are fragile and complex processes. Recognising this, I mediate, I re-present in this study the solidarity that exists between myself, Nonhlanhla Magubane, and the women of Nxamalala, conscious of its limited nature but convinced of its importance. And so I risk this representation. I do so because, as a South African African woman who has benefited materially through education that has been denied to Vulindlela women, I believe their voices need to be heard by those in power in the church and in the academy.

Poor and marginalised indigenous African women have been practising forms of resistance and solidarity for decades away from public view. They have resources that are vital to the construction of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) in the academy. Their voice needs to be heard and their participation harnessed, and I believe that through my re-presentation, I am using my privilege “to create oppositional consciousness” within the spaces of power I inhabit (Pillai 1996:238). For it is in their voice that questions are raised that would otherwise be forgotten within a dialogue amongst intellectuals and church authorities. They are questions that question academic definitions of activism, resistance, and solidarity. They are questions that counter the patriarchal hegemonic discourse of the church. They are questions that force privileged women to question the choices we make in shaping our identities. They are questions that arise out of a struggle for “survival, liberation and life” (West 1999:165) which I believe lies at the heart of the women’s project in South Africa.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter began with an attempt to define “feminism(s)”. Through this discussion it became apparent that how this discursive practice is defined, depends largely on which group of women is controlling the agenda. As I showed, the feminist agenda is understood to be white and western in origin and has been critiqued extensively by women from the third world and black women from the first world. For black women from Britain and the United States, the feminist agenda was seen to ignore race. Women from the third world, including Africa, critiqued western feminism as a form of colonial and imperialist discourse. Within

the South African context, I argued that the fractured nature of the women's project is deeply embedded in issues of race, class, and culture that are historically linked to our colonial and apartheid past. Showing how the women's project was divided along activist/academic lines, I argued that women's resistance to apartheid was not always seen to be legitimately "feminist" by academic feminists, who tended to be white. This discussion arises out of the broader international debate on whether organising around "bread and butter" issues of survival rather than around gender equity constitutes feminist practice. Further to the South African debate was the question of the legitimacy of "motherhood" as a valid basis for organising in the future as it has been in the past particularly amongst black women. Race, as a persistent marker in the post-apartheid women's project, was highlighted as a potential factor in ongoing divisiveness between activists and intellectuals. In attempting to cross the divide, I named myself an "activist-intellectual" and choose to refer to our work in South Africa as the "women's project".

Accounting for our "fracturedness" as women is crucial for our future work in transforming society and the church to which the majority of women in South Africa belong. It was for this reason that I argued for a critical dialogue between postmodernism and feminist theory. Given our divisions, I suggested that it is postmodern impulses that acknowledge subjectivity, particularity, and agency that potentially provide a way out of the impasse in our theorising. Postmodernism was thus introduced more fully in this chapter and feminists reactions, both positive and negative, to this theoretical paradigm outlined. I suggested that the issue of representation raised by postmodern feminism is useful to South African theorising. Representation has become crucial to future work in the women's project. In raising this debate, I argued against Spivak (1988), that the subaltern can "speak", and given the continued marginalisation of poor women, it is their voices that need to make a significant impact on our socially transformative future work. I concluded the chapter by pointing to the personal theoretical implications of this "speech" for the activist-intellectual, arguing that there is a need for a re-shaping of the activist-intellectual through an "unlearning of her privilege as loss", working collaboratively through actual work together with poor and marginalised women, and a choosing to be partially constituted by women "other" than herself.

While postmodern impulses are useful analytical tools in foregrounding difference, identity, agency, and location, they must be rooted in a political commitment to change the structural oppression of women. The women's project is a political project. Survival is a political issue. And so is faith. In South Africa, politics has always had a theological dimension. For poor and marginalised women of faith, their survival theologies, which embrace a life in the world and a life in the church, are crucial to the women's liberation project. Acknowledging in Chapter 4 that religion is a neglected survival resource within the gender and development debate, I conclude this chapter by asserting that it is survival theologies that are crucial to informing the women's political project generally.

In the next chapter I move on to discuss the theological dimensions of the women's project in South Africa. The discussion will show that the fractured nature of the women's theological project resonates with the women's project as a whole. Focusing on the different locations of three South African theologians, Denise Ackermann, Christina Landman, and Madipoane Masenya, I indicate how their work raises issues of difference and solidarity, the representation of poor and marginalised women, and the naming of our theology. I thereafter highlight the contribution of these three theologians to my work, as well as that of other African women theologians, and of the womanist survival theology of Delores Williams.

CHAPTER 6

THE WOMEN'S THEOLOGICAL PROJECT IN SOUTH AFRICA

6.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter highlighted, “feminism” in South Africa is deeply contested. Historically, issues of race and class have divided women into two trajectories within the women’s project for liberation which was, and to some extent still is, characterised by an activist/academic divide. In broad terms the trajectory known as the “women’s movement” comprised mainly of black working class women who were committed to the struggle for political liberation. The “feminist” movement largely comprised of white, middle class, academic women for whom political liberation was secondary to gender equality.

The women’s theology project has not escaped this history and much of this debate is echoed within circles of Christian women. In the early stages of the women’s theological project in the 1980s, white women drew their impetus from feminist theological thinking from the first world. Black women increasingly aligned themselves with women theologians from the third world and African American women who had begun theologising their experience as “womanist” theologians. Womanist theologians foreground issues of race and the lived daily experience of African American women in the church. African women have begun theologising issues of African patriarchy, culture, poverty, and human rights.

In this chapter I seek to chart the women’s theological terrain on the African continent and in the African diaspora that has been useful to my work. I begin the chapter by outlining the historical roots of third world women’s theology from which African women’s theology emerged. In 1989 a network known as the Concerned Network of African Women Theologians was formed and through this network enables South African women to dialogue with women theologians from the rest of Africa. This is significant, because as I will show, the emergence of South African women’s theology in the 1980s was characterised by two racially divided trajectories. In South Africa, as in the United States, women’s theology has

been shaped by race. I will argue in this chapter that, as with the women's project as a whole in South Africa, our racial, class, and cultural locatedness as theologians foreground questions of solidarity and difference, representation of poor and marginalised women, and naming of our theology. I introduce these issues which I see as important to our agenda primarily through the work of three women theologians, Denise Ackermann, Christina Landmann, and Madipoane Masenya, all with "different" identities in the South African context. Their different identities are introduced through short biographical sketches. Having raised issues that I believe to be contentious but crucial to my work, I then discuss aspects of these three women's work that have been useful to shaping this study. Ackerman's "contextual liberating praxis" is discussed, followed by Landman's emphasis on telling women's stories, and Masenya's use of cultural practice and the Bible.

In the work of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians carried outside of South Africa, I have found two areas particularly useful for my theological reflection on work with the women of Vulindlela. Many of these African women theologians critique patriarchy from a cultural perspective, most notably Mercy Oduyoye. Her critique of patriarchy, while arising out of her own experience of Ghana and Nigeria, nonetheless points the way to similar theorising in our context. A sustained cultural critique of patriarchy by indigenous African women theologians in South Africa is yet to be undertaken. African women theologians also stress the importance of engaging women in the church in theological reflection. This emphasis lies at the heart of my work and offers a contribution to the ongoing dialogue as to how we do this effectively as activist-intellectuals. The survival theologies of the women of Vulindlela are the working theologies of faith of poor and marginalised women who constitute the majority of women in the church in South Africa. Integrating their voices into the women's theological project is crucial.

While continental African women theologians have provided important insights for my work, so too have African American women who have chosen to name themselves "womanist" theologians. Womanist theologians, like continental African women theologians, have stressed the role of women in the church for their theologising. There are many resonances with our context of racial division within one country which is usefully reflected in their work. In understanding the survival theologies of the women of Vulindlela, I have found the

work of Delores Williams particularly helpful. Her emphasis on a survival tradition rather than a liberation tradition in the Biblical text resonates with Africa where indigenous women have rejected western understandings of feminism as useful for our context (section 5.3.3). Williams (1993) uses the Biblical figure Hagar as a prototype for African American women's struggle for survival and in the final section of this chapter, I extrapolate the theological significance of Hagar for the women of Vulindlela.

6.2 Origins of third world women's theology

Debating the "origins" of resistance by women throughout the world is contentious (section 5.2). As feminism is associated with white, western women from the first world, so is feminist theology.¹ As I will show in the next section, these theological impulses shaped the work of white academic women in South Africa during the 1980s. However, black women in the church were increasingly being drawn into dialogue with women theologians from the third world.

As an organised forum third world theology came into being through the formation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976 (EATWOT 1983:191). This association of third world theologians sees the *locus* for theological reflection as "the struggle of the poor and oppressed against all forms of

¹ My study firmly locates itself within the African context and is a contribution to African women's theology. While feminist theological impulses continue to feed into our dialogue, I do not recognise these voices as my prime interlocutors. I have therefore chosen not to focus on the origins of feminist theology in this study. Other scholars have delineated the epistemological and historical roots of feminist theology in the United States (Hogan 1995; Schneider 1998). Hogan (1995) usefully shows the linkages between feminist theory from the 1960s and feminist theology. She also shows how two prominent North American feminist theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in their early work were influenced by Latin American liberation theology and European political theology of the 1970s. Schneider's (1998) work is an attempt to understand the implications for monotheism given the multiplicity of voices that now constitute the "feminist" theological project.

injustice” (EATWOT 1983:199). After five years of existence, at the EATWOT New Delhi meeting in 1981, women’s voices irrupted. EATWOT had to face the fact that, even as liberation theologians, there was not sufficient recognition being given to women’s voices and their experience of oppression including patriarchy (Oduyoye 1983:247). “The outburst came not because women were being treated as mere spectators at the meeting, but because the language of the meeting ignored our presence and therefore alienated some of the women present” (Oduyoye 1983:248). In demanding to be heard, women named sexism as one of the injustices that needed to be struggled against (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988).

The result was the creation within EATWOT of a Women’s Commission, and not a Commission on Women as some male members would have it. Rather than see ourselves solely as victims of male domination, we formed a sisterhood of resistance to all forms of oppression, seeking creative partnership with men of the Association (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988:x).

This Women’s Commission was formalised at a meeting of third world women theologians in Mexico in 1986 (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988:ix). At this meeting they came together to “reflect on what it means to do theology from a Third World women’s perspective” (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988:ix). Eight African women, including one South African, Dorothy Ramodibe (1988), contributed to the proceedings published under the title *With passion and compassion: third world women doing theology* (Fabella and Oduyoye 1988). The consultation resolved that as third world women theologians there was a need to broaden their understanding of their differing socio-economic and political contexts, focus on women’s experience of spirituality through rereading the Bible, and to deepen their “commitment and solidarity work toward full humanity for all” (EATWOT 1988:184).

6.3 African women’s theology emerges

Dialogue within the EATWOT Women’s Commission nurtured African women’s theology. African women theologians met as a group for the first time in 1989 in Ghana under the theme “Daughters of Africa, Arise!” (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990). Two South African women were present at this gathering, Brigalia Bam and Angeline Swart. Out of this

convocation the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle) was formed.

Originally the Circle defined “African women” as daughters of Africa living south of the Sahara whose lives are influenced by Christianity and African culture. In practice, however, the group includes African women representing all the major religions of Africa; it also embraces all women of Africa, regardless of colour (Phiri 1997a:69).

The insistence in describing their project as a *circle* of concerned African women is significant. This description draws on the “web of oppression” motif of African American women that includes “elitism, racism, classism and sexism” which African women seek to analyse (Oduyoye 1990:48). It also decries the stereotype of African women as passive victims, unwilling or unable to deal with their oppression (Hinga 1996:38-39). “Not only are women aware of the issues confronting them and the continent as a whole, but they also feel compelled to act towards the resolution of these issues” (Hinga 1996:39). The fact that the initiative was named the *Concerned Circle* was also significant as it expressed a caring about the “erosion and destruction of human dignity and life” and suggested the necessity of working against the injustice that brought this about (Njoroge 1997:80). It is this emphasis on action that aligns African women’s theology to other “feminist” theologies, particularly from the third world, that are committed to “life, justice, and freedom from oppression” (Hinga 1996:39).

In the inaugural address at the 1989 conference, Mercy Oduyoye (1990:47) emphasised that westernising Africa was not the road to liberation, in spite of having learned from western sisters the impact of patriarchy. Rather, exploring African culture through networks of solidarity amongst women that are to be found in church women’s groups is key to African women’s theologising (Oduyoye 1990:48).

We shall write theology in all the available literary and artistic forms of expression. But more important, we stand committed to see theology function as a liberating factor in our lives, the lives of our communities and of Africa (Oduyoye 1990:48).

The Circle committed itself to a research and publication project with specific goals and objectives (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990:2-5). Networking across Africa, research and publication of the effects of religion and culture on women's lives, and contributing to the transformation of policies on the continent that effect women's social conditions, were all significant concerns of the Circle (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990:2). Various publications have emerged through this process since that first 1989 gathering and the Circle has become an important forum for the voices of African women theologians (Amoah 1997; Kanyoro and Njoroge 1996; Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992; Wamue and Getui 1996). There has been concentrated research in three main areas:

the roles and images of women in relation to men in African cultures, with special emphasis on rituals in rites of passage; an analysis of the interaction between African culture and Christianity and its impact on African women; and reading the Bible through the eyes of African women. In 1996, at the Circle's evaluation meeting in Kenya, it was decided that there should be a fourth area: African women's histories (Phiri 1997a:71).

Oduyoye (1990), as suggested earlier, saw this research as being carried out through networks of church women's groups. Theologians such as Nymabura Njoroge (1997) have continued to argue for this vision of "doing" theology with women in the community. Doing theology implies "participation and exploration, emphasising the activity that produces theology" (Njoroge 1997:78). African women theologians seek "to be at the heart of where theology is being created, in the womb of the community of faith, [and] to academically articulate what is being produced" (Njoroge 1997:78). The areas of research outlined above by Phiri (1997a), and the impulses of linking women in the church with women in the academy suggested by Oduyoye (1990) and strengthened by Njoroge (1997) all have strong resonances with my work. It is a commitment to this framework that aligns my work with African women's theology.

The Circle has been instrumental in linking women's theology in South Africa with the rest of Africa. While small numbers black South African women have been associated with

EATWOT over the years, both black and white South African women participate in the Circle. As women in South Africa meet across race and class in Circle meetings, latent “difference” and “solidarity” issues arise. These meetings provide an opportunity for these questions and their implications for our future work together to be confronted and dealt with more openly. Racial division has strongly shaped our women’s theological agenda and until the legacy of this past is dealt with, creative possibilities for shared visions and practices that transform society and the church will be diminished. Before looking to our potential future work as women theologians, it is important to reflect on this history of division.

6.4 Division in the South African women’s theological project

The first feminist theology conference in South Africa was organised by the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) from 31 August to 2 September 1984 in Hammanskraal under the title, “Women’s struggle in South Africa”. It was attended mostly by “activist” black women located in the church and in community organisations. Almost all the papers were presented by black women at this conference which attempted to reflect theologically on the daily reality of oppression faced by marginalised women in society and the church (ICT 1984b). Within days a second conference was held at the University of South Africa (UNISA) titled, “Sexism and feminism in theological perspective” (Vorster 1984). This was an “academic” conference attended by mostly white delegates. The women who presented papers were all attached to universities and were middle-class and white. Feminist theology in South Africa was thus “born” into existing race and class divides amongst women, and this is clearly reflected in the proceedings of these two conferences. These two theological conferences were also a reflection of the academic/activist divide amongst women at that time (see section 5.4.1).

Within academic theology during the 1980s, there was an emerging body of feminist work authored by white women. These works dialogued primarily with North American feminist theology and focused on theological constructs originating in the west (Ackermann 1984; 1985; 1988; Edwards 1984; 1989; Guttler 1988; Keane 1988; Landman 1984; Walker 1989). During this time, there was also a strong focus on the ordination of women in the Anglican church which was being hotly debated in dioceses throughout the country towards the end of

that decade. This debate was also dominated by white women (Britton 1989; Fordred 1987; Roos 1988; Swart-Russell 1988; 1989).²

There were almost no black women studying theology in the academy at that time. Black women's struggle was being waged on the frontlines of the political struggle and was integrally part of the movement within the church which aligned itself with the struggle for justice. These women, while committed to the struggle for gender justice, were also political activists. Those that did publish their writings amidst the political turmoil of the day, emphasised practical issues facing women in the church *and* in society (Bam 1986; Bennett 1986; Chabaku 1989; Makhene 1984; Mncube 1988; Ramodibe 1988; Ramphele 1989; Thetele; 1979; Tisani 1989). This strongly contextual analysis which linked the political struggle for justice with feminist theology was absent from white women's theological reflection. Some black women also attempted from their particular location to provide a theological framework for black feminist theology which included a challenge to their male counterparts concerning gender justice in black theology (Jordaan 1987; Mosala 1984; 1986; Mncube 1984).³

This brief literature survey suggests that there were differing interests between white and black women during this decade that resulted in two streams of women's theology developing along racial and economic lines. Much of the literature authored by black women emanated from gatherings of para-church organisations such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), as well as from within

² Because this was the case, women's ordination (certainly within the Anglican debate) was often dismissed by African male clerics as a "white women's issue" that denied the role of African culture in the church.

³ While recognising that the relationship between black women and men theologians working within a liberation paradigm is important, the focus of this section is on relationships between women. While the relationship between male and female theologians is important to the future of our theological project in Africa, I do not choose to pursue the issue in any depth in this study. Suffice to say that about ten years on from the original challenge by black women, African women theologians such as Njoroge (1997:83) are still suggesting that women's theological voices are still not being taken seriously in African theology generally. Some black South African male scholars have in the intervening decade attempted to respond to this challenge by acknowledging the lack of a gender analysis in their work and by attempting to foreground women's voices. These include, amongst others, Maimela (1991; 1995), Maluleke (1997b), Mandew (1991), and Mosala (1992).

black theology circles such as the Black Theology Project (BTP).⁴ A survey of the literature also suggests that work authored by white women tended to be published locally in established academic theological journals or academic theses. This was not usually the case for the writings by black women during this period. Their work tended to be published in literature more accessible to communities or in publications linked internationally to third world theology.

Few white women theologians involved in the academy were also actively engaged in the work of activist para-church organisations such as the SACC and ICT. There appears not to have been much effort made to forge theological partnerships between those in the academy and those working within church structures that had an explicitly political liberation agenda during the 1980s. This observation, however, needs to also take into account the fact that Black Consciousness was the defining ideology of black theology in the 1970s and 1980s. There was therefore an ideological reluctance by black theologians to embrace whites within circles such as the BTP. Ellen Kuzwayo's (1985) autobiography *Call me woman* articulates this view in her personal discussion about the Christian faith, social action, and Black Consciousness. It has been argued that Kuzwayo's statement encapsulates

a kind of female empowerment and separatism associated with Western feminism at a certain stage in its history, but which is profoundly modified by an even stronger separatism of Black Consciousness that proclaims "blackness" as a distinguishing category (Kretzschmar and Cuthbertson 1996:299).

During this historical period of separatism in theology, the Umtata Women's Theology

⁴ The BTP, constituted in 1984, is historically linked to the emergence of black consciousness in South Africa (ICT 1984a). This project was an initiative by black theologians to encourage dialogue between one another and to provide a platform for theological reflection on the black liberation struggle. It was the successor to the Black Theology Agency, coordinated by Sabelo Ntwasa and later Mokgethi Mothlabi during the 1970s, which was disbanded due to state harassment of its leaders and members.

Group (UWTG) was born as a significant initiative that crossed the racial and the academic/activist divide (Isaac *et al* 1991). The group was formed after an ICT conference in 1987 by women living in Umtata (Isaac *et al* 1991:65) and it has continued to demonstrate the potential for our work together as women across our differences. Initiated by Pule Tshangela, who has had a long history of working for the then Transkei Council of Churches, the group has drawn in women from all walks of life. An important aspect of their work has been the publication of Bible study material which addresses a wide range of topics such as the feminine aspects of God and women in the Bible, as well as practical issues dealing with AIDS, sexuality, marriage, and parenting (UWTG 1990a; 1990b; 1992a; 1992b; 1995; 1996). UWTG also organises workshops which are attended by women from a number of the rural areas outside of Umtata. From personal experience of attending one of these workshops in the mid-1990s, this project has managed to increasingly include voices of poor and marginalised women from rural areas in their theological reflection. This was not always the case, but through regular critical evaluation, the group continues to provide one of the few theological forums for rural women (Isaac *et al* 1991:68-70).

In the early 1990s, the first book on South African women's theology was published under the title *Women hold up half the sky: women in the church in Southern Africa* (Ackermann *et al* 1991). The project was prompted by the failure of the Provincial Synod of the Church of the Province to pass a resolution in 1988 accepting the ordination of women to the priesthood.⁵ This publication formed part of broader advocacy work within the Anglican Church to ensure that the resolution ordaining women to the priesthood would be passed at the following synod in 1992.⁶ This is not to say that it was a project that solely addressed the question of women's ordination, or that it was not inclusive of writers from denominations other than Anglican. On the contrary, the project attempted to address a broad spectrum of theological issues facing women, and drew in a variety of denominational perspectives.

⁵ The editors were all active members of the Anglican church at that time.

⁶ The resolution to ordain women to the priesthood in the Church of the Province of Southern Africa was passed at this 1992 Provincial Synod.

While incorporating both black and white voices (male and female), indigenous African women's voices are conspicuously absent from sections that explicitly deal with theology, spirituality, and historical perspectives. The majority of indigenous African women contributors make their contribution in the section entitled "Women's experience of the struggle for justice in Southern Africa" (Bam 1991; Mncube 1991; Mpumlwana 1991). This could be explained in a number of ways. Perhaps the editors felt that the "theological" sections needed to be written by those formally trained in the academy. As I have already asserted, there were very few indigenous African women who were formally studying theology at that time. If this was the editors' assumption, then it seems to me that there was a false distinction made between "theology" and "life experience". My work seeks to show that theologising the life experience of poor and marginalised women poses a major challenge to theology carried out in the academy (section 8.6). So while this important book project attempted to articulate what women in South Africa were saying about their faith and theology, it was not that successful in bridging the divide between women who understood themselves as "feminist" and those who preferred to see themselves as "activist". The socio-historical context of the day shaped this discourse as the fight for political liberation continued.

In post-apartheid South Africa, women theologians, as in other gender justice circles, have begun to meet under a completely different set of political circumstances which have shifted the relational power dynamics. Issues of solidarity and difference have become crucial to the women's theological project. Women theologians have begun to meet across racial lines more frequently through gatherings of the Circle. My sense, however, is that within these gatherings women have not yet reached the point where they are openly confronting their difference and challenging one another critically about issues such as identity, location, and representation in a way that moves the debate forward, as has been the case in other "feminist" gatherings. The reasons as to why this is so are no doubt complex. While not having undertaken any formal inquiry, I would suggest from my own experience as a Christian woman that within theological circles we feel constrained by a Christian ethic of "love" that has traditionally been interpreted to mean resisting open conflict and confrontation. This results in a refusal to face the depth of the wounds of black South

Africans (Maluleke 1997a). We have also been living in an atmosphere of “reconciliation” (Maluleke 1997a:338-339) promoted by ex-President Nelson Mandela and expressed theologically by Archbishop Tutu as South Africans being “the rainbow people of God”. This atmosphere of reconciliation has encouraged us “to be nice to each other”, which further constrains open confrontation about difference, location, representation, and power. Not confronting and dealing with the clashing and competing interests that exist within our theological circles of women I believe will, in the long run, hamper efforts at ensuring that women’s political concerns are high on the theological agendas of the church and the academy.

In the following sections, I want to focus on three strategic areas that need to be addressed within the women’s theological project if it is to be effective in socially transforming the disadvantaged position of women in the church and society. Areas needing attention include: “difference” and its implications for solidarity amongst women, the representation of the voices of poor and marginalised women, and clarifying the current confusion over the naming of our theology. In addressing each of these areas, I will illustrate the issues from the works of three theologians who are located differently in our context: Denise Ackermann, Christina Landman, and Madipoane Masenya. Thereafter, I will indicate how impulses in each of their works have contributed to my own theological reflection with the women of Vulindlela. Before doing this, I “locate” each of these women theologians through short biographical sketches.

6.5 Biographical sketches

6.5.1 Denise Ackermann

Denise Ackermann was one of the first South African woman to complete doctoral studies within an explicitly feminist theological paradigm (Ackermann 1990; see Brand 1996:272). Her research focused on the work of the Black Sash, a women’s human rights organisation, and was concerned with the formation of theories for liberating praxis in South Africa which

are based on the reign of God.⁷ The Black Sash at the time had a predominantly white, English speaking membership with a liberal tradition of human rights work.

Ackermann has situated herself and her theology in this tradition and speaks of herself as a “white, middle-class, middle-aged, South African woman” (1996c:137). She sees herself as culturally both English and Afrikaner with strong French Huguenot roots but with no familial ties to Europe and regards South Africa as her home (Ackermann 1996c:137). In the initial stages of her work, Ackerman was one of the pioneers of feminist theology in the academy and, together with Christina Landman, is one of the few women professors employed in a theological faculty. Trained as a “practical theologian”, her writings over the years have increasingly attempted to shape the terrain of what she terms a “feminist theology of praxis” (Ackermann 1984; 1985; 1991; 1993a; 1996a; 1997a; 1998). She was a co-editor of the first book published on women’s theology in South Africa (Ackermann *et al* 1991), and currently has probably one of the highest international profiles as an academic “feminist” South African theologian.

6.5.2 Christina Landman

Christina Landman is one of the few Afrikaans speaking theologians in South Africa that would situate herself within an explicitly liberation paradigm. She initially trained as a church historian during the 1980s, and was present, together with Denise Ackermann, at the academic feminist conference held in 1984 at UNISA, Pretoria. At this conference she delivered a paper profiling her understanding of feminist theology as described in the first world theology and also attempted to explore the tenets of emerging Latin American, Asian, and African feminist theologies (Landman 1984).

Landman’s work in the early 1980s was unique in that she, as a white women, was attempting to situate feminist theology as a liberation theology within the context of black and other third world theologies. Recognising her responsibility as one of the few women in the

⁷ Ackermann annotated her own entries in the bibliography on South African women’s theology (Haddad 1997), from which this description of the thesis work is taken.

academy exploring feminist theology, she attempted to sketch its broad parameters while at the same time giving recognition to the third world. At this stage of her work, she saw western women in the academy as giving impetus to this theological movement around the world. She perhaps still does as she has continued to suggest that the 1984 UNISA conference “was the first time feminist theology received academic attention in South Africa” (Landman 1995b:143). Today, Landman (1998) would situate her work, with its emphasis on women’s stories and histories, within the African women’s theology paradigm of the Circle.

6.5.3 Madipoane Masenya

Madipoane Masenya began publishing theological work in academic journals ten years after women’s theology began to emerge in South Africa during the early 1980s (Masenya 1994). She also began this journey ten years later than both Denise Ackermann and Christina Landmann. Masenya represents a growing number of indigenous African women who are studying theology at both undergraduate and graduate level. Her work as an “African-South African”, a term she uses to name herself, is important because she is currently the only indigenous African woman to hold a doctorate degree in Biblical Studies (Masenya 1996).⁸ The particular contribution she makes to Biblical studies is an emphasis on the relationship between culture the Bible from a woman’s perspective (Masenya 1996; 1997a; 1997b). Masenya, as an indigenous African, is able to pioneer women’s theology in our context from a first hand perspective that takes seriously cultural rituals and practices of women.

6.6 Strategic issues raised by our “locatedness”

6.6.1 Difference and solidarity

As South African women the different locations from which we reflect theologically, highlighted above by the three different biographical sketches, immediately raises the question as to how we find solidarity in our difference. In post-apartheid South Africa, our

⁸ There is no indigenous African woman currently holding a doctorate degree in Theology. While Masenya’s focus is on cultural Biblical hermeneutics, she also speaks of doing theology from a women’s liberation perspective.

locatedness and the implications for our work together can no longer be ignored. “In erasure difference is made dangerous” (Copeland 1996:77). We thus need to search for ways of finding solidarity in our difference which is accountable and responsible so that our liberatory endeavours effectively impact society and the church.

For difference to lead to a solidarity that is enriching rather than dangerous, African American theologian Shawn Copeland asserts that there needs to be an openness to “pluralize, to destabilise, to dismantle, to problematize any propensity to asphyxiate or suppress difference in critical theologies committed to the radical liberation of women” (1996:71). Copeland is speaking into her context within the United States as well as to the context of global theologies. Her words are apposite in the South African context as we seek to find ways to theorise and act theologically in solidarity where “difference” is such a strong marker. She acknowledges that in such contexts, it is “difficult and painful” to speak “in or under one voice” (Copeland 1996:71). Together we need to create the space that opens up opportunities to dialogue on these matters in ways that lay sound epistemological foundations for “a liberating praxis”. Because of our difference, we need to *struggle* for a “celebrative option for life in its integrity, in all its distinctiveness” (Copeland 1996:72).

It is Denise Ackermann’s work that calls attention to questions of difference and solidarity as her personal journey reflects something of this struggle. Given that Ackermann was at the vanguard of academic theology engaged in the women’s project, her dialogue partners have been crucial to her reflection. In the first stage of her work, her reflections typified a white, middle class view of women’s experience that was not that different from feminist theology emanating from the north. Her writings at this time indicated that she dialogued primarily with feminist scholars from the northern hemisphere (Ackermann 1984; 1988; 1992; 1993b). Potentially her work was in danger at this point of reflecting very little of the reality of the majority of women in South Africa. Ackermann’s “experience” as a South African woman was but one aspect of “women’s experience” in all its diversity. In fact it was that of the dominant and privileged sector of society which perpetuated the academic activist/divide (section 6.4). The “liberating” paradigm within which she worked did not necessarily “speak” for the majority of marginalised women her work sought to represent.

During the 1990s, there increasingly appears to be a recognition that her “particular locatedness” needed to be foregrounded in her work. This was probably due to a number of factors. At that time, our country was making enormous socio-political shifts, which raised questions of difference and representation whenever women met together (section 5.4.1). Ackermann would have been directly affected by these socio-political shifts, particularly as she was employed at the historically black University of the Western Cape during this historic period. Secondly, western feminist scholars were increasingly being challenged theoretically through the influence of postmodernism with regard to “women’s experience” within their own circles (section 5.5.2) and by feminist scholars from the southern hemisphere (and womanist scholars in the north). Thirdly, African women’s theology was beginning to have a voice within EATWOT (section 6.3). The network of the Circle was growing and South African women were being drawn into this partnership, including Ackermann.

Musimbi Kanyoro (1995:20) recounts an incident that took place at a conference for African women theologians in Nairobi in 1994. During this conference, Ackermann described her spiritual journey as a white South African woman growing up in the system of apartheid. She described how she felt challenged to do this because of her commitment to feminist analysis that emphasised doing theology from “women’s experience”. In finding her place as an African women theologian, Ackermann shared how she felt left out from the experience of Christian and Muslim women from other parts of Africa who speak of their religious experience within the setting of African cultures. This included the discussions around issues such as naming rituals, fertility, widowhood, polygamy and so forth. These issues, while familiar to Ackermann, were not actually part of her lived experience, as she acknowledged. Kanyoro (1995:20) indicates that this reality led Ackermann to raise a number of important questions regarding white women’s involvement in African women’s theology. Did she have a right to be involved in the depth of analysis that the other African women are doing? How far could she go with her critique? Would her critique inevitably be from the safe distant vantage point from which she has been socialized to regard traditions of indigenous African people? Would this estrange her from other women and create division? Kanyoro explains how these concerns were dealt with:

The Cape Town Circle of Concerned African Women in Theology, a group made up of blacks, Asians, coloureds, and whites whose religious experiences are Muslim, Christian and African indigenous, discussed these concerns. Their dialogue led them to conclude that cultural critique is possible only where the vulnerability of all participants is transparent. Denise was challenged to lay herself bare on the issue of the culture of apartheid (Kanyoro 1995:20).

This incident must have had a personal effect on Ackermann, although I am not aware of Ackermann herself reflecting on it anywhere in her writings. She does, however, increasingly refer in her work to her dialogue with women from the Circle and the importance of these meetings for her own reflections (1995; 1996a; 1997b). In this “second phase” of Ackermann’s work, there is a foregrounding of her location as a white middle-class woman and she explicitly raises issues of difference and accountability in ways she did not do before (1995; 1996a; 1996c; 1998). This theoretical shift has been vital to her contribution to the South African women’s theology project. Her attempt to address “difference” signalled an important step in her own reflection which enabled more meaningful relationships with other South African women theologians and in Africa.

When Ackermann (1995) deals with difference and connectedness, she makes a personal statement about her own limitations which in itself is important to the “connectedness” of the women’s project.

As a feminist theologian, I have tried not to fall into the trap of making assumptions on behalf of other women. Yet I have done so simply because I have not analysed in sufficient depth my own place in my society and religious structures (Ackermann 1995: 264).

She continues by recognising the pivotal question of “power” in the debates around issues of race, class, sexism, culture, and sexuality. Through her involvement in the Circle, she recognises that for too long western women have set the agenda for feminist religious discourse. “Women’s cultural differences need to be recognised and respectfully and

creatively explored as sources for identity and human worth” (Ackermann 1995:269). She does not, however, attempt to answer any of the questions posed by the incident in Nairobi with regard to her “locatedness” as an African. There appears to be little dialogue in her published works with indigenous African South African women. Furthermore, Ackermann does not attempt to analyse the power relations that exist between academic theologians (of whatever race) and marginalised women in the churches. From my perspective, these omissions seriously flaw her attempts to move to connectedness in our South African context where there is a strong academic/activist divide in the women’ project, and where issues of African identity are crucial to the broad theological project.

Engaging “difference” in the women’s theological project is a decidedly postmodern impulse. Yet, in Ackermann’s work there appears to be no attempt to critically engage feminist postmodern theory with feminist liberation theory, and hence she does not theorise difference. In fact, I suspect that Ackermann (1996a:38) is wary of the influence of postmodernism on the feminist liberation project for much the same reasons as those held by materialist feminists (section 5.5.2). Given the complexities of women’s oppression in advanced capitalist societies, she asserts, it is not a new source of theory that is needed but rather a reclaiming and adaption of those aspects of the western project of modernity that are helpful for a “contemporary feminist theory and practice” (Ackermann 1996a:41).

Personally, I am not convinced by her theoretical move to women’s solidarity, though I am sympathetic to her concern that commitment to political action to change unjust structures might get lost in the morass of postmodernism. Because she does not adequately account for difference theoretically, there is a danger that she does not thoroughly interrogate its meaning for emancipatory discourse for *all* South African women. Instead she shifts quickly to theologise the “connections” that are ours as women.

While Ackermann speaks of a “connectedness” in difference, Copeland (1996:78) speaks of this solidarity as “community”. I find this paradigm more useful, as it suggests an active working towards a practical reality. Copeland (1996:78) argues that at the heart of critical theologies of liberation must lie authentic community which is the essence of the Christian experience. She argues that *authentic* community,

...emerges in the strenuous effort to understand common and different experiences; to interrogate those differences, commonalities and interdependencies rigorously; to reach common judgements; to realize and sustain interdependent commitments. As community in difference is a hard-won achievement, so too is difference in community (Copeland 1996:78).

It seems to me that for South African women's theology, it is this dialectic of community in difference and difference in community that needs thorough exploration before "solidarity" can become a reality. Community, in this sense, requires risk and vulnerability by white women. Ackermann speaks of this vulnerability as "choosing to relinquish power as dominance at the risk of not gaining anything in exchange" (1996a:46). I prefer to see this as "unlearning our privilege as loss" (section 5.5.5).

Relinquishing power means recognising that women with "other" experiences offer "a fund of necessary polarities" (Copeland 1996:78). I have argued that not recognising this leads to our loss. "Connecting" is not simply finding ways to appreciate each other's difference. A postmodern understanding of difference suggests that this does not go far enough. Rather, there needs to be a recognition of mutual subjectivity between our selves and those who are "other" than ourselves. By implication, wherever we are located, we do not have the whole truth. I am not sure vulnerability in sharing our difference is enough in order for cultural critique to occur, as suggested above by the Cape Town Circle. We must be willing to be re-shaped and re-made by the encounter with those who are "other" than ourselves. When we actively choose to enter in this process, "then interdependence is no longer threatening" (Copeland 1996:78). But, interdependence must be distinguished from assimilation and absorption.

Assimilation disguises those latent possibilities of domination in difference that not only intimidate the formation of community with the coerced uniformity but menace the crucial role that difference plays in the self-constitution of identity (Copeland 1996:78).

It is this self-constitution of identity by women previously marginalised that provides the

challenge towards an interdependence that is free of assimilation or separatism. For difference must lead to a solidarity that “insinuates cohesion, bonding and interdependence” (Copeland 1996:79). As a practice, solidarity needs to “move us on to something larger than, yet constitutive of, ourselves” (Copeland 1996:79). It is in our collaboration together that “we are made new” which is a theological imperative. As I have already argued (section 5.5.5), this collaboration is active engagement with women in the community and requires a willingness to “unlearn one’s privilege” and to make a choice to be “partially constituted” by those we work with. I contend that if those of us in the academy are not prepared to do this, then we must not risk representing “women’s voices” in scholarly work.

6.6.2 Representation of poor and marginalised women

Representation has become crucial to the debate within the women’s project yet it is seldom discussed on the theological agenda of South African women. Given the plurality of our context, theorising at a macro-level can be problematic if the subjectivity of all women is not recognised. The generality of the notion of “women’s experience” masks cultural, historical and social conditions of different women. So while we need to struggle for a macro-epistemological framework that acknowledges difference, it seems to me that particular and located sites of knowledge also need to be foregrounded. I contend, and will show in the next chapter, that these sites of knowledge are often in the unexplored locations where poor and marginalised women, who have not been trained in the academy, reside. It is these local epistemological narratives that “recover, restore and revalue women’s lived lives” (Copeland 1996:74). Copeland (1996:74) suggests that for our epistemology not to “stifle, manipulate, and betray”, there needs to be a dialectic engagement between “large-scale” narratives and what can be term “local knowledges” (Cochrane 1999). This epistemological commitment lies at the heart of my own work with marginalised women in this study.

For representation to genuinely embrace the subjectivity of those we seek to give voice to, a commitment to an epistemological dialectic is not enough. This commitment needs to translate into praxis, because with the “unleashing of new knowledges”, “new obligations emerge” (Copeland 1996:74). As we are actively and practically engaged with poor and marginalised women, so we become aware of difference and the way in which our presence

as activist-intellectuals is unhelpful to those we work with. I have already asserted that “knowledge is power” (Foucault 1980). Copeland suggests that in Christian terms, “knowledge leads to responsibility” (Copeland 1996:75). This responsibility in our context, I suggest, is not simply to theorise the new, located, knowledges of the marginalised, but also to work towards the transformation of these sites of daily struggle for survival. This means that our work needs to be relational, not simply across race, but across the class divide. We are not going to transform communities merely by words locked in the academy; as theologians in South Africa we need to be actively engaged in work with women in the church and community. This will give our work a “moral authenticity” (Copeland 1996:76), which is necessary for a solidarity that celebrates difference with integrity.

There has been some research undertaken on the religious practices of marginalised women in South Africa (Lebona 1993; Muller 1994; 1999; Thomas 1997b; Walker 1992; 1996). This body of work is diverse both in terms of research focus and in methodology. It is Christina Landman’s work (1996b; 1999a; 1999b) that represents a growing genre of research focused on recovering the voices and histories of poor and marginalised women through the telling of their stories (Haddad 1998a; 1999; Haddad and Sibeko 1997; van Schalkwyk 1997; 1999). This focus is consistent with the decision by the Circle, at an evaluation meeting in 1996 in Kenya, to include African women’s histories as an area of research (section 6.3). It is also consistent with feminist research methodology that emphasises personal narratives and autobiography (section 1.2). Because of this important commitment to recovering the voices of poor and marginalised women, Landman’s work highlights the issue of representation, as I discuss below.

In her personal struggle to “celebrate life in its integrity and distinctiveness” Landman has made efforts in two ways to connect with women who are “other” than herself: through networking with the ecumenical movement within South Africa, and through the Circle. Since the mid-1990s, her links with the ecumenical movement have been strengthened through her attendance at conferences organised by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) (Landman 1997a; 1997b). These efforts have been important to Landman’s understanding of the needs of poor and marginalised women. Indeed, much of her more recent concerns seem to have been influenced by the discussions concerning social

transformation, a major theme of SACC conferences in 1996 (see Landman 1997a; 1997b). Through her work as researcher at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (UNISA), she is concerned that tertiary theological institutions facilitate the imparting of religious skills to “women on grassroots level” (Landman 1997a:13). This concern is crucial to the South African women’s theology project in giving voice to marginalised women.

In her work with women not trained theologically in the academy, she identifies a number of areas of “skills training” that are important to this task. She argues that the first set of skills necessary to the task of helping women to “reflect theologically and act socially” is training in self-assertion and self-transformation (Landman 1997a:13-14). This will better equip religious women to take control of their sexuality and strengthen their position in the labour market (Landman 1997a:13). A second set of skills is in the area of transforming society, particularly in the field of health. Helping women to “redefine their bodies in their cultural contexts”, suggests Landman, will better equip them to deal with issues such as AIDS, abortion, virginity, contraceptives, and pornography (Landman 1997a:14). The third area of suggested skills training for religious women is equipping women to become “moral leaders” who help communities develop their full potential (Landman 1997a:14).

Landman’s desire to see marginalised women being equipped to deal with their oppression is commendable. But it seems to me that much of the success of such a programme is dependant on the extent to which existing knowledges are recognised, the nature of the process and method used to embark on such training is collaborative, and the role of the activist intellectual foregrounded. However, there seems to be little theoretical reflection and problematising of her role in this work. This potentially leaves Landman open to a critique of not being aware of the problem of representation.

Besides the ecumenical movement, a further way in which Landman has connected with women “other” than herself is through her involvement with the Circle (Landman 1996a). Together with Ackermann, Landman probably has a higher publication profile within the network than any black South African woman. Through this association, there has been a shift in her understanding of the South African women’s theology project. This is perhaps

best expressed in the naming of herself as an “African woman theologian” (1998:138). This move is a sign of Landman’s willingness to listen to the voices of women whose experience is different from her own, and to locate herself on the African continent. It resonates with my own commitments to the theological project.

However, as privileged white South African women doing theology on the African continent, we need to be careful that we do not inadvertently “represent” the voice of African women’s theology without problematising our own subject positions. Landman, in her desire to locate herself on the African continent needs to be more vigilant in this task. In her recently published essay entitled *African Women’s Theology* (Landman 1998) there is little evidence of this vigilance. Instead she runs the risk of defining “African women’s theology” on her own terms without an accountability to the Circle. Circles throughout the continent operate under a corporate mandate with clearly defined research goals (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1990; Phiri 1997a:71). Landman refers to four types of theologies in this essay: “of the mind and the womb”, “of sexuality”; “of relationships”; and “of interrelatedness” (Landman 1998:139). The latter two definitions resonate more clearly with the themes emerging in the writings of other indigenous African women than the first two themes she highlights. There is no explicit reference, however, to how African cultural practices are assumed in these theologies. Again, it appears that much of her discussion at this point is her own formulation of African theology without accountability to the body of work she is in alignment with. For Landman, they are one and the same. Landman’s work at this point seems to lack an awareness of questions of identity and representation and erases difference. In the women’s theological project, we must struggle *together* to foster solidarity and *be accountable to each other* in this process.

If we are not accountable to one another, we bring about further division in our theological project. Landman has unwittingly fallen into this trap, when she was seen to be representing a position on polygamy, an African cultural practice outside of her personal experience. Landman advocated polygamous relationships in the white community in order to counter the high divorce rate and as an “alternative for betrayed wives and mistresses” (*The Citizen* 15

January 1999).⁹ She asserted that polygamous relationships “would reduce the incidence of venereal disease, men’s needs for prostitutes, and the need for women to become prostitutes” (*The Citizen* 15 January 1999). Landman justified her argument in favour of polygamy from, amongst other things, the Bible, and pointed out that even the World Council of Churches (WCC) is needing to reassess its theological position on polygamy. The 1998 WCC meeting in Harare, she asserted, had shown that many African churches with observer status were served by leaders in polygamous marriages (*The Citizen* 15 January 1999).

A racially diverse group of women of the Circle in the KwaZulu-Natal region gathered to discuss Landman’s views and, from personal reports, were evidently angry. They publically accused Landman of misusing her position as a women’s advocate (CCAWT 1999:74). In their published response they address eight issues pertaining to what they perceive as a misrepresentation of their voices (CCAWT 1999:74). She has represented, they argue, in an inappropriate way both white women and indigenous African women (CCAWT 1999:74). White women felt she spoke on their behalf in a manner that devalued issues of the women’s liberation movement which they hold dear. Indigenous African women were concerned at her lack of critical analysis of a cultural practice that she presumed to know and yet had not experienced first hand. She was representing “women” on a cultural practice outside of her own locatedness. Representation at this point had become a threat to our solidarity.

Actively working for a *collaborative* solidarity requires that as activist-intellectuals we are involved in actual work with poor and marginalised women. Landman’s work seeks to do this. While I align myself with Landman’s work, I have also come to recognise the importance of vigilantly foregrounding representation. As I argued in section 5.5.5, this means more than simply situating ourselves as intellectuals within our activist work. It requires a choice to be shaped by this work. As we actively seek to work with groups “other” than ourselves we choose to be re-constructed by that work. In my work as woman-priest and activist-intellectual have chosen to constitute myself as a South African African woman. It is out of this re-constitution that I align myself within the trajectory of African women’s

⁹ *The Citizen* is not ideologically my favourite newspaper, but I cite it here because it is explicitly referenced in a debate that other women, women who are part of the Circle, take up with Landman (see below).

theology. The naming of the work we do is indicative of our interests and who we choose as our main interlocutors. The diversity and the fractured nature of our project is reflected in the current confusion over the naming of our theology. This debate resonates with discussions within the wider women's project (section 5.4.4).

6.6.3 Naming our theology

Our "difference" as South African women is perhaps most marked in the process of naming our theology. This process circumscribes our context, presuppositions, and experiences and continues to reflect the race and class divides between women. Denise Ackermann self-consciously chooses to continue calling her work "feminist" because of its emphasis on liberation, in spite of a recognition that this has negative connotations for non-western women. She unfortunately does not try to explicitly address the issues of her own "African-ness" which were implicit in the questions raised at the Nairobi gathering of the Circle (section 6.6.1). There is also a notable absence of a stress on particularising African women's voices. Christina Landman, as I have just discussed, locates herself within African women's theology and sometimes embraces "African-ness" without always fully interrogating the implications for a reconstruction of identity.

Naming ourselves in the women's theological project, reflects our divisive apartheid history and the theological alliances within different racial groupings at that time. During the 1980s, the use of the term "feminist theology" was generally used by both black and white women. As I pointed out earlier (section 6.4), both 1984 conferences organised along different racial lines were then understood as initiating South African "feminist theology". Increasingly, black women began to question the appropriateness of this term with its strong western connotations. As with the "feminist" versus the "women's movement" debate (section 5.4.4), black women asserted that their theology needed to be defined (or re-defined) appropriately to the South African context.

This process of re-definition was also not that dissimilar to what African American women were attempting to do in their own context (Masenya 1996). African American women theologians had rejected the usage of the term "feminist" to describe their theology, and

adopted the term “womanist theology” instead. The notion of being “womanist” derived directly from writer Alice Walker, who first adopted this term to describe African American women engaged in gender justice. She defined the term “womanist” as follows:

From *womanish*... A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” ie, like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, courageous or *willful* behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one... (Walker 1983:xi).

Because of the similarities between the South African and the African American experience, some women in South Africa began to call their theology “womanist”, at least for a period of time (Jordaan 1995; Masenya 1995; Williams 1990). In so doing, they were attempting to shape and define their experience as “different” from their white sisters. Coining African American terminology, as Masenya (1997a) argues, was no different from adopting the term “feminist”, and was as foreign to the African experience. It is Masenya’s work that most clearly articulates the naming process as integral to circumscribing the terrain of the women’s theological project in South Africa.

Madipoane Masenya (ngwana ‘Mphahlele) names herself and her theology in cultural terms as a *bosadi* approach. Masenya’s (1996; 1997a) work highlights the importance of naming our theology and the need to do so collaboratively if we are to find solidarity that expresses community. Unfortunately, there is little attempt in her work to theorise the implications of this naming process for the diversity of our theological project.¹⁰ Through autobiography she relates the process through which she moves in the naming of her theology.

¹⁰ I am not just referring to white women, but also to women classified coloured under apartheid such as Angeline Swart (1996a; 1996b) who attended the first Circle meeting in Ghana in 1989, Roxanne Jordaan (1987; 1989;1995) and Jaqueline Williams (1990; 1992) who provided an important gender critique within Black Theology, as well as Betty Govinden (1991; 1994) who has Indian cultural roots and is an active member of the Circle.

My first article on the subject of the Bible and women's issues was published in 1994 under the title, *A feminist perspective on theology with particular reference to black feminist theology*. It focused on definitions of key terms as well as outlining the context of African women in South Africa. In the concluding section, an attempt was made to re-read a few texts from a women's liberation perspective. This article was followed by others in which I used the terms "feminist" and "feminism" freely. A noticeable shift in my approach took place with the publication of *African womanist hermeneutics: a suppressed voice from South Africa speaks* in 1995. I proposed there that African women need to name themselves and because of the many points of resemblance between African-South African women and their African-American sisters, African women in South Africa should appropriate the term "womanist" rather "feminist" in their interpretative efforts. It was not until later on a research visit to the United States, that I realised that even "womanism", like "feminism", is uniquely North American. While still acknowledging points of commonality between South African-African women and our African-American sisters, I acknowledge the differences between us. This has resulted in the realisation that there is a need for African-South African women to rename ourselves, to resist to be named by others and to issue a challenge to call ourselves by our own names (Masenya 1997a:15).

The various phases that Masenya has moved through in the naming process indicate a personal journey of locating her identity within her academic work. This process culminated in her naming her work in way that reflected her particular cultural identity (Masenya 1996; 1997a; 1997b). "I have since then proposed the word *bosadi* (womanhood) as a term that may be relevant for a reading of the Bible from an African (Northern Sotho)-South African women's liberation perspective" (Masenya 1997a:15-16). Masenya (1996; 1997a; 1997b) argues that the *bosadi* paradigm, "like many liberation paradigms", foregrounds the liberatory aspects of the Bible as well as emphasising both the positive and the negative aspects of culture. Her most sustained attempt to do this is in her analysis of the text Proverbs 31:10-31, the subject of her doctoral research (Masenya 1996). While adopting a cultural location to

name her theology, Masenya (1997a; 1997b) makes the point that the term *bosadi* has its counterpart in other African cultures. The emphasis is thus on the African-ness of her theology which expresses her personal cultural experience (Masenya 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1998a; 1998b). In so doing, Masenya is alerting other scholars to the importance of particularity of location when speaking about women's experience. Giving a cultural name to her theology has been strategic in unmasking power imbalances between white and indigenous African women that have existed for so long. Locating her theology in this way forces women like myself who are outside of her location to question its relevance for our theology.

Masenya suggests that *bosadi* "describes what it means to be a woman in the Northern Sotho culture" (1996:156). She argues that the emphasis on a cultural hermeneutic is important in a context like South African where culture has been denigrated (Masenya 1996:157). For Masenya, culture is both liberating and oppressive in women's lives, and she would want to foreground the positive elements in her interpretive work of reading Biblical texts (Masenya 1996:157). Positively, *bosadi*, emphasises *ubuntu* or "humaness" which "implies a fundamental respect for human nature as a whole" (Masenya 1996:157). There is a relational respect for persons and property expressed in tolerance, compassion, and sensitivity to the marginal in the society (Masenya 1996:157). This relational aspect of humanity means that there is a strong emphasis on community which envisions both men and women living in mutual respect (Masenya 1996:158). The concept of *bosadi* furthermore, "elevates the significance of the family" which plays an important role in the African context (Masenya 1996:158). But, Masenya recognises, culture can also be an oppressive force. The *bosadi* approach will thus "take note of the interplay of the oppressive forces such as racism, sexism, classism and the African culture as factors shaping the way in which an African woman reads the Bible" (Masenya 1997b:445).

Interestingly, despite her emphasis on an African cultural hermeneutic, Masenya's (1996) doctoral work is strongly shaped by western feminist paradigms and traditional Old Testament scholarship. Throughout her construction of "the *bosadi* approach" there are liberatory elements that sit easily in a western feminist framework. She asserts that from a *bosadi* perspective, a woman is free to choose marriage or not (Masenya 1996:182).

Furthermore, in marriages that are oppressive through the system of *lobola* (bride-wealth), a woman “may use their family names even in their new families” (Masenya 1996:184-185). This also makes sense in a society that discourages young widows from remarrying (Masenya 1996:185). These issues of choosing singleness and keeping one’s family name, while important, are usually given prominence in the discussions of western women. Similarly, in discussing the “woman of worth as a manager of the household” in Proverbs 31, Masenya counters the position that suggests that the home is necessarily an oppressive place for African women (Masenya 1996). However, once she has stated this she shifts quickly to add that “there should be equal division of labour between members of the different sexes in the family” (Masenya 1996:195). This too is primarily a concern of western feminism.

It is not clear to me how Masenya makes the theoretical jump from western feminist scholarship to a cultural hermeneutic of liberation on these issues. While innovative in attempting to employ a contextual and cultural hermeneutical model in her work as an African scholar, there are inconsistencies in the way Masenya systematises her critical reflection. In defining her *bosadi* approach it is not always clear how she judges what theoretical constructs are acceptable and what are not. Her analysis of the positive aspects of culture at times appears to be fairly ad hoc and lacks a coherent theoretical framework. So while she helpfully stresses the value that culture places on the family, the home, and motherhood, it is difficult to assess on what theoretical basis, and why, she circumscribes the particular elements of the *bosadi* framework that are positive to women.¹¹

A further potential problem in her approach is that while her analysis is located racially and culturally, it is not located from the perspective of class, even though she acknowledges the importance of class. Masenya represents a growing number of indigenous African women who may have grown up in the working classes, yet through their university education have become middle class, but continue to see their work with poor and marginalised women as important. Her work would be strengthened if she addressed her status as an organic

¹¹ Itumeleng Mosala (1989) makes a similar point when he criticises black theologians such as Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu for failing to develop their theoretical framework in such a way that they contribute to the task of constructing a coherent and systematic black hermeneutics of liberation.

intellectual and her role in representation. These issues have long been recognised by third world scholars as important to post-colonial work (Mohanty 1988; Spivak 1988). Masenya presumes to speak “on behalf of” those she works with. I find her position on this matter theoretically flawed and ethically problematic. “...I speak on behalf of the suppressed voices of these [marginalised] women and propose ways of reading biblical texts that would help them achieve their full liberation” (Masenya 1995:150). As I argue, the intellectual, even the organic intellectual, needs to find ways of actively collaborating with those she works with in ways that take seriously the subjectivity and agency of poor and marginalised women.

For Masenya, naming her theology as an *African* woman is at the heart of her work. She critiques black South African feminists such as Bennett (1986), Jordaan (1987), Mncube (1991), and Ramodibe (1989) for failing to pay “particular attention to the context of African women in South Africa” (Masenya 1996:5). Yet her work continues to dialogue extensively with Biblical scholars from the north, with little serious or systematic engagement with those from Africa. In her seminal doctoral work (Masenya 1996), there is a minimalist reference to Justin Ukpong (1995), a Nigerian Biblical scholar, in her theorising of “cultural hermeneutics”, a notion he develops extensively in a number of works. Masenya only superficially engages with the work of Okure (1989; 1992; 1993) and Hinga (1992), dialogues with Oduyoye (1992; 1995) in a limited way, and only makes passing reference to the work of Kanyoro (1992) and Amoah (1989). From this discussion she concludes her discussion on what she terms “African feminist hermeneutics” by commending these women for their desire to arise out of their oppression and for “neutralising the male biased interpretations of African theology” (Masenya 1996:66). However, she voices her dissatisfaction “with their tendency to demonise African culture”, which she attributes in part to their “western orientated education” (Masenya 1996:66).

I take issue with Masenya at this point. From my own readings of the African scholars she refers to, there is not a “demonising of African culture”. The publication *The will to arise: women, tradition, and the church* (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992) is a concerted attempt by the authors to provide a nuanced analysis of the oppressive and liberating aspects of culture which have either been emphasised or ignored by the church to suit its own patriarchal ends. In my opinion, accusing these women of being influenced by their western education is ironic

given the influence of northern Biblical scholarship on her own work.

Masenya is part of a small, but growing group of African women Biblical scholars such as Theresa Okure (1989; 1992; 1993) and Musa Dube (1996a; 1996b; 1997; 1999), yet she gives little acknowledgement to the potential impact they *together* could have on African Biblical hermeneutics through mutual learning and discussion. Collaborative efforts lie at the heart of the work of the Circle throughout Africa (see section 6.3). Potentially, Masenya is in danger of isolating herself from other women theologians in Africa by her seeming unwillingness to choose as her main academic interlocutors indigenous African women scholars. This isolation from other Biblical scholars will diminish the potential of her contribution to African scholarship. Her lack of critical engagement with scholars doing similar work to her own, would also be a loss for the women's project in South Africa where an emphasis on cultural hermeneutics is so necessary at this time.

As a guest editor of an edition of the *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* on women's theology, I invited a cross-section of South African women to contribute to the volume (Haddad 1997). Not knowing how to give a name to the volume, I invited women to contribute to a discussion on "feminist/womanist" theology. Many responded with dis-ease at this invitation and argued that we needed to find a term that encompassed our "African-ness". In an open letter from the women students of the Moravian seminary, Heideveld, Cape Town, they rejected the term feminist theology which is a "western theology spearheaded by privileged white women" while at the same time they rejected the term "womanist theology" which is rooted in North America. "In South Africa we should coin our own terms as our situation is quite unique. Some of us suggested South African women's theology...an African women's theology which will bring back *ubuntu*..." (Moravian students 1997:4-5).

There is no doubt that the debate around terminology reflects the contentious nature of representation of women's theology in South Africa today. Questions of our African-ness are beginning to emerge as more African women get involved in public theological debate. So you find, as women meet in groups of the Circle, that the term "African women's theology", employed by women theologians in the rest of Africa, is increasingly being used by women

theologians of all races in South Africa. With opportunities in the academy opening up for women from economically disadvantaged communities, there is a small, but growing number of indigenous African women writing within the academy, who will continue to make a vital contribution to this dialogue (Lebaka-Ketshabile 1995; 1996; 1997; Mndende 1996; 1997; Plaatjie 1997; Sibeko 1997). However, as I continue to assert, the dialogue should not remain in the academy but rather engage women in the community who do not necessarily see themselves as “feminist” or as theologians.

Issues of solidarity and difference, the representation of poor and marginalised voices, and the naming of our theology are all aspects that are recognised as important to this study. Theoretical discussions on our “difference” as women needs to account for the voices of poor and marginalised women, as does the way we speak about our theology. In my work, the emphasis on the survival theologies of these women is an attempt to give expression to this commitment which, I believe, is necessary to a solidarity that accounts for all South African women in our theological project.

As I have engaged the women of Vulindlela in theological reflection, I have done so drawing on theological impulses from a number of sources. These sources include the works of South African theologians such as Ackermann, Landman, and Masenya, the theological work emanating out of the Circle in the rest of Africa, and the emphasis on the survival Biblical tradition of womanist theologian, Delores Williams. Each of the contributions from the three South African theologians are dealt with first. The focus of Ackermann’s contribution is on her “contextual liberating praxis”, while Landman’s “telling women’s stories” is discussed, and the interaction between cultural practices and the Biblical texts in Masenya’s work is highlighted. Thereafter I discuss the contribution of African women’s theology in their critique of patriarchy and their engagement with church women. Lastly, the theologising of survival by womanist Delores Williams is extrapolated into the survival experience of the Vulindlela women.

6.7 Contribution of Ackermann, Landman, and Masenya

6.7.1 Contextual liberating praxis

Having discussed how Ackermann's work raises issues of difference and solidarity (section 6.6.1), I now discuss aspects of her "contextual feminist theology of praxis" which is helpful to my own reflection. Ackermann (1996a:38) argues for the need to reclaim and reformulate the central idea of practical theology as "praxis". She suggests that feminist theology with its emphasis on action/reflection is eminently suited to do this.

A feminist theology of praxis which critically reflects on the active, participatory dimensions of women/marginalized and oppressed people's communicative praxis in the interests of justice, liberation and well-being also offers a self-critical corrective to feminist liberation theologies (Ackermann 1996a:38).

All of Ackermann's work expresses a need for passion and hope which must drive women back into political action against gender injustice. This has been inspirational to my work in the women's theological project as woman-priest and activist-intellectual. She has focused on specific issues facing women, one of which is violence against women. Ackermann (1987; 1996b; 1996d; 1997c) offers theological reflection on this issue which has not been done elsewhere in the South African women's theological project. From women's lived experience of oppression, Ackermann (1993a; 1996a; 1998) articulates her framework for a "contextual theology of liberating praxis". This framework has been helpful as I have attempted to understand my work with poor and marginalised women and its contribution to our theological project in South Africa.

Theologising, for Ackermann (1996a:43), requires a critical reflection arising out of an awareness of one's location in relation to the marginalised and oppressed. This critical reflection, fuelled by "moral outrage, anger and passion", must lead to committed action (Ackermann 1996a:43).

A critical and self-critical consciousness is realized by searching analysis of the social contradictions that shape both our personal and collective lives and a commitment to work for change" (Ackermann 1996a:43).

Ackermann (1996a:43) further argues that critical theory and feminist liberation theologies have in common a “utopian hope for a better world”. It is this envisaging a better world that sustains us in our fight against oppression (Ackermann 1996a:44). Critical theory from the social sciences has been useful to my own attempts to understand the theologies of poor and marginalised women as resistance (see Chapters 7 and 8). It is my commitment to actual work in poor and marginalised communities as woman-priest and activist-intellectual that has been sustained by this vision of a better world. Moral outrage, anger, and passion have often been strong driving forces. But my commitments have also been sustained through a growing understanding of the resistance practices of faith carried out by women who are the most marginalised in society. They have also challenged me to understand that my role as activist-intellectual is not as prominent as I previously thought (section 8.5.4).

A contextual theology of liberating praxis is not just “critical and committed”, it is also “constructive and collaborative” (Ackermann 1996a:44).

As a theologian with an avowed commitment to emancipatory praxis, I need to collaborate with women from different cultures, religious traditions and social locations in order to construct theological discourse which will be informed by the needs of those who experience discrimination and oppression (Ackermann 1996a:44).

This analysis resonates with the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1989) who speaks of communicative praxis as collaboration (section 5.5.5). Ackermann (1996a:44) sees this collaboration as drawing on stories and experiences of marginalised women, dialogue with other women scholars, and critical engagement with the social sciences. I have argued (section 5.5.5) that *collaboration* is more than this; it is *actual* work with poor and marginalised women through which the activist-intellectual is re-constituted. In one sense, Ackermann is correct; contextual theology is constructive in its collaborative efforts. For it is in this mutual *work* that theologies are constructed across race, class, and culture. This is precisely the task of this study.

For work to be mutual there needs to be accountability in relationships (Ackermann 1996a:44-45). This accountability implies “an acute awareness of injustice” as the lives of the marginalised are foregrounded, which in turn leads to a transformation in the way we activist-intellectuals practically live our lives (Ackermann 1996a:45). Accountability also brings responsibility as the activist-intellectual seeks to cross boundaries between poor and marginalised women and the wider liberatory networks of women in church and society (section 8.5.4). Accountability to the women of Vulindlela is crucial to our relationship. This mutual relationship has been strengthened as we have worked together, particularly in the Bible study group in Nxamalala (section 7.5). As our relationship has grown, so has my accountability to them and to our joint theological reflection as I re-present their voices in the women’s project.

As I alluded to at the beginning of this section, Ackermann asserts *passion* and *hope* as key to the struggle for liberation. These attributes act as a catalyst for human agency in the “mending of God’s creation” (Ackermann 1996a:46). My passion for justice, spurred on by a belief that we are able to transform our world, lies at the heart of my work. Women’s theologies are not merely theoretical constructs, they are frameworks that contribute to the transformation of unjust social structures. This task requires that we recognise human agency even when it is not that obvious. The working theologies of survival of the women of Vulindlela indicate that agency lies even with the oppressed. Sustained by a vision for a better world, we work collaboratively together to transform the struggle to survive. Ackermann’s insistence that our work within the women’s theological project is “contextual liberating praxis” continues to be a key marker as we chart the new terrain that is ours in post-apartheid South Africa.

6.7.2 Telling women’s stories

Women’s stories are an important methodological tool in this study (section 1.2). Christina Landman as a trained church historian has emphasised the telling of women’s stories as important to our theological work. Her focus on recovering women’s stories as a way of doing women’s theology resonates with a research area included by the Circle at their 1996 gathering in Nairobi (section 6.3). In recent work, Landman calls these stories “sacred” as

they include the “comfort [women] derived from being near to God” (1999b:3). A recent work of mine has attempted to tell the sacred stories of some women of Vulindlela, written specifically as a resource for the women and their immediate community (Haddad and Magubane 1999).

Landman is interested in the sacred stories of women “whose religiosity was hidden from us because the sources referring to them did not take women’s spirituality seriously”, as well as those stories that were written by women themselves about their experiences of God but often employed images “inherited from men who were trained in theology the European way” (199b:3-4). In the former case, these stories need to be reconstructed from contemporary sources that allude to religious practices of the day, while in the latter case there needs to be “a re-imagining of God and a renaming of women’s religious experiences on their behalf” (Landman 199b:4). For Landman, the telling of these sacred stories in this way brings about the “liberation of women from religious oppression and the restoration of religion as a liberative force” (1999b:4).

Landman’s (1999) methodology in telling sacred stories rests on what she terms the three pillars of suspicion, reconstruction, and renaming. In order for these stories to be liberative, there needs to be a suspicion of the primary sources, “both those written by others referring to women, and those written by women themselves” (Landman 1999b:4). Both these types of texts are suspected of reflecting the “conscious or unconscious use of religion to stereotype and disempower women” (Landman 1999b:4). Secondly, in reconstructing these stories,

...we shall liberate ourselves from oppressive forms of Christianity and reconstruct for ourselves a new tradition of local female spirituality - and thereby also a new future for living as religious women in this country (Landman 1999b:4).

Renaming the religious experience of women as positive is an important part of this process, and it is sacred stories that can be used as “intertexts to form new images” (Landman 1999b:5). Landman has used this methodology of suspicion, reconstruction, and renaming in her own work (1994; 1999a; 1999b) and has also encouraged others to do the same through

projects such as *Digging up our foremothers: stories of women in Africa* (Landman 1996b). This collection of women's stories is written by a cross-section of scholars from different academic disciplines and makes an important contribution to recovering, what she terms, the "muted" voices of women in Southern Africa.

To date, her most significant contribution has been the publication of *The piety of Afrikaans women: diaries of guilt* (Landman 1994). As an Afrikaner woman, she seeks to give voice to the spirituality of Afrikaner women and show its potential contribution to the women's theological project. To a certain extent, this project was motivated by a lack of inclusion of Afrikaner women's voices in the landmark publication, *Women hold up half the sky: women in the church in Southern Africa* (Landman 1997b:15). By analysing the "ego-texts", the diaries and letters, of seven Afrikaans speaking women born between 1768 and 1880, Landman (1994) argues that their piety was deeply influenced by Calvinism as defined by patriarchy. She argues that the spirituality of these women was driven by guilt fantasies which was a main feature of their relationship with God and with men. This guilt was directly related to the diminished role they were expected to play in society. Through a series of analytical stories of a number of women, she concludes:

By experiencing themselves as the religious guilty, they believed themselves wanted by God, and so overcame the isolation and loneliness of the female subculture (Landman 1994:1).

The final story in the book is that of Marie du Toit who, in 1921, published a book *Vrou en feminist, of iets oor die vrouevraagstuk* (Woman and feminist, or something on the women's issue). Landman (1994:109) refers to her as "the first muted Afrikaans feminist". Du Toit's story reveals that she was a lone voice in the Afrikaans community pleading for women's suffrage, the subject of the book (Landman 1994:111). Landman (1994:115) skilfully uses du Toit's arguments to lead into her own convictions that Afrikaans women, even today, need to recognise their potential role in all aspects of society. Through the historio-theological analysis of Afrikaans women's diaries, she has helped to recover voices that would otherwise not have been heard.

The publication of *The piety of Afrikaans women* evoked vociferous response, particularly

within the Afrikaner community. Landman undeterred, stood her ground and made her reply (Landman 1995a). This history, as Kretzschmar and Cuthbertson (1996:293) argue, is a story of white people that distinguishes between a “nationalist” God of the political ambitions of Afrikaner men, and the God prayed to in “private” by the women. As one critic suggested, this dichotomous thinking potentially absolves Afrikaner women from complicity in apartheid which was based on the Afrikaner God of nationalism (Kretzschmar and Cuthbertson 1996:294). Landman (1995b) does not directly address this issue in her response which is unfortunate, as it has wider theoretical implications for the work of storytelling. Implicit in this critique is an acknowledgement that even “reconstructed” stories with an explicitly liberative agenda are never innocent. Sacred stories must take into account all socio-economic and political factors that have given rise to their narration. Landman, in stressing suspicion, reconstruction, and renaming as important critical tools, fails to foreground the subjectivity of the storyteller in this process. Because of this, the hermeneutic of suspicion can in turn be applied to her “reconstructed stories”. Hence the stress on foregrounding subjectivity and representation in my own work.

Furthermore, Landman’s methodology suggests that recovering muted voices is enough for a liberative agenda. In my study, while stressing the importance of story as a methodological tool, I have also indicated that “telling stories” is not enough. The work that we do as activist-intellectuals must contribute to the transformation of social structures and the process of telling stories must be directly linked to this larger strategic agenda. Women’s stories, in and of themselves, do not necessarily lead to the liberation from oppression.

6.7.3 Cultural practices and the Bible

Having discussed and critiqued Masenya’s *bosadi* approach to theology, I turn in this section show how she relates cultural practices to Biblical texts. My work within the Bible study group in Vulindlela is committed to the same task (see section 7.5). Masenya, as an indigenous African woman and a Biblical scholar, makes an important contribution to this dialogue in South Africa.

Employing a cultural hermeneutic to the Biblical text, Masenya argues that the *bosadi* approach acknowledges the resemblances between the Israelite world-view and the African

world-view (Masenya 1997b:445; 1998a:278). Texts that offer these resemblances need to be “harnessed and re-interpreted” (Masenya 1997a:16). She argues that the Bible, or at least the Old Testament, far from alienating people from African culture, actually speaks to the African cultural context (Masenya 1997a:16). Both the contexts of the reader and that of the Bible are taken into account in a *bosadi* reading (Masenya (1997b:446). In highlighting the context of the reader, the “faith element in the life of an African woman in her encounter with the Bible” is emphasised (Masenya 1997a:16). The Bible, asserts Masenya, is experienced by African women, not simply as a scholarly book to be critiqued, but as a “life-transforming book” (Masenya 1997a:16). It is thus important to seek out Biblical texts that resonate with the life experience of African women. This conviction is expressed in her seminal work on the reading of Proverbs 31:10-31 (Masenya 1996). Here, Masenya seeks to address ways in which the liberating images of the woman depicted in this text resonate with her own experience as a Northern Sotho woman, and those aspects which might be similar but are oppressive and need to be re-interpreted. Masenya (1997a; 1998a) has since stressed the need to engage texts which refer to foreigners and those outside of the “chosen people of Israel”. She observes that African South African women have been marked by “foreignness” in South African history as the most oppressed of all groups (Masenya 1998a:278). This concern is practically expressed in her writings on Biblical texts that focus on the relationships between women from different backgrounds such as Ruth and Naomi, and Hagar and Sarah (Masenya 1998a; 1998b).

In engaging the Biblical text through a cultural lens, Masenya is helpfully placing African cultural issues facing women on the theological agenda of women scholars and African theologians in South Africa. In her study on Proverbs 31:10-31 she raises a number of cultural issues facing women, particularly those who are married (Masenya 1996). She identifies in this text positive images of women such as mother, wife, managers of the household, and counsellor (Masenya 1996:111-120). In making this text relevant to Northern Sotho culture, she shows through analysing indigenous proverbs that these same positive images are present, but so are negative images such as women being quarrelsome, cowards, and are not capable of leadership (Masenya 1996:163-181). In putting forward a *bosadi* hermeneutic, Masenya then draws on the positive images and re-interprets the negative ones within African culture (Masenya 1996:182-204).

In dealing with the story of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis 16, Masenya (1998a:280) adopts a similar methodology and emphasises the textual themes of economic power, surrogate motherhood, and foreignness. The differing economic power relations between Hagar and Sarah are paralleled with those that exist between white and black women in the South African situation (Masenya 1998a:282). Unlike womanist theologian Delores Williams (1993) whose treatment of surrogate motherhood in this text focuses on the relationship between black slaves in domestic households caring for white children, Masenya (1998a:284-285) emphasises the cultural practice of the provision of a substitute wife in cases of barrenness.¹² She explains how the practice operates within her community and shows that in cultures where children are highly valued, surrogate motherhood serves to reduce the “shame” of the barren woman (Masenya 1998a:285). Through the actions of the surrogate mother, the barren woman experiences *buntu* [humaness] (Masenya 1998a:285). Finally, Masenya (1998a:285) argues that Hagar as a foreign woman represents the Northern Sotho woman who, like Hagar, is also not part of “the chosen race”.

The story of Ruth and Naomi in Masenya’s (1998b) reading of the text focuses on the cultural expectations of the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. She shows the similarities that exist between the Biblical story and the lived reality of Northern Sotho women (Masenya 1998b:88). While problematising some of the patterns that exist in this cultural relationship such as the shared commitment to continue the male family line, she suggests that scholars, including feminist scholars, should “first try to understand the text in its own context” (Masenya 1998b:89). For within this story are important positive aspects about the relationship between these two women. “Though we may not rule out the patriarchal orientation of the story, we must not underestimate the power of female discourse within it” (Masenya 1998b:90).

The relationship of Naomi and Ruth, as it is presented in the book of Ruth, is an example of female love, mutual respect and bonding, and models how

¹² In sections 6.9, I deal in more depth with the Delores Williams’ analysis of this text and my interpretation of the implications for the women of Vulindlela.

women, particularly mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, should behave, especially in an African-South African context (Masenya 1998b:90).

Masenya (1998b:81) argues that in the Northern Sotho context, relationships between brides and their mothers-in-law are often conflictual, requiring healing and restoration. Hence the importance, as Masenya suggests, of reading this text as a social critique of cultural practice. My work too is committed to allowing the resonances between the Biblical text and cultural practices to become clear. Bible study discussions with Vulindlela women have often foregrounded these resonances in ways that my own subject location prevented me from knowing. This group of women confirmed that in Zulu culture, relationships between young women and their mothers-in-law are difficult and can be oppressive. The following accounts illustrate this reality:

Manje kuye kwenzeka kanje mhlawumbe uma abafana mhlawumbe bebabili umamazala mhlawumbe athande lo omncane lona omunye angamthandi. Umakoti akubone loko ukuthi umama akangithandi mina uthanda lona omncane, bese kuba khona ukungezwani ke naye abone umakoti ukuthi umama akangithandi. Kwesinye isikhathi ke kube ngumakoti ongamthandi umama athande owakhe omzalayo angamthandi lona ozala indoda. Yizinto ezenzekayo ke impela lezo siyazibona.

It happens sometimes that she has two sons, and a mother-in-law is fond of the younger *makoti* more than the other one. When that *makoti* realises that mother-in-law doesn't love her, instead she loves the younger one, then the conflict develops. Sometimes it is the *makoti* who does not love the mother-in-law, instead she would love her own mother not the husband's mother. We often see such things happening (Chiki Ngcongco, 21 October 1999, Nxamalala).

Kuba ngcono uma ungahlali naye ngoba uma uhlala naye impela hayi. Hayi, mina ngashada ngimncane kakhulu okuningi okwakwenzeka sesiye sikhuleke manje nomkhwenyane wami ngimbuze ngithi, "uyakhumbula ngiseyisilima

ngifika lapha kini?”... Athi angimkhumbuze ngithi nje kukhona into nje umama ayethi angiyenze nje engiyibonayo ukuthi nje ukuba kwakuyimanje ngangengeke ngize ngivume.

It is better if you do not stay together, because if you stay together.. No. I got married when I was still very young, now we sometimes laugh when we remember some of the things that used to happen. I would remind my husband and say, “do you remember when I was first came here when I was still a fool”? [laughing]... He would ask me to remind him and I would remind him of the things that my mother-in-law ordered me to do. Something that when I look at it, I feel that I would not do it today (Thandiwe Mdluli, 21 October 1999, Nxamalala).

Uhambe uye kotheza utheza phi eFamu, ubuye ukhathele ulambile. Usathi uhleli nje kancane usaphumula athi unkosikazi hawu ngokutheza nje ususebenze umsebenzi wokushona ilanga usho awukhathele akuvumi ngisho wenzeni. Kusasa futhi kufuneka uphindele khona kotheza, avele aphume aziqobele eziko zonke, kusasa uya khona futhi. Uzothi umuzwa abe ethetha ethi uyabona lezizinkuni zakho ngeke ziliqede isonto lezizinkuni uxakeke ukuthi pho manje mina ngizoyithathaphi iloli engizoligwalisa kuze kube nguMgqibelo neSonto.

You go to fetch firewood in the forests at Cedara and when you come back you are tired. Just as you are resting for awhile a woman would say, “just by going to fetch some wood you have done the work of the day”? Tomorrow again you go back to fetch some wood, she would just take all the wood that you have been carrying and put it on fire one time. The following day you have to go back to the forest. Then you would often hear her saying that this wood will not last for the week, then you wonder how she thinks you will get a lorry to fill it up with wood that will last till Saturday and Sunday (Themban Khoza, 21 October 1999, Nxamalala).

While drawing on the impulses of Masenya's work, methodologically we work differently. Masenya uses her location as an indigenous woman and a Biblical scholar to give *the bosadi* reading of texts. I would want to emphasise the role of poor and marginalised women in the *actual* reading and draw on their reflections of their life experience as they resonate with the Biblical text. My work with the women of Vulindlela suggests that there are many readings of the Ruth-Naomi story from an indigenous African woman's perspective. This study seeks to give a more nuanced analysis of the fracturedness of indigenous women and the way in which they theologise. For this reason, I find a notion such as "survival", a common experience, more useful than Masenya's cultural designation in speaking about the theologies of poor and marginalised women in South Africa.

As Masenya's work has shown, culture has an important role in our project. The work of the Circle has indicated this as well. It is, however, African women theologian's critique of patriarchy and their insistence on the engagement of church women that has been especially helpful to my reflection. It is to these two impulses in their work that I now turn.

6.8 Contribution of African women's theology

6.8.1 Patriarchy and African culture

Culture is crucial to the lived experience of African women, and so is patriarchy. African women's theology is done "in a context of a living and dynamic culture that is imbued through and through with traditional religious symbols, beliefs, rites and rituals, a whole world-view that we drink with our mother's milk and breathe till death" (Oduyoye 1998:360). As a "protest theology", the purpose of African women's theology is to "seek, find, examine, and expose the historical and cultural aspects that are the roots of belief systems that continue to dehumanize women" (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 1992:4). Hinga (1996:37) argues that one of the reasons members of the Circle chose to name their theology "African women's theology" was to counter the patriarchal forces that always assume that the women's voice is included in that of men. Culture is not above critique and patriarchy as expressed in African culture is crucial to their debate. It is this cultural critique of patriarchy emanating from the theological reflection of the Circle, and extensively discussed by Mercy

Oduyoye (1995), that has been one of their important contributions to my work with the women of Vulindlela.

Cultural critique however, argues Kanyoro (1995:21, 23), is contested terrain.¹³ Solidarity amongst African women regarding criticism of culture is not easily attained as it is not easy to resist African patriarchy while at the same time affirming the culture in which it is embedded.¹⁴ Furthermore, many African women theologians wish to actively seek to draw men into the process of bringing about change (Kanyoro 1995:23). Teresa Okure (1993) holds this position and argues that both men and women should be incorporated in the process of finding new inclusive meanings from the Biblical text. She asserts that African women's theology differs from western feminist approaches to Biblical interpretation precisely because these western approaches exclude the possibility of men "being able to offer a valid interpretation of scripture as it relates to women" (Okure 1993:77). Arguing that because African women are committed to a new humanity, and that the Bible is "fundamentally a community book", re-reading the Bible contextually in the African context necessitates both men and women being involved in the process (Okure 1993:78). Furthermore, "the comprehensive framework for doing theology is the survival of the people's of the continent. Life problems on the continent of Africa are rooted not only in gender but also in race and class" (Okure 1993:78). Men and women are both victims, argues Okure. Emphasising African women's need to sustain the reconciliation of all of humanity there is therefore a desire "to carry men along with them in their search for a liberating and life-giving theology" (Okure 1993:78). This, she suggests, is in keeping with traditional African contexts where "fully human undertakings are done conjointly by men and women" (Okure 1993:78).¹⁵

¹³ Some African women, such as Masenya, argue that they find personal empowerment from traditional practices. This is also illustrated in the discussion around the reintroduction of virginity testing of young girls discussed in section 3.5.

¹⁴ Masenya's *bosadi* approach was critiqued by other African women during a panel discussion on women's readings of the Bible from Asia, Africa, and Latin America at the American Academy of Religion in 1995. Her approach was seen to not include a sufficient cultural critique, as well as her strong emphasis on the "married woman", it was argued, excluded a large sector of indigenous women who are single parents.

¹⁵ The debate on the extent to which African American male scholars should be included in dialogue and debate is also prevalent within womanist circles. It has recently come to the fore in debates on "Afrocentrism" (Sanders 1995; Douglas and Sanders 1995). Some like Williams (1995a) argue that

Okure (1993), in wanting to assert an inclusive methodology, appears uncritical of the patriarchal elements that exist in African theology. She does not engage directly other scholars such as Oduyoye (1995; 1998) and Phiri (1997b) for whom patriarchy is a key element of their work. While recognising the need to be in continuity with African theology, they are also critical of male African theologians in the church and academy for contributing to the silencing of the women's voice and for their complicity in women's oppression.

Oduyoye (1995) is unequivocal in her rejection of African patriarchy. She asserts that it is often argued that African religions and cultures "afford adequate and requisite participation for women", but this is not borne out in the experience of women in Africa (Oduyoye 1995:12). "[B]y the time a woman has spent her energies struggling to be heard, she has barely the energy left to say what she wanted to say" (Oduyoye 1995:12-13). African men often claim that their continent does not need "women's liberation" suggesting that "our women are not oppressed" (Oduyoye 1995:13). Instead, women are called to "be African". This call with its strong connotations of submissiveness, is "seeking to render feminism a non-issue for Africa" (Oduyoye 1995:13).

Oduyoye (1995) critiques patriarchy through a series of cyclical narratives that address how women are viewed in the cultures of the Akan of southern Ghana and the Yoruba of southern Nigeria. In focusing on language as important discourse in the first narrative cycle she analyses myths, folktales, and proverbs of these cultures as both liberating and oppressive to both men and women (Oduyoye 1995:19-76). Liberating aspects need to be affirmed and oppressive aspects re-interpreted from a women's perspective. Myths often emphasise mutuality and reciprocity in relationships with a stress on women's involvement in areas such as divination and political life (Oduyoye 1995:35). Having been excluded from these areas of public life, African women can appeal to these cultural images that are so highly regarded in society (Oduyoye 1995:35). In Akan and Yoruba folktales gender roles are circumscribed and often ascribe negative traits to women. Oduyoye (1995:54) argues that these tales are

Afrocentrism in womanist theology embraces African patriarchy too uncritically, while others such as Douglas (1995) are more sympathetic to dialogue and inclusion of their male counterparts.

part of a male history that women need to re-read in an attempt to find “God-stories”. As with folktales, proverbs teach men and women what is appropriate behaviour and to “steer clear of inappropriate roles” (Oduyoye 1995:61). Generally, Oduyoye (1995:62) asserts, gendered socialisation through these myths, folktales, and proverbs has operated against women in Africa. Women, however, “have set out on a journey to call society back to its divine origin and back to the dignity of the human person” (Oduyoye 1995:76).

In the second cyclical narrative, Oduyoye (1995:79-153) shows how women are living up to this “folktalk”. The areas of culture, religion, and marriage are examined. In analysing culture, Oduyoye (1995:80) critiques its negative impact on women. She also shows how colonial policies add to their burdens (Oduyoye 1995:104). Culture is not static. The positive impact of modernity on Africa, Oduyoye (1995:106) argues, does not touch women who are losing out in the process (see Chapter 4). Despite the fluidity of cultural practice as a result of increasing modernisation, men expect women to continue performing their traditional roles.

Faced with the increasing social pressure on women to return to tradition, it is of the utmost importance that women join together to define what tradition they are being asked to return to, and whether it is advisable for women to *return* while men *move on* into the twenty-first century (Oduyoye 1995:108).

As with culture, religion is an important arena where women are circumscribed by “folktalk”. The “maleness” of God is not an issue in traditional religions as is the case in Christianity, because by and large the ways of talking about God in indigenous languages are gender neutral (Oduyoye 1995:110-111). However, divinities in traditional religions are expressed in gender terms (Oduyoye 1995:111). In theory both men and women are free to consult these divinities through priests and priestesses which attend the shrines. In practice, while there are women who are priests and healers, the majority are men (Oduyoye 1995:120). Within African Independent Churches, women do play a more prominent role but are curtailed by oppressive cultural practices which circumscribe the freedom with which they perform their tasks (Oduyoye 1995:130). Oduyoye (1995:130) concludes that while women are given access to divinities, this access is always under the directorship of men.

Issues of marriage, the home, and child-bearing are central to African “folktalk”. In discussing these practices as prescribed by cultural norms, Oduyoye (1995:151) observes that there is much that is benevolent and humanitarian in their ethos. Men are made to feel responsible for the provision of women. Nonetheless, the ramifications of these practices are often oppressive, curtailing women’s land and inheritance rights (Oduyoye 1995:151). In fact, “traditional norms are enforced whenever they serve to silence women, reduce or eliminate their voices” (Oduyoye 1995:151). This silencing has been reinforced through western style patriarchal government structures that have been formed throughout Africa, with foundational laws being laid without the participation of women (Oduyoye 1995:151-152).

In the third and final narrative cycle, Oduyoye (1995:157-208) “dreams” of what women have become and what women want to be. She argues that the first step is for African women to break the silence of their unjust treatment (Oduyoye 1995:170). For African women to be treated justly, their concerns and questions must be taken seriously (Oduyoye 1995:171). The church needs to be called to account in this task (Oduyoye 1995:172). Christianity did not bring liberation to African women, rather it attempted to create them in the image of European, middle-class housewives (Oduyoye 1995:175; see section 7.3.2). For Oduyoye (1995:175), the way in which the Bible has been interpreted in Africa has had the effect of marginalising women further. While the Christian heritage of Biblical prophetic denunciations of oppression has had a part to play in the history of Africa, “oppressive strands of the same Bible do reinforce the traditional socio-oppression of women” (Oduyoye 1995:175-176).

It is painful to observe African women whose female ancestors were dynamically involved in every aspect of human life define themselves now in terms of irrelevance and impotence. This distorts the essence of African womanhood. Yet, it is generally admitted that the large dose of Christianity that has been part of the socio-cultural Westernization of Africa, especially in terms of women’s education, vocations, and the interpretation of marriage, has orientated women to accept the meaning of helper as subordinate (Oduyoye

1995:175).

Even African theologians working within a liberation paradigm have accounted for race and class but have largely ignored gender (Oduyoye 1995:180-181). The credibility of the church in Africa is at stake. Women need to be brought into decision making structures that effect the operation of the church, and this includes “the forming of its theology” (Oduyoye 1995:181). Patriarchy needs to be eradicated in all its forms, so that together women and men can truly experience a liberating humanity.

In my work as a South African African woman working within an indigenous community, Oduyoye offers me ways of speaking about the patriarchal oppression of the women of Vulindlela. Her work is an important resource in our context. Critiquing patriarchy from a cultural perspective is crucial to the women’s theological project in South Africa. Unfortunately in the past, this critique was, more often than not, carried out by white women. No longer can our project run the risk of being seen to be controlled by women influenced by western scholarship. The time has come for indigenous African women to embark on the necessary theological reflection on culture and patriarchy and its impact on the lives of women. This is vital to debate in which there is a growing emphasis on culture as a defining feature of theology in South Africa.

6.8.2 Engaging women in the church

Perhaps the greatest contribution to South African women’s theology has been the Circle’s commitment to establishing a network of theologians across the continent of Africa which overtly seeks to draw in women from the church. Oduyoye (1998:360) argues that the Circle’s emphasis is on theoretical reflection on lived experience. All women are theologians, not just those in seminaries, universities and colleges (Oduyoye 1998:360). Elizabeth Amoah (1995) agrees with Oduyoye and suggests:

African women who are not formally educated express their theology in the spontaneous, poetic lyrics, songs, prayers which are an ordinary part of their everyday lives. In the African instituted churches, women freely involve themselves in preaching, prophesying, healing and counselling. At a more

formal level one can cite examples of women who are Sunday school teachers and guidance counsellors for children in the churches. All these activities involve genuine theologizing by women; that is, they involve reflections on and conceptions of God in their daily lives and needs and in the church (Amoah 1995:1).

As Oduyoye (1998:365) points out, “Church women of Africa, are enthusiastic students of the Bible”. Because this is so, there is a foundation “for developing among them a conscious theological statement of the faith by which they live” (Oduyoye 1998:365). My work with church women in Vulindlela acknowledges the important role the Bible plays in their lives. Through contextual Bible study work¹⁶ I seek to provide the opportunity for women to find liberating strands in the Bible that resonate with their lives of struggle. Our work together attempts to develop a conscious theological statement of the faith by which they live. I have argued in this study that they live by “survival theologies”.

Many of the Circle theologians are pastors and so much theologising goes within the context of the church. Yet, there has been a recognition that academic women remain orientated towards their institutions rather than towards “ordinary women struggling to survive” (Amoah 1995:7). Amoah (1995:7) argues that it is issues arising out of contemporary social and economic problems facing Africa, with women and children bearing the resultant poverty and death, that need to be opened up more in women’s theological discussion. Hinga (1996) poses a similar challenge. She asserts that with the formation of the Circle, there was a commitment to create theology(ies) that are not just *about* women but also *of* women (Hinga 1996:41). It is crucial that women in the academy “make consistent efforts” to include the experiences of the majority of women who are in “daily struggles of survival” (Hinga 1996:42). “The enduring challenge is for women theologians to resist privileging experiences of elite women as normative for theology” (Hinga 1996:42). Unless experiences of women not in the academy are drawn into theological reflection, the danger of speaking on their behalf will continue to exist. These concerns are also a major challenge currently facing women theologians in South Africa (see section 6.6.2). The impulse to recognise the process

¹⁶ I will explain this method more fully in the next chapter.

of theologising in the daily activities of faith of marginalised women strongly resonates with my work and is consistent with what I assume to be crucial to the emerging agenda of the South African women's theological project.

Hinga (1996:42), with Amoah, further suggests that while it is legitimate to focus on a critique of religion and culture, the equally urgent issues of survival that women are facing need to be remembered.

For African feminist theology to avoid the danger of reification, it has to be consistently engaged with issues of women's empowerment and economic justice, issues that are at the root of many of the problems African women continue to endure. Since African women's theology is committed to play an advocacy role on behalf of women, it is challenged to persist in seeking practical solutions to the many problems women face. Such visible and unwavering engagement with issues of women's survival will be a significant measure of the continued credibility of feminist theology as it evolves on the continent (Hinga 1996:42-43).

This study as it seeks to intersect the disciplines of gender and development, feminist theory, and women's theology is arguing this precise point. In constructing my role as an activist-intellectual in my actual work as a priest, I seek to integrate liberating action that leads to social transformation with theological reflection. Survival is the pivot of this intersection. In the next section, I outline the contribution womanist theologian Delores Williams (1993) makes to this study because of her emphasis on "survival" as a way of theologising the faith experience of African American women. Her work has an important contribution to make to my own reflection on the survival theologies of the Vulindlela women.

6.9 Contribution of womanist survival theology

6.9.1 Womanist connections

Womanist theology has been a source of inspiration to black women in South Africa since the

1980s. The fractured nature of the women's theological project in the United States has many resonances with the division in South African (section 6.4). White feminist women initially defined the nature of their project and were criticised by African American women for assuming to speak on their behalf (Lorde 1984). It was at this time that African American women rejected the term "feminist" in naming themselves in favour of being called "womanist" as defined by Alice Walker (1983) (see section 6.6.3). African American women theologians followed suit and began to name their theology "womanist" (Douglas and Sanders 1995). For a while in the 1980s black South African women followed this terminology because of the similarity of the racialised experience of African American women and black South African women (section 6.6.3).

Early womanist writings theorised around issues of ethics (Cannon 1988) and Christology (Grant 1989). The African American experience of slavery deeply shapes womanist theological reflections and key women during this antebellum period such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, continue to be a source of inspiration (Kirk-Duggan 1997; Martin 2000; Townes 1995; 1997). Another source of inspiration are early twentieth century writings of African American women such as Zora Neale Hurston (Cannon 1988; 1995). Womanist theologians have consistently insisted on the need to theologise out of their particular experience of racism in the United States from the period of slavery, through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, to today (Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher 1997). The 1990s has seen the publication of a growing body of literature that explore further the earlier themes of ethics (Sanders 1993; Townes 1993) and Christology (Grant 1993; Terrell 1998; Townes 1997) and also new areas such as gender discrimination in the black church (Sanders 1995) and issues of sexuality (Hill 1993; Douglas 1999).

Because of the immediate parallels between the African American context and that of black women in South Africa, this body of work is a crucial resource for our own theorising. The focus of this section is limited to the study by Delores Williams (1993) on the survival experience of African American women. Because the notion of survival is the pivot of this study, Williams' theological reflection on survival has immediate relevance to my work.

6.9.2 The Biblical survival tradition

Delores Williams (1993) employs the notion of a hermeneutic of “survival/quality of life” in her study *Sisters in the wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk*. In attempting to understand the faith experience of African American women, Williams (1993) has used the prototype of Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16). In re-reading this story with Hagar at the centre, it becomes obvious this slave women’s story “is and unavoidably has been shaped by the problems and desires of her owners” (Williams 1993:15). Hagar’s story contains within it themes such as poverty, slavery, ethnicity, sexual exploitation, exile, and encounter with God, all of which resonate with the experiences of African American women. These experiences make up the African American women’s struggle for survival and life and the story of Hagar enables an understanding how God helps these women make a way out of what they thought was no way (Williams 1993:108).

In the Genesis text, Hagar is introduced as the property of a wealthy slave-owning Hebrew family, Sarai and Abram (Williams 1993:15). Barrenness for Sarai, a woman in the Ancient Near East, would mean lost status. Hagar is forced to bear a child on behalf of Sarai as was permitted by law. She is thus coerced into motherhood and her body, over which she as a slave has no control, is violated. “Through the lens of motherhood we see the struggle between power and powerlessness in human relationships disrupt peace in a family unit, breed enmity between women and send a poverty-stricken female slave (Hagar) scurrying into the wilderness” (Williams 1993:16-17). The notion of a wilderness, a desert place, conjures up a picture of desolation, isolation, and hardship. This is Hagar’s context when she encounters God. She is pregnant and homeless and in the wilderness, choosing this course rather experience more abuse at the hands of Sarai. Hagar, the surrogate mother, flees to the wilderness and in so doing is depriving Sarai the opportunity of the motherhood she planned and longed for (Williams 1993:19). No heir to Abram’s inheritance signals the possible extinction of the family line. But there are implications for Hagar as well.

Just as the welfare of Abram’s family is insecure at this point, so is Hagar insecure. She has run off into the wilderness as a lone woman without family support or protection. Courageous though her liberation action may be, Hagar is without the support and physical sustenance a pregnant woman needs

(Williams 1993:20).

It is here in the wilderness, Williams (1993:20) argues, that issues of survival and quality of life come to the fore in Hagar's story. For a moment it appears that Hagar is in control of her destiny and seems to be trying to make her way back to Egypt (Williams 1993:20). But God has other plans for her that will "ensure her survival and the quality of life she must form and endure for several years" (Williams 1993:20). Having encountered God, Hagar declares that she is running away from her mistress Sarai (Genesis 16:8b). As Williams (1993:21) points out, in what appears to be God's support of slavery she is encouraged to go back to her situation of slavery and to submit to Sarai (Genesis 16:9).

Other Biblical scholars (Tamez 1986; Tribble 1984) have argued for a liberatory strand in Hagar's encounter with God in the wilderness. In an attempt to foreground a liberationist thread in the story, Elsa Tamez concludes that God let Sarah continue her oppressive acts against Hagar "because he had other plans for Hagar, a better future than in the house of Abraham" (1986:11). Williams (1993:198) counters this position, suggesting that Tamez is stretching the text as there is nothing in her story to suggest a better future. Life for Hagar is even more precarious and vulnerable than ever before. For Williams there is no clear liberation thread in Hagar's story. What is clear is God's promise of survival.

Hagar is given a promise that her descendants that "will be too numerous to be counted" (Genesis 16:10). The birth announcement of a son to be named Ishmael (God hears) includes the prediction that his life will not be peaceful as he "lives at odds with all his kin" (Genesis 16:11-12). But he will be free and a warrior and "will be able to create and protect the quality of life he and his mother, Hagar, will later develop in the desert" (Williams 1993:22). To Hagar, the promise of descendants assured survival while the birth announcement "forecasts the strategy that will be necessary for survival and obtaining a quality of life" (1993:22). When Hagar is finally expelled from Abraham's¹⁷ household (Genesis 21) and is wandering around in the desert with Ishmael and without food and water, God opens her eyes

¹⁷ As Williams (1993:247) notes, in Genesis 16 the name of the slave owners are Sarai and Abram. God changes their names to Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 17. Hence the use of the name Abraham in this Genesis 21 account.

and she sees a well of water that she had not seen before. Hagar in her moment of desperation is not provided with liberation, but with survival resources: a well of water. Williams thus concludes that Hagar's story is part of a survival tradition rather than a liberation tradition in the Biblical text:

...promise and covenant in the Hebrew Testament contain God's assurance of survival for persons through their posterity. When Yahweh gives promise and covenant with Abram, survival is promised as well as economic resources (land) to sustain survival. (Survival meaning survival of one's family line.) Also associated with promise and covenant are intimations toward quality of life often involving transforming identity (Abram and Sarai's names are changed to Abraham and Sarah) or defining it (as in Ishmael's...birth announcement). Once the promise is given or the covenant is sealed, quality of life - mindful of the promise or covenant - involves the human search for, use and/or creation of economic, political, educational and spiritual resources for well-being. It seems that this connection among promise, covenant, survival and quality of life runs through both the Hebrew and Christian testaments. Therefore, it may be possible to identify a survival tradition in the scripture, just as one can identify a liberation and a prophetic tradition (Williams 1993:249).¹⁸

6.9.3 Survival and African American women

It is this survival tradition in the Biblical text that characterises the experiences of African American women, argues Williams (1993). "Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side" (Williams 1993:33). Hagar thus acts as a symbol and a model for African American women,

¹⁸ Williams (1993:249) suggests that the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites might also provide narratives for this survival tradition.

representing their social and political situation. Their context is the wilderness, the wide, hostile world where, like Hagar, African-American women face a near death situation everyday. The economic and political realities of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment force these women to search, to find a fresh vision. Like Hagar discovering the well, African American women need to search for new survival resources.

Williams (1993) identifies four key areas arising out of Hagar's story that resonate with the experience of African American women: motherhood, surrogacy, racism, and the wilderness experience. These aspects of the lives of African American women have forced them to search for new survival resources, and to "make a way out of no way" (Williams 1993:108). I focus on each of these four areas in this section, with the intention discussing in the next section the relevance of Hagar as a symbol and sign for the women of Vulindlela.

Motherhood is a key theme in discussion on the lives of African American women. As Williams (1993:34-59) argues, motherhood came to represent and be represented in a variety of images from the period of slavery to freedom. The motherhood debate as discussed in the South African context (section 5.4.5), is mirrored in the United States. African American scholars such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have argued similarly that while motherhood is often seen by white feminists as oppressive, for black women it is the key to their sense of dignity and worth.¹⁹ Collins suggests that black motherhood is negatively portrayed in images that reflect the "happy slave", the white-male-created "matriarch", and the black-male-created "superstrong Black mother" (2000:176). She argues that African American women need to debunk these images with a feminist analysis and motherhood needs to be "invoked as a symbol of power" in the community (Collins 2000:192). hooks (1984) points out that the context of the home has been where, for black women, "humanising" work takes place "that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care..." (1984:133). It is work outside the home that is dehumanising for black women.

¹⁹ In fact, Collins (2000) uses the work of South African Julia Wells discussed in section 5.4.5 to refute the way "motherist" politics is circumscribed by white feminists. Her argument is almost identical to what was being argued in the South African context by black women.

It is for similar reasons that Williams (1993:56-57) argues that motherhood has positive connotations for the spirituality of African American women. Locating motherhood within the survival Biblical tradition, Williams has suggested that even black male scholars have not taken seriously “the intensity of the black mother’s commitment to the survival of her children and her willingness to do what is necessary (including being a mammy, a domestic or stealing food from the white folks) to maintain the life of her offspring” (1993:51). It is this commitment to survival through a faith in God that African American women in their nurturer, care-giver and provider roles ensure the survival of future generations, while at the same time find dignity and worth for themselves and give hope to others (Williams 1993:57).

Closely linked to the theme of motherhood in the story of Hagar is that of surrogacy. African American women too have been forced into social roles of surrogacy through having to nurture the children of white slave masters and other colonial rulers. Even after slavery was abolished, “voluntary surrogacy” continued as a result of the poverty that existed within the African American community (Williams 1993:61). This kept large numbers of African American women in domestic service, looking after white women’s children. While motherhood has had positive connotations, surrogacy on the other hand has been a negative force, as it has kept African American women in the service of other people’s lives (Williams 1993:81).

The third area of resonance between the story of Hagar, and that of African American women, is that of racism. Williams (1993:85) acknowledges that the Biblical text does not directly indicate the extent to which her skin colour played a part in her exploitation as a slave. However, Williams (1993:85) asserts, there is enough suggestive evidence to conclude that ethnicity played a role in the unequal relationship between the two women, Hagar and Sarah. She argues that in the United States, Africa has been, and still is being, depicted as the “dark, uncivilized continent, inhabited by savages”. This has resulted in a disdain for black culture and led to extreme racism throughout society (section 5.3.1). Religion, suggests Williams (1993:91), has not been innocent in reinforcing racism. White interpretations of the Biblical text have “fed into this debasement of blackness and black people” (Williams 1993:91). Redeeming the Biblical Hagar as a symbol and a sign that brings together the sacred and the secular, as well as recovering the survival tradition within the Biblical text, are

important aspects for the theologies of African American women.

While motherhood, surrogacy, and racism are all points of connection, it is, however, the theme of the religious experience in the wilderness that links Hagar with African American women most securely (Williams 1993:108).

For many black Christian women today, “wilderness” or “wilderness-experience” is a symbolic term used to represent a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her to make a way out of what she thought was no way (Williams 1993:108).

The result of the hard times in the “wilderness experience” is “risk-taking faith” (Williams 1993:109). This has involved courageous acts throughout the fight for the abolishment of slavery and through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Together with Hagar, African American women have been “sisters in the wilderness struggling for life and by the help of their God coming to terms with situations that have destructive potential” (Williams 1993:109).

During the antebellum period, for the slave, the wilderness had positive connotations as a place “conducive to uplifting the spirit and to strengthening religious life” (Williams 1993:113); a place where spiritual and religious identity was forged as a Christian. Even though it was a place of struggle, once the experience was over, the emotional and spiritual results were invigorating (Williams 1993:113). In the postbellum period, the notion of wilderness came to symbolise the black community’s negative economic experience of poverty and social displacement (Williams 1993:119). It was a hostile place where black women needed to go and seek a living for their families.

This postbellum African-American symbolic sense of the wilderness, with Hagar at its center, makes the female figure symbolic of the entire black community’s history of brutalization during slavery; of fierce survival struggle and economic servitude after liberation; of children being cheated out of their inheritance by oppressors, of the threat of life and well-being of the family; of

the continuing search for a positive, productive quality of life for women and men under God's care (Williams 1993:119).

Williams (1993:117) argues that this dual view of the wilderness came together in the appropriation of the Biblical Hagar to the life experience of African American women. She functioned as a symbol and as a signal that brought together the sacred and the secular (Williams 1993:120). Through Hagar as symbol and signal, qualities such as "defiance; risk-taking; endurance when endurance gives no promise; stamina to hold things together (even without the help of a mate); the ability, in poverty, to make a way out of no way; the courage to initiate political action in the public arena; and a close personal relationship with God" (Williams 1993:122), became markers for the social identity of African American women. Hagar thus models a womanhood that compatible to the historical facts of the lives of the "rank-and-file" African American women (Williams 1993:122).

For these women, the struggle for survival was a communal one. The church was where women found, through sisterhood and community, the strength to endure in the face of destruction and death. Many women throughout African American history could testify with Hagar that: "Me and God stood up". (Williams 1993:139).

The greatest truth of black women's survival and quality of life struggle is that they have worked without hesitation and with all the energy they could muster...They depended upon their strength and upon each other. But in the final analysis the message is clear: they trusted the end to God (Williams 1993:239).

6.9.4 Survival and the women of Vulindlela

Motherhood, surrogacy, and racism within a context of economic exploitation and homelessness are themes that emerge out of the Hagar story that are common to both African American women and black South African women. In Chapters 2 and 3, I have discussed extensively the social, political, and economic conditions under which the women of Vulindlela live. Their context of economic exploitation and lack of land ownership rights resonates with the vulnerability of Hagar who in the wilderness "made a way out of no way".

Issues of surrogacy, raised by Williams (1993) with regard to African American women, are to this day a reality for large numbers of women in Vulindlela employed as domestic workers. The oppressive conditions under which domestic workers live in South Africa were outlined in Chapter 3. Suffice to say that many of the women of Vulindlela continue “to live in service of other people’s lives”. This service is intimately tied to the legacy of racism that has caught Vulindlela women in a web of oppression brought about by, amongst other things, a lack of access to educational resources. This has forced many of them into surrogacy roles that have resulted in them being “mother” to other people’s children.

African American scholars assume the significance of motherhood (hooks 1984; Collins 2000; Williams 1993), as do black women in South Africa. In my experience, motherhood for the women of Vulindlela is important. The home affirms African women’s identity as nurturers and care-givers which brings dignity and is life giving. However, this is not all that the home is; it is also a place shaped by the constraints of patriarchy (section 6.8.1). But there is little doubt that the women themselves define their roles as mothers positively. This is probably most forcefully expressed in their involvement in church women’s organisations such as the Mothers’ Union (MU) which reinforce the positive aspects of motherhood. Gaitskell (1981) argues that at the turn of the century, with increasing urbanisation, African women found themselves in a new situation without the necessary skills to deal with the impact the city was having on the “morals” of their adolescent daughters. It was through these organisations that they sought and found support and systems to cope with the disciplining of their daughters. Motherhood and the struggle for survival of their children were crucial elements in the formation of church women’s organisations.

The women of Vulindlela wage a daily literal struggle for the survival of themselves and their children and, with Williams (1993), I would want to suggest that it is in this wilderness experience of near death²⁰ where they meet God. This is what aligns them most strongly to the story of Hagar.²¹ Time and time again they can and do testify with Hagar and African American women: “Me and God stood up”. Like Hagar, God has given them further survival

²⁰ I use the term “near death” here to mean more than physical death. It refers to all situations that are not life-giving in a physical, emotional, and spiritual sense.

²¹ Womanist theologian Linda Thomas (1997a) also relates Williams’ notion of wilderness to the life of black South African women during apartheid and beyond.

resources. It is these resources, I contend, that are foundational to their survival theologies.

6.10 Conclusion

Third world women's theology has its origins in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. I began this chapter by sketching this history and showed how African women's theology emerged from within this Association and described the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians at a conference in Ghana in 1989. This network of women theologians, I argued, has been instrumental in linking women's theology in South Africa. I also suggested that it is at meetings, such as those of the Circle, that the latent issues of difference and solidarity emerge as South African women meet across race and class. In analysing the fractured nature of the women's theological project, I contended that we need to confront our difference before we could effectively work towards a solidarity that transforms the church and society. To illustrate our difference as women in the theological project, I gave short biographical sketches of three prominent women in the academy, Denise Ackermann, Christina Landman, and Madipoane Masenya. Identifying solidarity and difference, the representation of poor and marginalised women, and the naming of our theology as important to this study, I indicated how their work describes the theoretical terrain of each of these issues in turn.

An important concern of my work in the women's theological project is that we actively engage poor and marginalised women, not trained in the academy, in our theological reflection. I continued to argue that this is a particular contribution that my study brings to our debate. In my own theological reflections on what I have termed the "survival theologies of poor and marginalised women", I have found various strands of women's theological reflection helpful to my work. I outline these contributions in the second half of the chapter. I began doing this by discussing the usefulness of Ackermann's "contextual liberating praxis", Landman's "telling women's stories", and Masenya's focus on culture and the use of the Bible in our hermeneutics. This discussion was followed by the contribution of African women's theology to my work, particularly in its cultural critique of patriarchy and emphasis on engaging women from the church in theological reflection. The concluding section of this chapter detailed the contribution of womanist theologian Delores Williams who emphasises

the survival experiences of African American women in her work. Each of these contributions, I contend, have influenced and shaped my work as I have sought to foreground the survival theologies of the women of Vulindlela.

In the next chapter, I argue for the recognition and recovery of subjugated theological knowledges of poor and marginalised women. In so doing, I introduce the subjugated survival theologies of the Vulindlela women by suggesting two locations in which they may be found. In the first instance, I will argue that the Mothers' Union, a church women's prayer organisation, is a site of indigenous women's Christianity. Through a critical reflection on the practices of members of the organisation, their survival response to mission Christianity will become apparent. The second location is a weekly Bible study group in Nxamalala, a small geographic area in the Vulindlela region. Detailing the process through which a safe site was created in my role as woman-priest and activist-intellectual, I will argue that active mutual collaboration between us became possible. Through this collaborative activity, the Bible study group became a new site for the potential recovery of indigenous African women's survival theologies. I will also show that through our contextual, communal, and collaborative reading of the Bible, embryonic forms of these theologies began to emerge. Crucial, to the socially transformative nature of the South African women's theological project, is recognising and locating these subjugated survival theologies. This is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

RECOGNISING AND LOCATING SURVIVAL THEOLOGIES

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I charted the theological territory on the African continent and the African diaspora that is useful to this study. I concentrated on those impulses in the work of South Africans, Denise Ackermann, Christina Landman, and Madipoane Masenya, the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians, and womanist theologian, Delores Williams' that resonate with my own. In so doing, I suggested key areas in which this study develops these resonances and contributes in a particular way to the South African women's theological project.

Amidst the complexities of our theorising are the lived lives of faith of poor and marginalised indigenous African women. They constitute the majority membership of the church in South Africa and their voices are seldom heard in the corridors of power in the church and academy. While we, women who have access to these corridors of power, seek to understand, search for, and find the "liberating" aspects of our faith, poor and marginalised women live their faith as expressed in the struggle to survive each day. The working survival theologies of poor and marginalised women pose a challenge to both feminist liberation and to gender and development debates. Religion is a key resource in the struggle for survival (section 4.2.4). For the South African women's theological project to be meaningful and true for all women, *survival* as lived and experienced in everyday life by most women needs to become a key construct in our theoretical reflection. Engaging this lived reality of survival means that there needs to be an explicit commitment to an active mutual collaboration between women across race and class. This requires a willingness by those of us who are activist-intellectuals to "unlearn our privilege" and be "partially constituted" by those we work with in the community (section 5.5.5). This is no easy task. Yet, it is in risking together through this active mutual collaboration that we have the potential to point the way for women's theology worldwide. In our South African context of racial division where class

is such a strong force and where there is enormous disparity between the rich and the poor, we have an opportunity to find ways of crossing the divides amongst women ourselves. Finding ways of doing this as women in the theological project has been an important aspect of this study. For me, it is the *active engagement* with poor and marginalised women in theological reflection in third world women's theology that has been neglected. It is my intention that the discussion in this and the next chapter will go some way in making a contribution to the discussion on the theological voices of these women and their resistance practices which are not always obvious nor easily understood.

I begin this chapter with a theoretical discussion of the necessity for recognising and recovering the subjugated theologies of poor and marginalised women who have not been trained in the academy. These subjugated expressions of faith are what I have termed survival theologies and are to be found in gatherings of religious women who do not project an overt "feminist" consciousness. As I have already argued (Chapter 5), a critical engagement between postmodern and liberation theory enables the recovery of the voices of those who are "other". With scholars such as Sharon Welch, James Cochrane, and Gerald West, I explore in this chapter the implications for theological discourse of this critical engagement between these two theoretical paradigms. Domination often causes subordinated women to appear silent. I contend that as activist-intellectuals we need to find ways of theorising this "silence" which help us to understand the existing agency of poor and marginalised women. The work of political scientist James Scott is useful to this task and will be introduced in this chapter and discussed more fully in the next when survival theologies as resistance theologies are discussed.

There are two types of locations for the potential recovery of women's survival theologies. The first, are those places where women gather in spaces that they themselves have created such as church women's prayer unions. A second type of location, I suggest, are places explicitly opened up to provide a safe space for active mutual collaboration between poor and marginalised women and activist-intellectuals like myself. I illustrate the former through a detailed discussion of the church women's prayer union movement generally, and the Mothers' Union (MU), the Anglican women's organisation to which the women of Vulindlela belong, in particular. The history of the MU will suggest that it increasingly

identified with the emerging indigenous movement of women's prayer unions corporately known as the *manyano* movement. In illustrating the MU as a site of indigenous women's Christianity, I focus on their church uniform, their preaching and praying practices, and their fundraising activities as three expressions of survival theologies. While the MU is an established site for practices of survival faith that the women themselves have created, in the second instance I show the potential for the exploration of survival theologies within a safe, sequestered site. This discussion is illustrated through a case study of the weekly Bible study held at the church in Nxamalala, a geographic ward in Vulindlela, which was initiated in and through my capacity as woman-priest and activist-intellectual. Detailing the group process, I show how collaboration emerged in the group across race, class, culture, and language divides as that space increasingly became safe to all of us to explore our lives of faith. As this site became safe, so embryonic forms of survival theologies began to emerge. Through this collaborative activity, the potential for the mutual sharing of theological knowledges between those trained in the academy and those not, is highlighted. I will argue that this collaborative process impacted on all of us.

In the final section of the chapter, I will argue that the two illustrative sites for the potential recovery of subjugated survival theologies are interconnected. This interconnectedness offers further potential for the recovery of subjugated survival theologies which, I suggest, are necessary for a socially transformative theological agenda in the church and the academy.

7.2 Recognising and recovering subjugated theologies

Delores Williams (1995b) tells a story of being invited to speak as a graduate student to a group of Christian women from the black community of Harlem on feminism and feminist theology. After she had finished speaking, a woman stood up and addressed her:

Honey, I want to say something about this feminism... This reminds me of the day I went into a fancy dress shop downtown and saw this real pretty dress. The colours in the dress blend right. The design was modern and fashionable. The buttons in front look real pretty with the material. Everything about that dress looked just right. There was only one problem... The dress was size

five, and I wear size twenty. The saleslady told me the shop didn't carry dresses over size thirteen. I can sew real good, but I knew there was no way for me to alter that dress and still have the same thing. There was just no point, honey. This feminism and feminist theology is real pretty, but there just ain't enough in it to fit me. And what I was wondering is: if you black feminists try to make it fit me, will you still have the same thing? (Williams 1995b:113).

Perhaps for too long feminist liberation theologians have tried to make their theology fit *all* women. In the story recounted above, this poor black woman challenges Delores Williams to take seriously her life experience. As an educated, middle-class woman, Williams was being asked to be willing to see women's theology from a completely different perspective.

Williams (1995b:113) concludes from this experience and a few others like it, that the search for theological resources needs to be concentrated in the everyday lives of African American women who "live, work and die in the context of black community life". For Williams' journey as a womanist intellectual, this experience was a turning point in understanding the crucial reality that theological knowledge exists within the lives of marginalised women and that academics are not the sole arbiters of "theological truth". This has led her to reflect on what it means to take seriously as a primary theological source, the faith, thought and life-struggle of marginalised women (Williams 1993:xi). Hence a focus on "survival" in her theological reflection (section 6.9).

Williams' journey resonates with my own which has been significantly influenced by my work with the women of Vulindlela and through dialogue with colleagues at the School of Theology, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. During the past decade, there has been a growing body of work emanating from this School that has explicitly explored what it means to recognise and recover the theological resources of poor and marginalised groups (Cochrane 1994; 1996; 1999; Cochrane and West 1993; Haddad and Sibeko 1997; Mandew 1993; 1997; Philpott 1993; Walker 1992; 1996; West 1993; 1995; 1999; 2000). This study stands in continuity with this body work, develops further Walker's (1992) work with women, and extends the analysis to include reflections from the field of gender and development as a crucial point of intersection. Recognising and recovering the subjugated

theologies of poor and marginalised indigenous African women remains largely unexplored territory within the South African women's theological project. I have argued that it is a critical engagement between postmodern and feminist liberation theory that theoretically enables the recovery of the voice of the "other" in theological discourse (Haddad 1998a; see Chapter 5). This has similarly been argued by a number of scholars (Cochrane 1999; Fulkerson 1994; Welch 1985; 1990; West 1999).

Michel Foucault (1980:81-82) speaks of "subjugated knowledges" in two related ways. Knowledges can be subjugated when historical contents are "buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemisation" (Foucault 1980:81). Alternatively, subjugated knowledges are a set of knowledges "that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task... naive knowledges located low down on the hierarchy..." (Foucault 1980:82). Subjugated knowledges understood in this second sense is theoretically useful to this study. Subjugated theologies of poor and marginalised women are new knowledges that in the past has been considered inadequate to the task of theological reflection. This "popular knowledge" of the women of Vulindlela is not just "common sense" (Foucault 1980:82). Rather it is a

differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything - that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (Foucault 1980:82).

Drawing on Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledges, Sharon Welch (1985) argues that liberation theology, with an emphasis on dangerous memory, helps to uncover subjugated knowledges. In so doing, it represents the resurgence of knowledges suppressed by a dominant theology and a dominant culture. "The liberation paradigm", however, is not sufficient for describing the recovery of subjugated knowledges. I have argued in my theoretical discussions of gender and development (Chapter 4), feminist theory (Chapter 5), and women's theology in South Africa (Chapter 6), all of which operate within a liberation paradigm, that the *voices* of marginalised women are not always accounted for. It is not simply "women's voices" that represent the oppressed. As has been suggested throughout

this study, even within the women's project there are discourses that reflect differing power relationships between women themselves. It is, I contend, the voices of poor and marginalised indigenous African women that represent the most "disqualified" of all knowledges. By implication it is these women in particular that represent the greatest potential for "new interpretations of Christian symbols, texts, new analyses of social structures, critiques of the institutional structure of the church, and solidarity with others" (Welch 1985:44). It is their disqualified knowledges that perform a necessary critical function for all theological reflection.

If these knowledges are to perform a critical function, then recovering the subjugated theological voices of poor and marginalised women becomes crucial. Earlier (section 5.5.4), I showed that Spivak (1988), who holds to a strong view of the hegemonic power of dominant discourses, argues that marginalised women are rendered silent. They cannot knowingly represent or speak for themselves. I took issue with Spivak on this point and suggested that poor and marginalised women do speak, but perhaps in ways that are not easily recognised. No matter how pervasive and extreme their experience of domination, subordinate groups "are never without forms of discourse which both neutralize and negate the hegemonic force of dominant patterns of discourse" (Cochrane 1996:118). In theorising the apparent silence of marginalised women I have found a range of critical resources from the social sciences helpful (John and Jean Comaroff 1991; de Certeau 1984; Scott 1990). As I have attempted to understand and enter into the discursive relationship between myself and the women of Vulindlela, I have drawn primarily on the work of James Scott (1990).

Scott (1990) argues that discourse takes place within both the realms of the public and the hidden. When dominant and subordinate groups encounter one another, the *public* transcript of the dominant and the *public* transcript of the subordinated are represented in the interaction (Scott 1990:13). The public transcript of the dominant merely serves their own hegemonic ends. "It is designed to be impressive, to affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites, and to conceal or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule" (Scott 1990:18). The responsive discourse of subordinated groups to the public transcript of the dominant can occur at one of four levels (Scott 1990:18). The safest response is the one that operates at the public level and tends to flatter the images of the dominating elites (Scott 1990:18). In sharp

contrast, subordinates might react completely offstage with a discourse that is hidden and it is these “hidden transcripts” that make possible a dissonant political culture (Scott 1990:18). Of particular interest to Scott (1990:19) is a third realm that lies strategically between the public and hidden transcripts which offers glimpses of the “nonhegemonic voices and practices” of subordinated groups. This is the realm of “infrapolitics”, rumours, gossip, folk tales, euphemisms, rituals, codes and so forth, where “a politics of disguise and anonymity... takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors” (Scott 1990:19). The fourth level of discourse is the most explosive and occurs when there is a rupture of the hidden and public transcripts in the discourse of either the dominant or subordinated group (Scott 1990:19).

Scott’s (1990) view calls into question the reliability of representations of subordinate groups, by themselves or by a third party, which rely on the public transcript alone. In describing the discursive acts of the oppressed, Scott (1990:xi) privileges their dignity and autonomy and argues that what is proclaimed publicly in word and deed is only half the story. Public proclamations will always contain the hegemonic language of the dominant. Rather, it is in the realm of the hidden and in the disguised language of infrapolitics, the speech acts and a range of other practices carried out behind the backs of the dominant group, that the voice of the oppressed is to be found.

In this chapter, my discussion of the faith practices of members of the MU (section 7.4) indicates that they are an indigenous expression of Christianity forged within a context of colonialism. These practices can be understood as a response on the level of infrapolitics to dominant ecclesiastical and colonial discourse (see section 8.3). Analysing the discourse within the Nxamalala Bible study group discussions is complex given my position in the group (section 7.5). On the one hand, I represent the dominant group as an economically privileged woman in ordained leadership in the church. On the other hand, I am a *woman* who “is not quite white”, and in the Bible study group we all share aspects of subordination as a result of our gender and darker shades of skin colour. These various positions that I occupy suggest that at different times our common discourse operates on the level of the public or at the level of infrapolitics. At other times, however, I have access to the hidden realm of discourse of the women, as they do to mine.

Given Scott's analysis of the discourse of subordinated groups, it is apparent that recognising and recovering the subjugated knowledges of the women of Vulindlela is fraught with complexity. Acknowledging this, however, should not be a deterrent to undertaking this important theoretical analysis. I seek to show in the final section of this chapter that the subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised indigenous African women, once recognised and recovered, pose a challenge to the church and academy that cannot be ignored.

Believing that the voices of the marginalised help to bring about social transformation within the church and the academy, Cochrane (1999) systematically shows how the theologies of a base ecclesial community of Amawoti, a shack settlement¹ outside Durban, are necessary to this task. He argues that marginalised people, such as the community of Amawoti, who have not been formally theologically trained, have a "community wisdom" which is a form of subjugated knowledge. Analysing Bible studies conducted in the Amawoti community over a four year period, Cochrane (1999:24-39) recovers their understanding of Jesus Christ and redemption (see also Philpott 1993). Megan Walker (1992; 1996) in her work on the Marian devotion of Catholic women living in the impoverished township² of Mphophomeni similarly shows how traditional Catholic understandings of Mary, such as her "goddess-like" attributes, are only part of the faith practices of these women. Mary, for the women of Mphophomeni, has also come to take on a significance directly related to their poverty and struggle for survival as she becomes a provider and fellow-sufferer (Walker 1996:147-148). The image of Mary as "the suffering, sorrowful mother is clearly one with which people feel able to identify and from which they derive their strength" (Walker 1996:147). Hence, alongside this dominant role of Mary, as Cochrane comments on Walker's work, is another stream of consciousness,

¹ A shack settlement is an informal housing area that has arisen spontaneously as a result of increasing urbanisation.

² A township is a term created by the apartheid government as a designated area for people who are not white. Townships comprise of small government-built houses and are usually located outside the boundaries, but on the edge, of a small town or city. Mphophomeni is located on the edge of the town of Howick, KwaZulu-Natal.

one which sees Mary as taking sides for the poor and oppressed as one of them, who stands alongside those who suffer, who does not run away in the face of danger and death, who exemplifies the defiance of life against the forces of death: Mary the fellow-struggler (Cochrane 1994:32).

These subjugated community knowledges of the people of Amawoti, Mphophomeni, and as this study suggests, the women of Vulindlela, are a theologically and socially relevant wisdom which can be termed “incipient theology” (Cochrane 1999:22). Incipient theologies emerge as communities, who are not formally trained in the doctrines of the church, reflect on their faith in a provisional way, “gathering an as yet untested wisdom about the meaning of their faith” (Cochrane 1999:22). Incipient theologies offer “contrasting experiences” to dominant discourses and are potentially transformative for theological reflection in the academy and for practice in the church (Cochrane 1999:21-22). Recovering these theologies requires an epistemological privileging of discourses of the poor and marginalised which of necessity results in an *epistemologica ruptura*, a radical break in epistemology from traditional theology (Frostin 1988:4).

For women’s theology in South Africa to be relevant to the lives of *all* women, the *epistemologica ruptura* of survival theologies must become a major challenge to theological reflection. This is particularly true in our context where women doing theology are needing to choose where to locate themselves epistemologically. In as much as women’s theology in South Africa is dominated by white women, it too becomes a dominant discourse in the academy, even though it is situated within a framework of liberation. Survival theologies, I suggest, do not merely reform the feminist liberation paradigm, but they call attention to the need for a radical rethink of both our epistemology and the way we understand liberation as women theologians in our South African context. I argue in this study that it is to those contexts where poor and marginalised women articulate their faith practices that activist-intellectuals need to re-locate practically and theoretically. And so I now turn to detail a context where religious women, who do not necessarily call themselves “feminist”, gather and express their faith in particular ways. They are poor indigenous African women whose lives have been shaped by economic, racial, gender, and colonial oppression. They are women who were introduced to Christianity through female missionaries. In the following

sections I introduce the prayer unions of indigenous African women corporately known as the *manyano* movement, where I focus particularly on the Mothers' Union, the Anglican organisation to which many Vulindlela women belong. Indigenous Anglican women took a colonial church women's organisation and transformed it into an indigenous form of Christianity. The history of the MU and its practice today will attest to this reality.

7.3 Church women's prayer unions - the *manyano* movement

7.3.1 Introducing the *manyano* movement

Long before the emergence of feminist theology in the 1980s, religious women were gathering together in church organisations which have corporately come to be known as the *manyano* movement. According to Brandel-Syrier (1962:15), *manyano* is originally a Xhosa noun which is the reciprocal form of the verb *ukumanya* which means "to join". She suggests that this word was possibly first coined amongst Xhosa peoples of the Ciskei, the region with the earliest missionary concentration. Brandel Syrier (1962) also suggests that when the Methodists entered Natal they incorporated a number of Xhosa words into the Christian Zulu vocabulary, *manyano*, being one such word. It was first coined by the Methodist women to refer specifically to their weekly meetings known as prayer unions. Increasingly, it was adopted by women from other denominations when referring to their church organisations. Today, almost every black church in South Africa, mission initiated and African Independent churches, will have a church women's organisation that is part of this movement.

These organisations have in the past been seen by women engaged in the women's project (even by other indigenous African women) to be in continuity with those elements in the church that foster conservative attitudes towards women (Gaitskell 1990:270). In Chapter 8, I will argue that even though the majority of women in these organisations would not recognise themselves as "feminists", they use this space to carry out practices of resistance that are consistent with the women's theological project. The vision of the Concerned Circle of African Women Theologians of women doing theology communally has yet to seriously embrace the challenge of addressing the literal survival issues faced everyday by millions of African women of faith. Addressing this challenge requires a critical engagement with

women's theologies outside of the academy as it takes into account the issues raised by the gender and development debate (Chapter 4). It is a central contention of this thesis that the concerns and agendas of these women who have not been theologically trained in the academy, are crucial to South African women's theology and must become part of our theoretical reflection. The *manyano* movement is a crucial arena for women's theology throughout Africa, but especially South Africa because it is where most women of faith are located.

In this section, the Mothers' Union (MU), an organisation of the Anglican church, is used as a case study to illustrate the emergence of the *manyano* movement and the resistance practices that have emerged as part of women's theological strategies. One of the reasons that the history of the MU is particularly pertinent to the debate on women's theologies in South Africa is because it highlights the interplay of power dynamics between white and indigenous African women. It was the only organisation within the movement that was initially a "colonial import", that had its roots outside of the African continent. All other church organisations in the mission initiated churches were started by missionaries for African women only. It was through the strategies and struggles of African Anglican women that today the MU is an integral part of the indigenous *manyano* movement, while simultaneously ascribing to the mission statement of its mother organisation in England.

7.3.2 Historical roots of the *manyano* movement

African women's expression of Christianity is intricately intertwined with both the process of colonization and with the missionary enterprise of the late nineteenth century. Scholars such as Cock (1990), Labode (1993), Meintjies (1990), and Walker (1990) have shown the church's role in the process of colonization of African women and girls through the missionary enterprise during this period. Walker (1990), in tracing gender patterns within the migrant labour system between 1850 and 1930, alludes to the role Christianity played in reinforcing sanctions against female mobility and independence. This work has implications for studies done by Cock (1990) and Labode (1993) who have both attempted to argue that mission education for girls was based on the Victorian ideal of motherhood and domesticity. In the South African context, this "ideal" meant that in practice it was linked to the training

of young girls for domestic service in the homes of colonial administrators and some missionaries. African women were encouraged by the missionaries to meet weekly to pray together and then these gatherings were also used as an opportunity to teach skills such as sewing, washing, and laundering.

In the minds of women missionaries, “the kraal” of the heathen African woman needed to be transformed into a home in which Christianity could flourish. From their perspective, this required major ideological shifts within the South African context and meant that African women needed to be “created” in order to preside over these homes that reflected the Victorian ideal of motherhood with its strong puritanical connotations (Labode 1993:126). Attempts at “creating” women through this ideology of “devout domesticity” (Gaitskell 1981; 1982; 1983; 1990) were, however, not always met without resistance in this early period of colonization. Labode (1993:136-141) refers to a number of incidents of dissent where young girls were clearly more interested in “book learning” than in the “domestic” education the women missionaries deemed necessary for them. Having said this, she is more sympathetic to missionary efforts than is Cock (1990). While recognising that mission education did become a servant of colonialism, she asserts that it also worked towards offering independence for some individual young women (Labode 1993).

Gaitskell (1981; 1983; 1990) argues similarly to Labode (1993) that Victorian Christianity brought to South Africa during the nineteenth century, “offered a contradictory package to African women: a way of escape from some of the constraints of pre-Christian society and yet a firm incorporation in to the domesticity and patriarchy of Christian family life” (Gaitskell 1990:254). She argues that nineteenth century middle-class Christians from Britain and the United States of America “were living through a revolution in and re-creation of their own domestic lives as a necessary basis for devout living” (Gaitskell 1990:254). This ideology arose as an evangelical response to nineteenth century industrialization and was increasingly adopted not only by the middle-class, but also by the working classes by the end of that century (Gaitskell 1983:241; see also John and Jean Comaroff 1992; 1997:274-322).

It was this early pre-1900 work of missionaries amongst African woman and girls that laid the foundations for the *manyano* movement. The seeds had been sown. By the turn of the

century, African Christian women were meeting regularly together, individual women were offering leadership in these groups that had been nurtured by female missionaries, and a focus on the home had been established at a time when increasing industrialization was threatening family life. All these factors combined to set the scene for African women to forge a movement that was an authentic expression of their Christian faith within the structures of the missionary churches (Gaitskell 1981:12). Adrian Hastings (1979:119), a church historian, in discussing influential revival and prophetic movements such as the Catholic Jamaa movement of the then Belgian Congo and the Revival movement of East Africa within the mission churches, names the *manyano* movement as another such movement which had by the 1950s spread throughout Africa (see Moss 1999; Muzorewa 1975; Steady 1976).

In my experience, the influence of the *manyano* movement continues to this day. The significance of *manyano* movement is that it arose and continues to shape its life within the context of mission orientated churches. Women within these churches have not, by and large, left to form their own congregations, perhaps because, as Gaitskell (1981; 1990) suggests, the social constraints have been too great. Rather they have realigned and constituted themselves in a form that gives the outward appearance of compliance with the missionary structures, but in its functioning adopts forms that embrace what it is relevant for their daily life of struggle and survival. It is this aspect of the *manyano* movement, and MU groups in particular, that is of particular interest to me as a activist-intellectual and as a woman-priest working within church structures so desperately in need of change.

7.3.3 Formation of *manyano* groups

The Methodists in the Transvaal appear to be the first to formally organise women into an organisation in about 1906 which was known as *manyano*, followed shortly thereafter by the Anglicans with the introduction of the Women's Help Society³ (Brandel-Syrier 1962;

³ The Women's Help Society (WHS) and the Mothers' Union (MU) are both organisations of the Church of England introduced into various parts of South Africa depending on the preference of particular female missionaries. Their relationship to one another in the Johannesburg diocese is elaborated upon in section 8.4.2. The demise of the WHS in England during the 1930s effectively meant that the MU became the *manyano* group for indigenous African Anglican women.

Gaitskell 1981). In Natal, the American Mission Board, initiated their group which came to be known as *isililo* (meaning “wailing” or “lamenting”) in 1912 (Gaitskell 1981).

Gaitskell (1981:241) argues that one of the major concerns of female missionaries at this time was the necessity of inculcating the ideal of a male breadwinner, dependant housekeeping wife and mother, with dependent school-going children, among the African women and girls they worked with in the cities. Church women’s organisations became the vehicle through which missionaries attempted to achieve this ideal. “For urban black females in early industrial South Africa, Christianity was as much about a specific family form, of which they were a linchpin, as about a new faith in Christ” (Gaitskell 1983:242). However, this ideology of what Gaitskell calls “devout domesticity” was not entirely at odds with that already held by African women in their pre-Christian days (Hassim 1993; Hansen 1992; Amadiume 1997; Makhene 1984; Oduyoye 1995). What was different for African Christian women in the city, was the additional burden of a spiritual and child-rearing role which meant, in contrast to their pre-Christian days, that they had “to take responsibility for the chastity of their adolescent daughters” (Gaitskell 1983:249). “It was a burden they shouldered with reluctance and even despair, especially as a cluster of social and economic circumstances - Western education, industrialization, urbanization - combined to increase premarital pregnancy” (Gaitskell 1983:249).⁴ In some instances of *manyano* prayer unions, particularly that of the American Board Mission *isililo*, became a place where they could “bemoan and confess their sins as irresponsible mothers of adolescent daughters, then commit themselves to a new start spiritually” (Gaitskell 1982:343). *Isililo* was a traditional Zulu cleansing ritual undertaken by women after the burial of the deceased, and re-appropriated into their Christian context.

During the 1930s poverty was rife amongst urban African families. Missionaries increasingly had to face the fact attempting inculcate their ideal of devout domesticity was a fruitless task given the reality that African women could simply not afford to be full-time housewives and mothers (Gaitskell 1983:252). Activities such as beer brewing which

⁴ Gaitskell (1981;1983) shows within the Anglican church special schools for young girls were begun at this time, as well as attempts by all the *manyano* groups to begin “junior guilds” for their adolescent daughters.

enabled a woman to remain at home, were forbidden by the church, although many did this illicitly and as a result faced the rebuke of their women's prayer unions (Gaitskell 1983:252). Urban women increasingly became full-time domestic servants living in the "white suburbs" away from their children. By this stage, influx control laws were in operation which increased the migrant labour workforce and in effect left millions of rural women struggling to survive on their own and unable to find easy access to the cities (Gaitskell 1983:254). Rural women were having to struggle against their family life being destroyed by structural realities. As a result, family life became something to fight for rather than against. This would echo the sentiments expressed by South African women activists discussed earlier (section 5.4.5).

The Mothers' Union (MU), with its strong emphasis on mothering and family life was introduced into South Africa within a contextual ideology of "devout domesticity" as promulgated by the missionaries. As an organisation it was nurtured through the early decades of the twentieth century when African women were struggling for the survival of family life. Its history is of particular note because of its complex inter-related history with both the MU based in London, and with other the *manyano* prayer unions. The Church of the Province in South Africa (CPSA) spent the first half of the twentieth century attempting to "regularise" MU branches in African communities away from their ever-increasing *manyano* identity with its emphasis on extempore prayer and preaching, the wearing of identifiable uniforms and fundraising activities. This identity characterised these prayer unions as local and indigenous appropriations by women of Christianity. The CPSA through the missionaries and missionary bishops, sought by all means during this period, particularly during the 1950s, to ensure that the MU retain the identity shaped in England. In the next chapter I will argue that they were only partially successful in their efforts as African Anglican women appropriated MU meetings for their own ends. I will further argue that not only were these meetings used for their own ends, but they became (and still are) places where hidden forms of resistance are practised by African women within a safe and "created" place away from the dominant male leadership in the community and the church. Before this discussion on the MU as a site of resistance, it is important to outline its history more fully.

7.3.4 History of the Mothers' Union

The emphasis by early female missionaries on the “the kraal” needing to be transformed into a “Christian home” was congruent with the aims and objectives of the MU which was introduced into South Africa in the early twentieth century by deaconesses of the Church of England. The MU is a women’s organisation that was founded within the Church of England in 1876 by Mary Sumner, wife of the rector of a Hampshire parish. She gathered women from the parish with the explicit purpose of teaching them “the spiritual value of wifehood and motherhood, the great responsibility of parents for their children and the power and example of prayer” (MU London A n.d:2). The organisation grew and spread to churches throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. The headquarters of the organisation was established in London and is known as Mary Sumner House.

Foundational to the work of the MU as it was constituted was the instruction in and adherence to its three Objects: to uphold the sanctity of marriage, to awaken in all mothers a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls as fathers and mothers of the future, and to organise in every place a band of mothers who will unite in prayer and seek by their own example to lead their families in purity and holiness of life (MU London A n.d:2).

Upholding the sanctity of marriage was crucial to the work of the Mothers’ Union. Only married women who were “in good standing” with the church were eligible for membership of the organisation. In practice, being “in good standing” required that you be baptised, bring your children for baptism as children, accept the teachings of the Apostles’ Creed, and be faithful to your marriage vows (MU London A n.d:4). Women received into membership were known as “Ordinary Members”. There was a second category of membership known as “Associate Membership” which was open “to unmarried women who are interested in the Objects and work of the Society and possess the same qualifications, so far as they are applicable, as are required for Ordinary Membership” (MU London A n.d:5). At least a six month preparation period for admission to membership was required. This associate membership option explains the presence of many unmarried women missionaries involved in the work of the MU, given its strong focus on marriage.

There was a strong prohibition on divorce and unmarried mothers were not eligible for membership. Divorce was strongly condemned with Biblical justification given as to why it was not allowed and divorced women were barred membership. “As all members undertake to uphold marriage as a life-long relationship, no one who is divorced or who has married a man with a wife still living, may be a Member” (MU London A n.d:6). Likewise, unmarried mothers were equally harshly censured from the organisation. “As the first Object is to uphold the Sanctity of Marriage, it is not possible to admit unmarried mothers to the Mothers’ Union” (MU London A n.d:6).

It was specified that on the joining the organisation women were to make a promise to adhere to the objects of the MU during a public enrollment service which included a MU prayer asking God’s help in being faithful wives and mothers (MU London A n.d:8). At the service each member received a membership card and MU badge on being admitted by the Enrolling Member, the head of the MU in each branch (MU London A n.d:6). This pattern of membership was transported by female Church of England women missionaries to their missionary dioceses throughout the Commonwealth, including South Africa. However, in South Africa, these missionaries were competing with local, indigenous voices of the *manyano* movement for control of the Anglican women’s organisation. “In their *manyanos* the mothers of Africa come together to pray, sing and dance to the Christian God” (Brandel-Syrier 1962:16). The MU was becoming a place where the mothers of Africa and not England were praying, singing, and dancing. But this was not without struggle.

7.3.5 Colonial leadership, control, and relinquishment

Gaitskell’s (1981) study, which focuses on women’s organisations with the Anglican, Methodist, and American Mission Board churches, suggests that the Anglicans’ history was different from the other two in that much greater control was exercised by the Anglican missionaries. Brandel-Syrier (1962), conducting research in the 1950s on *manyano* groups, while recognising Anglican groups as part of this movement, points to a different history and ethos. Pauw’s (1975:93) work with *manyano* groups in the Northern Cape also confirms that Methodist women had greater freedom than Anglican women to conduct their affairs.

Anglican male priests insisted on attending the women's meetings and the church used the clergy to exercise strict control over the MU (Brandel-Syrier 1962:92). Branches were established only with consent from the priest (MU London D n.d:4). Control was also exercised from the London office of the MU who stipulated clear guidelines on how MU workers sent to South Africa were to carry out training in the "Bantu" branches. In the *Mothers' Union Handbook for the use of Bantu branches* it indicates the need for each branch to have an indigenous leader who is "chosen from the Church members and approved by the Priest-in-Charge and the Mothers' Union Worker" (MU London D n.d:5). Set duties were laid down for these branch leaders. Materials published by the London office suggest that the training of branch leaders was a key aspect of the work of the MU worker (MU London E n.d.). It seems that branch leaders "reported" to the MU worker who saw it as her duty to carry out teaching and training in the branch, to check financial records, to visit MU projects and so forth. In some instances, such as the diocese of St John's where the MU was entirely Xhosa speaking, in addition to the MU worker sent out from England, Miss Wilson, three Xhosa speaking women, Miss Rasmeni, Miss Xaba, and Miss Mpehle, were also employed. The salaries of these three women was a third of what was paid to Miss Wilson! (MU London F 1961). The London office supported (and controlled) the work not only through human resources, but provided the necessary financial support through grants for salaries, transport, and for other costs.

Control over the MU branches was not just exercised by the priests and MU workers; for decades the bishop's wives were the titular head of the organisation in each diocese. They carried the responsibility of reporting on behalf of their diocese to the central office in England. Internally within South Africa, MU matters from the various dioceses would be discussed informally by the bishop's wives when they met at Episcopal Synod. This pattern of leadership continued until as late as 1954, when a Provincial Council of the MU was inaugurated and a constitution finalised a few years later (MU South Africa A 1957:2).

With less control over the MU from the London office, tensions began to surface between the MU Provincial Council and the London office in the early 1960s. On 11 December 1961, a confidential letter was sent to the then Archbishop, Joost de Blank, by the then secretary of

the MU London office, Mrs Llewleyn-Davies, expressing concern about perceived tensions within the MU Provincial Council in South Africa (MU London G 1961). She suggests that perhaps it had been a mistake to have set up a Provincial Council which is proving expensive to maintain and difficult to hold together given the diversity of the Province. She argues for a disbanding the Provincial Council and returning to the system where the London office is in contact with individual dioceses. In this way particular needs of dioceses, such as money for vernacular translations can be accounted for (MU London G 1961:2). The gist of the letter written in response by Archbishop de Blank affirmed the necessity for a Provincial Council and suggests that more time is necessary for a welding together, given the long history of bishop's wives being in control of the MU in their dioceses. He argues implicitly that the Provincial Council forces dioceses that are not regarded as "missionary" dioceses to take responsibility for the enormous needs that exist in the Province as a whole (MU South Africa H 1962).

What makes this incident noteworthy is the fact that shortly afterwards, the Executive Committee of the MU Provincial Council passed a resolution expressing concern at the grave problems arising out of the administration of the work of the MU (MU South Africa I 1962). In so doing, they made the recommendation that the bishops delegate the control of the work to the MU Provincial Council in matters concerning the province and to MU Diocesan Councils over diocesan matters. In an attached memorandum they argue for greater autonomy from both episcopal oversight and the London office (MU South Africa I 1962). They indicate that the London office does not recognise their authority and continues to work through the bishops, and they request that the diocesan bishops give the MU Diocesan Councils the necessary authority to control the work.

It appears that the Episcopal Synod accepted this resolution and the bishops acted accordingly. However, it took another ten years before the London office suggested that MU workers be trained and selected locally (MU London H 1973). Even then, ultimately the appointments had to be confirmed by the Overseas Committee in the London office (MU London H 1973:2). It was in that same year at a MU Central Council meeting in London that three important resolutions with implications for South Africa were passed (MU South Africa J 1973). One of these resolutions provided the option for the MU to seek autonomy from the

London office. Seeking this autonomy was set in motion at a meeting of the MU Provincial Council in March 1975, where a new constitution and set of bye-laws was adopted (MU South Africa K 1975). Once it was approved by the Episcopal Synod a month later, it was forwarded together with a request for autonomy to the London office. The path to autonomy had been difficult, with little voice given to those to whom the issue mattered most, namely the women members. The main actors appear to be the bishops and the London office of the MU. At best, members of the executive committee of the Provincial Council were able to wrench a little control away from these two groups.

Of note is that when the committee were able to do this in 1973, MU membership was approximately 97% African (MU South Africa L 1975). The racial classification of the MU Executive committee did not reflect this dominant African membership (MU South Africa M 1970-1980). As Gaitskell points out, the Anglican church was slow to elect indigenous leadership within their women's organisation in comparison with, for example, the Methodist Church (Gaitskell 1981:167). The President of the MU remained a white woman well into the 1970s, with the first black woman, Mrs Eva Mkhabela, being appointed in 1979 (MU South Africa M 1970-1980). This is in spite of the fact that white enrollment into membership had been declining rapidly throughout the 1960s and by the 1970s the majority of white Anglican women were joining another women's organisation within the CPSA, the Anglican Women's Fellowship (AWF).⁵

Today, in the diocese of Natal, there are no longer white branches of the MU (although I have seen about two or three elderly white women attend diocesan MU services in their individual capacity). There are a small number of branches within traditionally Coloured and Indian parishes. Approximately 95% of the membership of the MU would be African and most members would unequivocally see themselves as part of the broader *manyano* movement in South Africa.

⁵ The AWF was accepted as a parallel organisation to the MU in 1973 (MU South Africa N 1973). I suspect, but have not established through formal research, that this was in response by white women to a growing sense of alienation from the MU which had an African ethos and was dominated by an indigenous African membership. This would be an important area of further research. If my hypothesis is correct, this would lend further weight to my argument that African women, even if not in formal leadership, had occupied the "space" that the MU provided and used it for their own ends.

But the struggle to be part of an indigenous movement was real for MU members of the past, some of whom are still alive today. Adrian Hastings (1979) has argued that it was during the 1950s that there was an upsurge in membership of these groups. However, it was during this decade that strong campaigns were waged by the Anglican church to rid the MU of elements that it shared with other *manyanos*. Church uniforms were banned in Natal (Brandel-Syrier 1962:93). In Johannesburg, Mrs Reeves, wife of the bishop, “vigorously combatted” these common elements; extempore praying and preaching, compulsory uniforms, fundraising, and evangelism (Gaitskell 1981:168). “In addition, the requirement of indissoluble Christian marriage was strictly enforced and practical instruction in sewing and sex-education were introduced” (Gaitskell 1981:168). Every attempt was made at this time to bring the African members of the MU in South Africa into line with their English counterparts.

In the Anglican groups, members must be admitted by a priest; unmarried mothers and divorced women are prohibited from membership. An exactly prescribed order of service must be followed and to this end, each member receives a special Form of Service from which the prayer formulae are read and the hymns sung. No extempore prayer or spontaneous choice of hymns is allowed... The ‘Praying and Preaching’, which is the very *raison d’être* of the *Manyanos*, is obliterated. One address only is allowed to be given “by the priest or the enrolling member, or some responsible person if requested”. A list of approved speakers for the Mothers’ Union is available. This address may deal with purely spiritual subjects, but also with more general and everyday problems of Christian mothers (Brandel-Syrier 1962:92-93).

These concerted efforts at bringing the MU in line with the organisation as established in England never entirely succeeded. Forty years have passed since Brandel-Syrier (1962) conducted her research. The indigenous characteristics of these prayer unions identified by Brandel-Syrier (1962) resonate with my own limited understanding of what currently takes place in Zulu speaking MU branches in the diocese of Natal. In the next section I will discuss three of these characteristics in more detail: the church uniform, extempore praying and preaching, and fundraising. For purposes of this study, these defining characteristics are of

significance as expressions of subjugated *survival* theologies by indigenous African women who are “making a way out of no way”.⁶ They also represent a response to ecclesiastical and colonial leadership by this group of subordinated women and are as such, as I will argue in the next chapter, practices of *resistance*. In as much as the MU is a site where expressions of these subjugated survival theologies occur, it a place for their potential recovery.

7.4 The Mothers’ Union as a site of survival theologies

7.4.1 The church uniform

⁶ Moss (1999:110) makes a similar point about Shona Methodist *manyano* women who carve a space for themselves within the structures of the church that meets their particular needs of daily survival.

On Thursdays, driving through the valleys of Vulindlela, women wearing a variety of church uniforms are evident throughout the day. Thursday is traditionally *manyano*-day. Women meet in their *manyanos* on a Thursday, usually in the homes of one of the members. This tradition probably developed from the practice of laundry women fetching the washing on Monday from their employers, washing on a Tuesday, and ironing and returning the washing on a Wednesday. This was followed through with the colonial practice of Thursday being the designated “off” day for African women in domestic service (Brandel-Syrier 1962; Gaitskell 1981).⁷ Even today, where the practice of full-time live-in domestic servants is not as prevalent as it was in previous decades, Thursday will be referred to as “women’s day” even by women who are not members of an organisation, and also by men. It is primarily the distinctive church uniforms worn by *manyano* women that mark this day as “women’s day”.

Joining a *manyano* group is through a formal ritual ceremony of robing in the specific uniform of the denomination the woman wishes to identify with. At St Raphael’s, Sweetwaters (see Map 2), the robing ceremony takes place during a Sunday service rather than at a Thursday meeting. The uniform, consisting of a black skirt, hat, and girdle, and a white blouse, is placed on the altar and is officially blessed by the priest after the women have made their MU promises. Ceremonially the new members are led out of the church carrying their uniforms by the older members of the organisation. The congregation waits patiently singing choruses while the women don their uniforms. When they re-enter the church, then the celebration really happens! This ritual has come to be known as the “blousing” ceremony.

So significant is the uniform that it is seen as the appropriate dress in which to receive communion. At major regional MU services, a collection is made for those in need and this aspect is known as “washing the blouses”. When I inquired as to why this term was given to this collection, I was not able to illicit much clarity on the matter. What I was told was that washing another member’s blouse was an important act of service and that the collection symbolised this. Perhaps most significantly, in my experience, women choose to be buried

⁷ An interesting aspect of further research would be an investigation into the extent to which Thursday as the designated “day off” for domestic workers was in fact a tradition developed by women themselves rather than the day designated by white employers.

with their uniform, which is carried on top of the coffin and into the grave (see also Brandel-Syrier 1962:49).

Both Brandel-Syrier (1962) and Gaitskell (1981) in their work on the *manyano* movement have attempted to understand the significance of the church uniform. Gaitskell (1981) argues that adopting western clothing was a sign by the first converts of a commitment to new religious beliefs (see also Jean Comaroff 1985:219-228). The church uniform worn by



MU members from St Raphael's at a "blousing" ceremony





MU members at a regional gathering

manyano women should be interpreted as a reassertion of a distinctive Christian dress that proclaimed spiritual allegiance, advertised marital respectability, and was recognised as a reward for upright living (Gaitskell 1981:215). For *manyano* women the church uniform replaced western clothing as the mark of Christian commitment. It also replaced the MU badge as a distinctive marking which was considered adequate corporate identification by white leaders, but was not sufficient for *manyano* members (Gaitskell 1981:216). As a dress code, the church uniform partially overcame what indigenous African women saw as “the lack of symbolic particularity in Western female dress” which made no distinction between young or old, married or unmarried women (Gaitskell 1981:215).

Brandel-Syrier (1962:49) argues that the church uniform is more than a symbol of corporate identification that indicates Christian commitment and status. There is a sacramental element to the wearing of the uniform. “In the donning of the uniform there is transferred an essential quality which is not just associated with it as symbol, but is inherent in the uniform itself and thus conferred upon the wearer” (Brandel-Syrier 1962:49). Jean Comaroff (1985:220) confirms this view, suggesting that the uniform instantiates the ritual practice it represents and, as such, has a “magical” quality. A Methodist minister commenting in the late 1960s on the church women’s uniform, had this to say:

In all the churches they think that when they put on the uniform, they take on the divine power itself ... Our Methodist women say that if they break church law while wearing the uniform they might be strangled by it (Comaroff 1985:220).

I have no doubt that the members of the MU at St Raphael’s Church, Sweetwaters believe

that the uniform is more than a corporate symbol. These are no ordinary garments. For the women they contain supernatural powers. When asked why putting on the uniform is important, a common response is, “*Kimina nje ngiye ngizwe inginika amandla*” [I always feel that it gives me power] (Sophia Ntombela, 6 May 1998, Sweetwaters) and “*kufika amandla ehe ya*” [the power comes, yes...] (Violet Mhlongo, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters). Some women would go as far as to say that when they put it on they are healed from physical illness: “*...uma sengiyigqokayile noma ngigula ngiyasinda kuba khona ukusinda kimina*” [...when I am on it (wearing it), if I am sick I get well, I become healed] (Selinah Ndlovu, 17 April 1998, Sweetwaters), “*...ngcono nje konke ngoba noma ngigula ke nje uma ngike ngathatha yunufomu yami nje ngathatha imedani yami ngayigaxa lapha ngakhuleka ngiye ngizwe ngiba namandla*” [...everything feels better because even if I am sick, once I take my uniform and put it on and pray, I feel the power] (Sophia Ntombela, 6 May 1998, Sweetwaters). Other women alluded to a relief from “not feeling well”: “*Ngizwa ngiphila impela uma sengiyifakile ngizwa kuba mnandi impela egazini lami ngizwa ukujabula nje impela sengiyigqokayile sengihamba sengiphelele*” [I feel better when I put it on I feel good in my blood I feel happy when I have put it on and when I depart being complete] (Josephinah Nene, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters). The “feeling better” suggests much more than a physical relief. It encompasses an overall sense of physical, mental and spiritual well-being, perhaps best summed up in the response that when the uniform is put on, “*Ingenza ngiphila iyangiphilisa*” [It makes me feel alive] (Selinah Ndlovu, 17 April 1998, Sweetwaters). It is this overall sense of well-being, of aliveness, that Delores Williams (1993) would call “quality of life” (section 6.9) in the face of survival struggles.

This aliveness is both a spiritual aliveness and an aliveness that equips Vulindlela women to deal with the harsh physical realities of their world. On the one hand they afford the uniform a spiritual significance.

Ngavatha ngoba ngabona ukuthi lomhlaba ngeke uze ungisize ngalutho... Ya iyunifoma ifuna uyifake ngoba wazi ngempela ngempela ukuthi uqondene nayo iyunufomu, hayi, uyifake nje uthi uyahloba”

I put them on (the uniform) because I realized that this world has nothing to

offer to me... Yes you should wear the uniform only if you know that you are concerned about it, no, not just to make yourself look nice (Selinah Ndlovu, 17 April 1998, Sweetwaters).

Resources gained by putting on the uniform, however, are not simply to endure in an “other-worldly” way. They are survival resources that enable Vulindlela women to deal with life in the here and now.⁸ The uniform provides “status” as it gives a sense of dignity to the wearer, “*Ngiyayithanda ukuba ngiyigqoke iuniform ngoba sengathi kukhona ekukhiphe ngaphakathi enhlizweni yami yangibeka kwelinye ibanga*” [I like to wear the uniform because it seems as if it has taken something out from inside my heart and has put me on a certain position] (Violet Mhlongo, 14 April 1998, Sweetwaters). Putting on the uniform also strengthens, “*...iyasiqinisa iyuniformu...*” [...the uniform strengthens us...] (Sophia Ntombela, 6 May 1998, Sweetwaters). “*Bese ngikhuthala ngisebenze ngikhuthale manje ngoba sengidle into enginika umdlandla wamandla*” [Then I become hard working and work because I have eaten something which gives me strength] (Violet Mhlongo, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters). “*Iyuniformu impela siyayithanda thina ngoba uma sihamba nje siya eSontweni kanje kodwa singagqokile uyabona singayifakile iyuniformu kuye kube sengathi asiphelele angathi izikhali zethu aziphelele*” [We really like the uniform because if we go to Church like this without wearing a uniform we feel as if we are not complete, as if our weapons are not complete] (Sophia Ntombela, 6 May 1998, Sweetwaters). Scott (1990:xi) privileges dignity and autonomy as “weapons” of the dominated (section 7.2). Mrs Ntombela, in asserting her “completeness” through the wearing of her church uniform which is her “weapon”, is asserting her autonomy and dignity in the face of oppression and a daily struggle for survival. The women of Vulindlela wear the uniform because it affords them status where they have none. Infused with God’s power, it brings hope and comfort and healing in the face of illness. As they are provided with strength, they are able carry out the physical demands made upon them in the everyday practices of their lives. The uniform is literally and figuratively a symbol of their autonomy and dignity. They even choose to go to the grave with it displayed on their coffin.

⁸ The work of Henriques (1996) suggests that indigenous African Catholic women in KwaZulu-Natal have similar understandings of the value of their church uniform to those expressed by the Anglican women of Vulindlela.

*Ha uyazi ukuthini ngiye ngifise ukuthi ngangcono ukube kuthiwa ngothi
sengithule ngihambe nayo inyufoma yami bangifake konke nebhantshi
nesigqokayo ngiqhamuke nje*

You know what I sometimes wish that it will be better if when I die I can take my uniform with me, that they put it all on me my blouse and my hat so that I will appear as a complete person (Josephinah Nene, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters).

The church uniform, as an expression of subjugated survival theologies, has an intrinsic value for those who wear it. As I have participated as woman-priest in the life of a congregation with a large MU membership, I have come to realise that it performs another function for poor and marginalised indigenous African women. The church uniform also has a strategic value. Women wear their uniform because it strategically creates space for them to operate in the church in ways that are not normally open to them. In proclaiming their allegiance to the *manyano* movement through the wearing of the uniform, they align themselves with and in a space that they themselves have defined away from domination. As I will argue in section 8.3, the uniform enables these women to operate in the public realm employing their own infrapolitical strategies, codes, and rituals which are a form of resistance to oppressive forces, including church authorities.

This strategic created space is most clearly defined in the Thursday meeting, *manyano* day. It is on this day that women have the opportunity to preach and pray with authority and dignity not to be found anywhere else in the church. Through their practice of extempore prayer and preaching on this day, the Vulindlela women express another form of their survival theologies.

7.4.2 Praying and preaching

Alongside the church uniform, the *manyano* movement is characterised by its emphasis on preaching and praying. Brandel-Syrer (1962) graphically describes her experience of the

praying and preaching that takes place in *manyano* meetings across denominations:⁹

Each meeting has the same general rhythm. The start, a succession of short prayers or Bible readings and hymns, usually led by one or more of the leaders, is slow. Gradually, the audience begins to warm up. Here and there, women begin to sigh or weep softly, until one will start shaking violently in preparation for the moment when “she is taken by the Spirit” and begins to speak. The other women listen intently, in close participation, and while the speaker slowly works herself up to a high pitch of emotion, the feelings of the listeners find in her a channel through which they pour themselves out, and by so doing generate again a renewed tension in the individual who acts as a focus of, and outlet for, the collective mood. This goes on mounting in a wave after wave until a climax is reached. Suddenly, somehow the women decide it is enough, and one starts a hymn in which all others join and all the emotions find their release... When the hymn is ended, the women sit down and wait till another woman starts to “preach” and the whole process begins again. And again the women let themselves be carried away on an ever-mounting wave of emotion, until again all the tension dissolves in song and the women “feel much better afterwards”. This succession of praying, preaching and hymn, speech, and song, like a charging and discharging of emotional tension, is the rhythm of all *Manyanos* I have attended (Brandel-Syrier 1962:34-35).

In my own experience of meeting with women at a Thursday meeting at a time of bereavement, a more simplified successive pattern of preaching and praying exists. One woman is designated the “leader” who is to open the meeting. She will choose the Bible

⁹ Brandel-Syrier’s (1962) discussion of the *manyano* movement is at times problematic. While capturing the vitality of these groups, there is little analysis in her work which is written in a descriptive style. She thus leaves much room for subjective experience and in Gaitskell’s words, “her personal judgements are at times intrusive” (1981:8). Her work does provide helpful insights, particularly given the dearth of written material on these practices of faith, but is a representation of the “other” that at times lacks critical sensitivity (see section 5.5.4).

passage for the day and lead the other women in liturgical prayers including the MU prayer and then begin to preach. Each women in turn will rise to her feet singing a chorus which indicates that she is ready to preach, and then preach around the Biblical text that has been chosen by the designated leader. At times extempore preaching will be interspersed with praying leading to ecstatic signs of the Spirit, which, in my experience, does not necessarily become the focus of the meeting. Usually a woman “overcome by the Spirit” is taken to one side of the room and ministered to by a few of the members. The pattern of preaching and praying continues regardless.

Gaitskell (1981; 1995) has attempted to understand some of the origins of this pattern and argues that itinerant revivalist preachers of the late nineteenth century such as English preacher, William Taylor and the American, Elder Weavers, had a huge impact on the *manyano* movement. “They brought a Christianity that was pietistic and fervent, concerned about repentance and individual salvation, and continuing trust in, and commitment to God. Their style seems to have taken root at this formative time and become entrenched, especially in the *manyanos*” (Gaitskell 1995:212). Revivalism fed into the *manyano* movement in that it fostered a particular religious style and it encouraged indigenous mobilisation and leadership (Gaitskell 1995:213). Itinerant revivalist preachers helped indigenous male leadership to set up evangelistic movements. One such example is that of an American Board Mission (ABM) member, a man named Banda, who was helped by Weavers to start a movement at Umtwalume, Natal, known as the *Amavoluntiya* [the Volunteers] (Gaitskell 1995:213). This movement began once the British started volunteering for the Anglo-Boer war in 1899.

The movement began because, as Banda described it, it was laid on his heart to go out into the fields and pray all night for his people, then call them to repent.

His wife and two other Christian women caught the spirit and accompanied him in preaching from house to house. Others joined in through home meetings at night, where they preached and sang, sometimes travelling nearly all night in their eagerness for revival (Gaitskell 1995:213).

This example illustrates how women, through movements such as the *Amavoluntiya*, were given practice in exhortation which in turn began to shape the format of their own meetings.

A dawn gathering in approximately 1903-4 exemplifies what became the staple fare of all the mission women's prayer groups: hymn-singing interspersed with the sharing of reflections on a Bible passage, and the voicing of personal testimonies and prayer needs, sometimes in scenes of dramatic repentance or emotion... (Gaitskell 1995:214).

This pattern of participatory revivalism that took root in ABM women's organisations in Natal spread to other denominations in the region, then to parts of the Eastern Cape, and eventually to the Transvaal (Gaitskell 1995:215). Hence, when Anglican missionaries wanted to begin the MU at St Cuthbert's Mission in St John's diocese in 1903, great interest was shown by local women largely because of their first hand experience of revival services (Gaitskell 1995:215). Revivalism emerged within a context of indigenous religious practices that embraced the ecstatic and fostered a new "spiritual vitality and self-confidence in women's leadership (Gaitskell 1995:217).

Not only revivalism, but also indigenous faith practices impacted on emerging indigenous forms of Christianity (see Comaroff 1985:194-251), including the *manyano* movement. *Manyano* prayer has important continuities with the style and content of traditional prayers to the ancestors:

traditional prayer was prayed in groups and out loud and was sometimes dramatized in dancing or singing. It was generally extempore and stated material need or losses in a manner "quite free and natural", full of trust in supernatural provision (Gaitskell 1995:218).

But, traditional prayers to the ancestors were public prayers led by senior male members of the family. Women were rendered silent in this context of vocal and communal prayer. Gaitskell (1995:218) argues that Christianity through the *manyano* movement, apart from changing the focus of prayer from the departed to God, sanctioned women's prayer in both the domestic and public spheres.¹⁰ Indigenous African women were not slow to take

¹⁰ Steady (1976) argues similarly that Protestant women's organisations in Sierra Leone provide an alternative avenue for female religious leadership as clerical positions in these churches are mainly

advantage of the opportunity be personally involved in public prayer and ensured that through their *manyano* meetings, they had a safe space in which to do this. Group prayer became a means through which they could voice their burdens as they struggled to survive, putting them in touch with God and helping them “to see their problems in perspective” (Gaitskell 1995:220). “The mutual care offered by women who have heard one another voice their pain in public prayer has long been a major drawcard of *manyanos*” (Gaitskell 1995:220). While praying in public was often allowed, even outside of the Thursday meeting, there was always male opposition to women preaching at Sunday services (Gaitskell 1995:226). Thus the segregated outlet of the *manyano* meeting became a crucial vehicle for women’s expressions of faith and an opportunity to preach from the Bible and publically share their personal experiences (Gaitskell 1995:226). As Gaitskell (1995:227) points out, it was not just the sanction of Sunday preaching that silenced their public voice; they were also sanctioned in the domestic and political spheres. Within the Thursday meeting, *manyano* created a place where their voice was not only allowed, but even expected (Gaitskell 1995:227).

What the *manyano* legitimated... was the eloquence of those tutored only by the Spirit. Lively participation required no special church training, not even literacy. Women learnt their own special hymns off by heart, spoke extempore on biblical passages perhaps introduced by the minister’s wife, and prayed spontaneously about immediate and personal needs (Gaitskell 1995:228).

In recent years as I have participated in *manyano* meetings, not much seems to have changed. Lively participation, fervent preaching from Biblical texts first introduced by the leader, extempore prayer, and sharing personal stories and experiences all reflect aspects of their subjugated survival theologies as expressed in this communal, safe space that they have created for themselves. Thursday is understood as a day different from Sunday. It is a day where their voice is taken seriously.

*Hawu lihle kakhulu elangolweSine phela ngoba siyahlabela sibuye
sishumaye... Ha, ngilithanda kakhulu phela lona ngoba kusuke kwesinye*

restricted to men.

isikhathi kukhona nabanye amakhosikazi amabandla ahlangele kuxubene kakhulu ehe kuxubene uyabona ke... ngiyalithanda nalo isonto kodwa ulweSine luhluka kakhulu phela ngoba sisuke sibaningi, sisuke le ngezinyawo usizwe sihlabelela siza lapha, abeza ngalapha mhlambe sesishayisile abangalapha sihambe sichezuka ekhaya ke

Thursday meeting is more nice because we sing and preach [laughing]... I like it most because usually there are some other women, the combined churches, it is a mixture, you see... I also like a Sunday but Thursday is too different, because we are many, from far away, on foot. You would hear us singing as we come from far away coming here, those who are coming to this side [pointing] when we have closed, then we depart and go to our homes (Lilian Ngcobo, 24 June 1998, Sweetwaters).

There is a recognition that meeting together in this way enables *women* to hear *women's* perspectives on faith. Thursday meetings provide an opportunity to preach from the Bible and gives voice to women who are not normally heard in public places.

Kuhle nako kuhle impela nje kuhle kabi uma sihlangu sithandaze sishumayezane uzwe intshumayelo yomunye uzwe ingena kuyena, nawe uzoshumayela ayizwe omunye naye intshumayelo ingena kuyena naye kube kuhle ke loko uze uti ewu umzwile eshumayela?

It is good that we pray when we meet and preach to each other and you would hear each other's preaching getting into you. And you would also preach, the other one would hear your preaching getting into them, and you would say, "Have you heard their preaching"? (Josephinah Nene, 1 May 1998, Sweetwaters).

When discussing with MU members what they enjoy about their Thursday meetings, they are always careful to tell me how important Sunday services are and how much they enjoy my preaching. But the illocutionary force of many of their responses as to why Thursday

meetings are important to them, indicates the freedom they each feel to participate. Being able to fully participate in Thursday meetings addresses their personal needs directly and, for the women, is what “revives” them.

*Khlukile ngoba ngoLweSine sizofika mhlambe kuthiwe yimina engizovula
inkonzo yomama, ngivule inkonzo yomama uyabona ngifunde incwadi
besengisho kebesebelandela ke abanye... yithina abefundisi, ngiyakudlula
nawe Mfundisi*

Its different because on a Thursday maybe I will open the mother’s service. I will open the mothers’ service by reading the book [the Bible] and I say then the others will follow...we are the *mfundisi*’s, more than you *Mfundisi* (Miriam Zondi, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters).

Mrs Zondi, in stating in a matter of fact way that on a Thursday they were all *abefundisi* [priests], is clearly offering a critique of the church. The church does not encourage women’s participation on a Sunday, a day when, as many women told me, “they sit back and listen to the priest”. On *manyano* day, all women can preach and pray and lead services, sing their songs, and share their personal needs and cares. On this day they are all women-priests, even more than I am on a Sunday, because they have ensured that they do not have any patriarchal forces to circumscribe their expressions of faith.

Members of the MU have created a space in which to practice their survival faith and in which a different discourse from the dominant ecclesiastical paradigm operates. It is this alternative discourse of church women that poses a challenge to women’s theology in the academy. It is a discourse that does not distinguish between a life in the church and a life in the world. It is a discourse that embraces their struggle to physically survive each day. Perhaps the aspect of their discourse that deals most directly with this physical reality involves the practice of raising funds within meetings and services. Fundraising is a common practice in the *manyano* movement and is embarked upon by *manyano* women with the same zest and fervour that is evident in their praying and preaching.

7.4.3 Raising funds

Amongst the women of Vulindlela, occasions where money is publically collected evoke joy and celebration. There is an inordinate capacity to give financially from what is a very small economic base within families. In my years as woman-priest at St Raphael's, Sweetwaters, I have witnessed large sums of money being raised both through formal collections over a number of weeks with a specific project in mind, and spontaneously in response to an act of service to the community or to a crisis such as illness or death. I earlier argued (section 4.2.4) that poor and marginalised women have developed survival strategies which include membership of various savings clubs known as *stokvels*. In outlining *stokvel* fundraising, I suggested that the pattern of fundraising within the MU and the Bible study group was in continuity with *stokvel* principles. As indicated in that discussion, little research has been undertaken on the extent to which *stokvels* embody an integration of practical and religious survival strategies. Within the MU, as with all *manyano* groups, practical and religious survival strategies do merge together.

Both Gaitskell's (1981:221-223) and Brandel-Syrier's (1962:70-83) work on the *manyano* movement show that fundraising is integral to the functioning of these groups. Fundraising within the *manyano* movement, as with their patterns of prayer and preaching, closely follows that which is practised within African Independent Churches (AICs). It is already documented (Comaroff 1985; Kritzinger 1996) that AICs use public forms of collecting funds that enable their financial independence and give rise to community projects. The most common way of raising funds within AIC congregations, and in mission-initiated churches such as St Raphael's, Sweetwaters, is to practice *mjikelezo* [talents].

Mjikelezo is an approach to fund-raising which either sees neighbouring congregations of one denomination or else "ward" groups within a congregation visiting each other on a rotation basis and raising funds for each congregation/group in turn. During the fund-raising, the groups present take turns singing and dancing towards the front of a building, where they place their money on a table. It is counted immediately and the amount announced to the whole group. The groups "compete" with each other in a playful (but

serious) mood to see how much money they can raise for the particular cause, so often a group will go forward to the table more than once. Since each ward or congregation gets its turn, the principle of mutuality, rotation, and regularity - which are so fundamental to *stokvels* - are also operative here (Kritzinger 1996:126-127).

The women of Vulindlela practice *mjikelezo* in their MU meetings, locally, regionally, and nationally. Jean Comaroff (1985:236) argues that this ritualised public form of raising funds within the church context is a personalised appropriation of the power of money, where the giver is identified with the cash gift. Within this context, the giving of money

becomes a vehicle for regaining control over self in the gift, a personalized contribution to the fund of power of the collectivity. The carefully individuated style of donating unvarying amounts removes from money its function as an anonymous marker of quantitative value, thereby throwing into relief its role as qualitative signifier (Comaroff 1985:236).

In the practice of *mjikelezo*, each women brings her gift to the front table using her own individuated and distinctive style of dancing and choosing to give a particular amount. This self-presentation in the practice seems to suggest a “personalized control over money flow” (Comaroff 1985:236). In the giving and presentation of individual gifts there is a reclaiming of the value of self by *manyano* women which affirms their dignity and autonomy.

But this individually reclaimed value does not remain with the self; for the fullest realization of the return to the self of its essence is the ability to give, especially to give a gift that binds donors in a substantial unity (Comaroff 1985:236).

As the group practices *mjikelezo*, or other similar fundraising practices, social bonds are formed through the interweaving of individuals that constitute a community (Comaroff 1985:236). Individual donors are thus also drawing on the collective power of the community. Just as Mrs Nene felt that the preaching of other women was “getting inside” her

(section 7.4.2), so the act of giving money becomes a means through which *manyano* women are bound together communally and are offered resources of power which enable them to survive. Sharing their meagre finances in this way does not deplete their resources, but in effect enhances their ability to survive their daily struggles. *Mjikelezo* as a practice is a response by oppressed women that reflects an aspect of their survival faith which enables them to resist economic domination against the odds.

I am often told by my male priest colleagues that, “these *manyano* women know how to raise money”. They also acknowledge that for this reason they need to “watch that they do not offend the MU”, because without them the congregation would struggle even more financially. Through their ability to raise funds, *manyano* women create a space for themselves within the structures of power that gives them a dignity and autonomy that is measured far beyond monetary value.

Being able to draw on communal power through their financial giving also manifests itself in acts of care and concern for one another in times of need, sickness, or bereavement. As Mrs Mhlongo, the *umkhokheli* [parish leader] told me, “*Uma sesiya ke emizini yabantu sifike siguqe ke sisonte sithandaze kokunye siqondene nogulayo manje lona ogulayo simphathele ushukela saphatha nesinkwa*” [When we go to people’s houses we kneel and worship, sometimes we are coming to the sick, that one who is sick we have sugar and bread and soap] (Violet Mhlongo, 14 April 1998, Sweetwaters). My experience of visiting the bereaved at their homes together with MU members has proved that prayer and silence is always accompanied with the giving of whatever money is available, to offset the costs to the family of the death. Indeed, as they sought to comfort me at the death of my father, they came to my home and prayed and preached and sat with me, and before leaving placed money in an empty saucer on the table. Fundraising practices of *manyano* women are practices of survival faith that integrate their understanding of the power of God and the need to remain physically alive through financial resources.

In discussing the subjugated survival theologies as located within the MU, I have identified three areas for the recognition and recovery of subjugated theologies, namely, the church uniform, extempore praying and preaching, and fundraising activities which include practical

acts of care and concern for one another. The MU as a location of subjugated survival theologies is an example of where women themselves have created space within which to operate. There is, I suggest, also the possibility of explicitly creating new spaces within which subjugated survival theologies can be recovered through a process of collaboration between poor and marginalised women and activist-intellectuals like myself. As an activist-intellectual, I am interested in how we as women create *new places* that facilitate the *sharing* of resources between women of *different* races and classes.

In the next section of this chapter I introduce in more detail the contextual Bible study group introduced in Chapter 2 that I initiated in my role as women-priest at St Gabriel's church, Nxamalala (see Map 2). Establishing this group has been an active attempt to create a place for exploration of women's theology that engages the dynamics of race and class. For it is these dynamics that have shaped our divided relationships as women in South Africa, even in the church, as the history of the MU has shown. The group process also offers the opportunity to explore how an academically trained theologian can offer her critical resources to marginalised women in a process of mutual collaboration whereby she in turn is transformed by an engagement with subjugated knowledges. My particular interest in the process has been to try and understand what role the activist-intellectual can play in securing a safe and sacred site for subjugated survival theologies to emerge (Scott 1990; West 2000). For two and a half years I, together with a field assistant, Nonhlanhla Magubane, met weekly with a group of women who residing in Nxamalala. By locating myself as an activist-intellectual within a group of poor and marginalised indigenous African women, I am consciously shifting the emphasis of this theological exploration away from the academy and to a critical engagement with community wisdom.

7.5 The Nxamalala Bible study group as an exploration site

7.5.1 Doing contextual Bible study

The beginnings of the Bible study group in Nxamalala, an area within the region of Vulindlela, were explained earlier (section 2.5.1). Nine women participants were introduced (section 2.5.2), as was Nonhlanhla Magubane (section 2.6) who as field assistant was an

integral part of the project. The crucial work of this collaborative women's theology project was doing actual Bible study together on a weekly basis.

As a Bible study methodology, I chose to use the contextual Bible study approach adopted by the Institute for the Study of the Bible (ISB) (West 1993; 1999; 2000). ISB engages in Bible study with poor and marginalised communities. This collaborative work is based on the understanding that both formally trained readers of the Bible and those readers who do not have this academic training have resources to offer one another (West 1999; 2000). Given the resonances with my own interests, adopting their contextual Bible study method was an obvious choice. The contextual approach to the Bible, as appropriated in the work of the ISB, is premised on a number of commitments which all assume the central role that the Bible plays in the lives of poor and marginalised communities.

As a starting point, this approach has a commitment to read the Bible *critically* from a particular perspective. There is a recognition that our lived experiences shape our reading of the Bible and "contextual Bible study" has a commitment to the context of the poor and marginalised in South Africa (West 1993; 2000). As a process, it is committed to personal and social transformation.

Clearly such a commitment requires not only an acknowledgement and recognition of the effect of the South African context on ourselves and our reading of the Bible; it also requires an understanding and analysis of our South African context (West 1993:14).

My commitment, however, is more specific. In my work with the Nxamalala women, their context is of crucial importance, and what is of interest is understanding what it means to read the Bible from their context as poor and marginalised *women* (see Chapters 3 and 4). I earlier argued (section 7.2) that it is the disqualified knowledges of indigenous African poor and marginalised women that offer the greatest potential for new interpretations to emerge. The experience of the ISB (see West 1999; 2000) seems to suggest that the critical interpretive resources of academically trained women provide additional resources for an articulation of subjugated theological knowledges.

For the articulation of subjugated theological knowledges to occur through the contextual Bible study process, the Bible needs to be read *communally* and *collaboratively* (West 2000:599). Readers trained in the academy bring their critical theological resources to the process, while those readers not trained in the academy offer a range of interpretive strategies that have been “forged in diverse and difficult circumstances” (West 2000:602).

Collaboration, through communal reading, enables the mutual sharing of these resources and gives expression to a commitment to the recognition and recovery of subjugated theologies of poor and marginalised women (see section 7.2). This communal collaborative activity lies at the heart of my work in the Nxamalala Bible study group.

For this communal and collaborative activity to involve *contextual* analysis within the reading process, an existing *community* consciousness should exist in the group (West 2000:597-598). It is for this reason that ISB tends to work with groups that already have existing organisational structures (West 2000:598). The women who participated in this Bible study process were not an organised group before we started meeting. They were disparate women living within Nxamalala who had some connection with St Gabriel’s Anglican church. While I was convinced that they expressed subjugated theological knowledge as individuals, I was less sure of their community consciousness. It was for this reason that I saw my role, in addition to offering critical theological resources, as assisting in securing a safe site for community consciousness to develop. The contextual Bible study approach was also used as a means to *this* end (see section 7.5.3).

Appropriating the contextual Bible study approach within the Nxamalala group required that I be flexible in my facilitation of the reading of the text. Contextual Bible study as a methodology employs a series of questions on a given text (see West 2000:606-608). The opening and concluding sets of questions relate directly to community consciousness and draw on readings and resources of the group. Between these two sets of community consciousness questions that frame the study are a series of critical consciousness questions related to the text itself. These questions draw on the critical resources of the trained reader to ensure a careful and close reading of the text. Through this cycle of questions, readers move from community understandings of the text, to textual issues, and then conclude by grounding the Biblical text back into their concrete life experience. These structured and

systematic questions provide other ways of interpreting and appropriating the Biblical text (West 2000:601). Poor and marginalised women have “their own hermeneutics of resistance and survival” and through reading the Bible in this way, construct their “lived” and “working” theologies (West 2000:601; see Haddad 1998a). These theologies may be

pre-critical, unsystematic and scattered, and they may draw incongruously on a range of symbols, rituals, readings and ideas, but they are theirs - they are what they live by (West 2000:601-602).

Employing the contextual Bible study method as a strategy for recognising and recovering subjugated survival theologies required some adaptation. Literacy levels were generally low in the group and problems arose because of its focus on text (see Draper 1996; Lategan 1996). Hence, my flexibility in appropriating this approach. My role had, at times, to become more prominent than the method suggests or than I felt comfortable with. Furthermore, in reading the Bible with women in Nxamalala, the text needed to be dealt with in small sections and very repetitively. This meant that the few literate members of the group (or Nonhlanhla Magubane who also read the text) would need to read sections of the text over and over again. Sometimes I related a precise account of the story in addition to offering the socio-critical resources provided for by the approach (West 1999:64). In textually difficult passages, I would narrate the story in simple and contextual ways while attempting to be faithful to the text. At other times I attempted to move beyond text by providing the opportunity for community consciousness to be expressed through drawings and role play. Reading the Joseph story (Genesis 37) from a woodcut by artist Azariah Mbatha, was another attempt to raise critical questions outside of written text.

This exploration process, particularly in the early stages of the group, highlighted for me the complexity of working as an activist-intellectual cross-racially, culturally, and linguistically. In the next section I seek to problematise the process of our collaboration in Nxamalala. At the same time I argue that our common experience as women was sufficient, even before we had secured common ground, to warrant risking collaboration.

7.5.2 Problematizing our collaboration

In entering into the discursive relationship with the women of Nxamalala, I was conscious of Scott's (1990; section 7.2) analysis of encounters between dominant and subjugated groups. I have already suggested that my position in the group is complicated by the various positions that I occupy. On the one hand I represent the dominant as an economically privileged women in ordained leadership. On the other hand, I share gender subordination with the women of Nxamalala and a measure of racial discrimination through my skin colour. This complex positioning suggests that our corporate discourse operates at the range of levels from the public to the hidden realms (see section 7.2).

When we met together for the first time, the complexity of our discourse was evident. I opened the session by suggesting that it was important for us as women to meet together because we cannot always say what we feel in front of men at home or in the church. I went on to say that it was important to study together as women. We might not know the Bible very well and therefore do not know what it has to say about women and how Jesus related to them in the text. This opening statement was not the typical public transcript of a church official, but an attempt on my part to engage the women from my position as a woman. Thembani Khoza¹¹ responded accordingly, confirming that there are some things cannot be said at home in front of husbands. She went onto say that “even in church, when we get married the *umfundisi* [priest] tells them how to behave as a wife and what we must do when we get home”. The rest of the group agreed with nods and affirmative noises. But there were no other verbal responses at this point.

Given the verbal silence of the other women and afraid to push this open declaration by Mrs Khoza (which had surprised me) too hard, I gave the initiative back to the women and asked them to each share their expectations of the group. They were confused by this task. On reflection, this confusion was directly related to my role as priest. While I wanted us to engage in the group primarily as women, they took seriously my role as priest and assumed that what took place would be dictated by my agenda. When they finally responded, much of

¹¹ I indicated in Chapter 2 that because of the personal nature of our discussions, the names of the women attending the Nxamalala Bible study group have been changed to protect their identity and to ensure that this location remains a safe social site for the articulation of subjugated theologies.

their discourse pertained to the public realm. Their comments presumed what they thought I would want to hear or what they ought to say as Christian women. Mrs Khoza once again opened the conversation by suggesting that “she liked to do Bible study very much”. Busisiwe Khabela continued by stating that, “At home you are very busy, your Bible lies on the table unopened because there is no time and too many things to do. But here this is time every week to study the Bible”. Zanele Mwelase added, “I am also pleased to be studying with other women”. Nokuthula Khabela, now feeling that she was the last and should say something said, “I am old and cannot see very well but I am glad to be here to listen to what other women say when they study the Bible”.

The response of Mrs Busisiwe Khabela is significant as it contains within it, the kernel of Scott’s (1990) argument about the discourse of infrapolitics. Her response can be interpreted at two levels. At the level of the acceptable public transcript she is saying, “it is important that we make time to open our unopened Bibles (implying that they are unread) and study”. But embedded within her comment is a coded response which is saying, “we have no time at home for ourselves, there is always work that is required for us to do, this is a place that we can come and be and talk and create and make it our own”. The idea of wanting a place of their own was a notion that developed and grew over the years into a place that was their own, where they found a measure of safety to expose the realm of the hidden.

Suspecting that there would be coded responses, I asked Gladys Ntuli, a member of St Raphael’s church, who had offered to come to the meeting and act as interpreter, to share her experiences of attending a workshop conducted by the ISB on “Women and the Bible”.¹² She had also participated in a contextual Bible study group in Sweetwaters for a short time.¹³ The women listened intently and with interest to Mrs Ntuli. Mrs Khoza, adopting a spokesperson role, responded, “It is heavy to be a woman and that is why it is good that we are meeting in this way”.

¹² This workshop was held at Botha’s Hill, KwaZulu-Natal in September 1996.

¹³ I had made similar attempts to start a group a year before at St Raphael’s. Most of the women who attended this group over about six months were employed full-time and were already involved in the life of the congregation. Eventually the time commitment became too difficult, and the group process gave way to other activities. For the time that the group had operated, it had generated a number of discussions around gender issues in the church as most of the women attending the group were already in leadership in the structures of the church.

The extent to which Mrs Ntuli's involvement in the discussion was able to elicit responses that were not functioning merely as public statements is not that clear. What is clear is that Mrs Ntuli's direct engagement with the women enabled them to articulate one of their major concerns. After much discussion through Mrs Ntuli's interpretation it became evident that the women had been nervous about how they were going to communicate with me. They had been very relieved to see Mrs Ntuli arrive at the meeting. A discussion ensued about the use of language which could potentially be a stumbling block to our collaboration. I acknowledged their apprehension, but also pointed out that this was an opportunity for us to improve our language skills through one another, while assuring them at the same time that I would bring an interpreter along to our meetings.

Nonhlanhla Magubane began working with the group in our third session. Her introduction into the group added a further dimension to our work together. One of the first questions she was asked was what church she attended. When she told them the Apostolic Faith Mission, Mrs Khoza gave a slightly startled response, "The church that does not believe in worshipping the ancestors"! Nonhlanhla looked embarrassed and said that it was true. There was a moment of awkwardness. I was slightly concerned by this interaction and felt the need to reassure the group that her presence and church denomination would not effect what they felt about their faith. It had not occurred to me until then that her church affiliation might have implications for our collaborative work. As became clear through the process of creating a safe space (section 7.5.3), this did not prove to be the case.

While the Bible study group was an aspect of my work as woman-priest, it was also an activist-intellectual women's project that included a research dimension. It was therefore important that I addressed ethical considerations of our work together. In the first meeting I raised the issue of using our discussions for this study. During formal introductions, I explained my relationship with the University of Natal and why it was important that their views about God and faith were important to the writing of theological texts. I pointed out that even at the university, those who teach and those who are training are mostly men and this was part of the reason why I wanted to write about women's faith in God. They seemed excited by this prospect and acknowledged the dominance of men "in the things of the

church”. Related to the question of using their voices in this study was the need to seek permission to tape-record the sessions. I explained the necessity of this for an accurate record of their theological reflections. There was nervous laughter in response and what seemed to me to be reservations about a tape recorder. Mrs Ntuli handled the discussion in Zulu, and the women finally agreed to the taping of the sessions saying that “they would get used” to the recorder. The purpose of the tape recorder was clarified once more and agreement confirmed later in the group process.

Mrs Ntuli’s presence was crucial in mediating the encounter between myself and the women of Nxamalala in the initial meetings. Not only from a practical point of view as she acted as interpreter, but she also enabled the women to voice concerns about our collaboration early on in the process. Through her, aspects of our differing agendas were aired and my own commitment to personal and social transformation had been declared. The extent to which women were feeling pressured to meet together through my involvement, rather than enjoying the opportunity to meet away from domestic responsibilities and pressures, remained ambiguous in the early stages of our work together. But despite this ambiguity, there was sufficient evidence, even at this early stage, that the women were excited at the prospect of meeting together. Drawing on these collaborative impulses, we risked creating a safe, mutual space for the sharing of our theological resources.

There was a good, excited, spirit of anticipation as we left each other on that first day, of what proved to be a difficult first year. Attendance fluctuated considerably at first, and while being certain of my own commitment to the process, I had to accept that I had begun a journey of collaboration that was not mine to control. Living through the frustration and uncertainty of whether we were engaged in a project at all was important to my growing understanding of the extent to which survival shaped the women’s lives. Our work together lasted for two and a half years and the group continues to meet in my absence.¹⁴

¹⁴ Nonhlanhla Magubane had to withdraw from the group process at the end of 1999. For the first three months of 2000, I continued meeting with the women. I used this time to introduce Phumzile Zondi, the gender co-ordinator employed by ISB, who has continued facilitating contextual Bible study in the group.

7.5.3 Creating a safe site

Sharing theological resources collaboratively across race and class requires that a safe, social site be secured (Scott 1990:119). This safe site enables discourse to function, not just at the level of infrapolitics, but allows for the articulation of the hidden transcripts of poor and marginalised women. Scott (1990:119) has argued that it is in these spaces where hidden transcripts are “practised, articulated, and enacted” by subordinate groups offstage, away from dominant forces.

The social site of the hidden transcript are those locations in which the unspoken riposte, stifled anger, and bitten tongues created by relations of domination find a vehement, full-throated expression (Scott 1990:120).

For this full-throated expression to occur, there needs to be a “safe sequestered social site” that operates away from the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant (Scott 1990:120). West (2000:600) has argued that crucial to the work of the socially engaged Biblical scholar is this safe space and sacred place. Here, poor and marginalised women are afforded the opportunity to both engage with one another as they articulate and own their interpretations of faith and to access the theological resources of the intellectual engaged critically with the Christian tradition (West 2000:603). However, as West (2000:601) points out, because of heavy surveillance experienced by poor and marginalised women, there needs to be sufficient time for an articulation and an owning of hidden and subjugated expressions of faith. Securing such a social site is part of the process towards the articulation of the theologies of poor and marginalised women. For survival theologies, hidden and subjugated knowledges, to be given full-throated expression, women such as those of Vulindlela need to secure a safe and sacred space.

Control, surveillance, and repression is part of the everyday life of the women of Vulindlela. During our Bible study discussions, women increasingly were able to articulate to one another how they are silenced in the church, in the community, and in the home. The following three examples illustrate this point respectively:

...nakhona eSontweni anjalo awathandi kugcine izwi lomuntu wesifazane

manje izikhathi eziningi uma sifuna ukwenza into siyacela ukuthi sifuna ukwenza ukuthi uma bethi, “Hayi”, sesizobalalela ngoba siyazi ukuthi hayi ungumuntu ofuna kugcine izwi lakhe.

...even in the Church they do not want a woman's word to be final, most of the time when we want to do something, we ask them [male leaders] and if they say, “No”, we would listen to them because we know they want their word to be final (Thembani Khoza, 7 May 1998, Nxamalala).

Ngike ngaba senhlanganweni ekomitini lokusiza izalukazi eziholayo, kushuthi ke laphaya ekomitini kwakuxubene nje abesifazane nabesilisa. Manje kushuthi ke ukhona usihlalo olokuza amaagenda kanjalo manje izinto abazixoxayo mina njengesalukazi nanjengomama uma ngiveza umbono wokuthi mina kodwa bengingaboni kanjalo bengibona ukuthi kakhulukazi iphuzu lokuthi nje izalukazi ziyasizwa kodwa kungani zingakhulunyelwa ukuthi aziholelwe abantu abasakwazi ukuhamba ngoba kubukeka kubuhlungu ukuthi noma izulu lina noma libalele zithwelwe kanjena izalukazi zithwelwe ngabantu kuwusizi. Uthole ukuthi abakuvumi ke loko yibona abakunqabayo kakhulu ngoba manje yibona bazwelane nohulumeni bathi uhulumeni walahlekelwa yimali kakhulu yayintshontshwa ngumuntu uma ngabe ufika athi ngizokuholela. Hawu ikomiti phela selikhona ngeke wena makoti uma eseshonile umama wakho uzohola imali ngoba sikhona ngiyakwazi, uthole ukuthi ke yiphuzu abangathandi ke ukulilungisa lelo mhlambe ngoba livezwe wumuntu wesifazane ke... ngaleyondlela ke kwaba khona ukuthi ke angiyithandi lenhlangano kangangoba manje ngiyahlehla ngoba angithandanga ngabona sengathi yinto ekimina le uma sengigula ngithwalwe kanje angikuthandanga abe ekhona umuntu ongangisiza. Manje isikhathi esiningi ngamadoda laphayana esinawo isikhathi esiningi uyabona ukuthi abawathandisisi kahle amaphuzu avela ngasezalukazini. Yiloko ke nje mina okwangiphatha kabi phezu kwezinto zonke mina ngabona ukuthi bangakwakha kube kuningi kodwa akwakhelwe phezu kwesisekelo ngoba abakafisi ukusiza isalukazi sakubo.

I once was on a committee which helps the pensioners. The committee is a mixture of men and women. There is a chairperson who drafts the agenda and the like, then the things that they talk about, me as a mother and as a woman if I try to raise my view and say, but this is what I feel, especially about the fact that old women have people who help them, then why can't we negotiate for them, that only those people who can still walk come and take their money, because it looks painful when they walk in the rain or in the sun. You find that they [male committee members] disagree with that. They speak on behalf of the government and say that the government lost much money, people used to steal the money when they were coming to take other people's money. But now that there is a committee you can't as makoti come and take the money on behalf of the deceased mother-in-law because I am there and I know you, then you find that they don't want to address that view because maybe it has been raised by a woman. In that way I started to hate this organisation because I did not like this thing to happen to me when I can't walk people will just carry me while there is someone who could come and take my money. Mostly there are men there they don't like the views that are coming from women. This is what annoyed me most there because I felt that they can do much but it is not on a right foundation because they are not yet willing to help their old women (Themban Khoza, 20 August 1998, Nxamalala).

Hayi, kona kuyenzeka mhlambe kunephathi njengoba thina singaBantu siyaye senze iphathi yenkomo, mhlambe uma sekuhlangene abomndeni sebhuluma uthi uyabeke wena wesifazane bese bethi, "Hayi thula wena"! mhlambe bathi "Hayi phumela phandle wena"! ... Kushuthi bakhishelwa phandle nje kuthiwa nina hambani nokwenza eyenu imisebenzi phandle hayi ukuthi amadoda uma ekhuluma bese uzobeka umbono.

No, it happen sometimes when there is a party, as Bantus we slaughter a cow, sometimes when the family members are gathered together, when you want to say something as a woman they say, "No you just keep quiet"! or they say, "You just get out"! ... They just chase them [women] out and are told to go and

do their own works outside, you don't have to put your views across when the men are talking (Ntombi Shabangu, 20 August 1998, Nxamalala).

In my collaborative work in Nxamalala, it was thus apparent that our group needed to become a safe, sequestered, sacred site where women would have the freedom to give voice to discourse that is mostly hidden, even from one another.

The journey towards securing this site, however, was not straightforward. On reflection, the membership of the group over the two and a half year period could broadly be described as passing through two phases. In the first phase, the group lacked cohesion and was not a *secure* safe space. At times during this period, there was a voicing of what is usually hidden, such as speaking out about oppression by male leaders in the church, though such speaking was often followed by a retreating back into the realm of infrapolitics. An example where this occurred was during the reading of Mark 12:35-44, which tells the story of a poor widow who gives her last coins to the temple treasury. Through the discussion a connection was made between “the scribes who devour widows houses” (verse 40) and the poverty of the widow. Members of the group began to speak out about their experiences of the male leaders in their church. They said that these church leaders oppress women, calling for additional tithes for special occasions which women are expected to give despite the fact that they have no money to feed their children or pay the school fees. It was an extremely frank discussion with a great deal of anger vented. One woman acknowledged that when she found herself in this difficult position, she simply did not attend church until the special occasion was over. The next week, during our group session, I attempted to return to and take this discussion further. Each women in turn indicated remorse that she had spoken out and had said “such terrible things about their leaders”. The group then declared that because they had all felt this way without having spoken to one another during the week, it confirms that God was displeased with their discussion. This incident not only highlights the complexity of trying to penetrate hidden transcripts, but confirms the level of surveillance and resulting fears that pervade the lives of these women, not only in the home and community, but even in the church. When they speak out, but later perceive this to be a threat to their survival, they retreat.

The process of creating a safe site is full of internal contradictions that result from relationships between the women that are circumscribed by social and cultural forces outside of the group. Ambiguities exist within the space that the women have created for themselves, particularly while the site is still being secured, as it was in the first phase of the group life. Certain women wield more influence than others in the group due to social positioning in the community. For example, Mrs Khoza is married to a key lay leader in the church and being an older woman commands respect and authority from younger members of the group. The other women easily deferred to her. While I was aware of this dynamic from early on and tried to deflect conversation to other members, her domination of the discourse was always a factor in our discussions.

During this initial phase, both Anglican and non-Anglican women attended the group sessions. From early on, I noted a slight tension about the presence of non-Anglican women whenever issues concerning the congregation of St Gabriel's arose. Mrs Khoza often referred to the need for the group to get involved in upgrading the church building and implied that the involvement in the group of those not belonging to the Anglican church was a problem. This tension was exacerbated by a decision within a few weeks to move the meeting from a Tuesday to a Thursday, which is traditionally the meeting day of women's *manyano*'s [church organisations] in the area (see section 7.4.1). While no women came to the group in church uniform, the day of the meeting did raise the unspoken question as to whether our identity as a women's church group was denominationally linked. While the non-Anglican women continued to attend in the initial phase of the group, I was the one who primarily stressed the need to include all women from the community.



Women of the Nxamalala Bible study group



Nxamalala women dressed in their *manyano* uniforms

While internal dynamics within the group sometimes worked against securing a safe site initially, there were also external contributing factors. Meeting fortnightly was not regular enough to develop the necessary trust. Women with all the demands on their time found it difficult to establish the group meetings as part of the rhythm of their lives, resulting in irregular attendance by members. We all agreed after a few months to meet on a weekly basis. Perhaps an even greater external constraint was the poor social infrastructure within the community. The road up the hill to the church was impassable in rainy weather which dictated my access to the community. My car, the road, the mud, and the rain featured prominently in my notes of that first year. Quite frequently I would not make it up the hill

and would abandon the car in someone's yard and Nonhlanhla and I would walk the rest of the way. It was only about a year to eighteen months later that the road was upgraded and widened and water pipes put in, which reduced the mud and made traversing the road to the church much easier.

Other survival factors in the women's lives made securing this space difficult. Illness of husbands or children, shopping in town on public transport, and pensions that needed to be collected all took priority over group meetings. In the second phase of the group process there was a far greater stability in the attendance of the meetings and these practical survival issues did not seem to play such a major role in absenteeism. One factor that remained determinant in whether women were able to attend or not throughout the group process was the issue of employment. Temporary jobs, and in one instance a permanent position, immediately excluded women from attending no matter how committed they felt to the group.

The group, which felt a more safe space in the last year of our work together, took on a much stronger Anglican identity with more married unemployed women from the church taking a greater interest in the meetings. Trust and friendship grew amongst the Anglican members as they met more frequently in other church related activities. In addition, the social infrastructure of the community improved. Slowly a site that was sacred, safe, and sequestered was forged.

Studying texts such as 2 Samuel 13:1-22, which tells of the rape of Tamar, played a direct role in forging trust amongst the women. It was a deeply personal subject that was never openly discussed. Doing contextual Bible study together had enabled the articulation for the first time of that which had never been confessed to one another before. Mrs Thandiwe Mdluli poignantly describes the inability of women to speak about matters such as rape to one another (BSG, 22 April 1999, Nxamalala):

TM: *Ngicabanga ukuthi uma ngivelelwe yinkinga mhlambe
ngingasaba ukutshela abantu balapho ngihlala ngakhona bese
ngithi hayi ake ngiye kumama uKhambula. Angithi uma
sesixoxa sobabili uzokwazi ukungitshela.*

I think that if I encounter a problem I can be scared to tell the people around where I stay, then I can decide to go to mama Khoza. When we discuss it together she will tell me.

TK: *Ukuthi wenzenjani...*

What to do...

TM: *Ehe* [yes].

All: [Agreeing]

TM: Ja, I will run away to Mrs Khoza.

BH: Ja, because we have talked about it here .

TM: *Ehe* [yes].

TK: *UNkulunkulu asiphe ikhambi.*

God will give us a solution.

TZ: *Nami uma kukhona okungixakile ngiyaya kumama uKhoza.*

When I have a problem I normally go to Mrs Khoza.

TM: *Ngempela kubi ukutshela omunye umuntu nje umsukele ngoba uzosizakala ajabule kodwa uma ngabe uzotshela lo oyaziyo lendaba uzounderstanda kalula akuzufana nalona ozohlekisa ngawe.*

It is bad to tell another person because they will ridicule you

and feel happy, but if you tell the one who knows about this thing she will easily understand unlike the one who will just ridicule you.

Surveillance is pervasive, even by other women. Even a discussing a gender issue such as rape with your neighbour elicits fear that it would reflect badly on their roles as mothers. Rather than risk derision, they opt for silence. Over four weeks of discussing the rape of Tamar, women became more open about their feelings and concerns regarding rape. In the final discussion, I invited the women to do a role play of the story set in the Nxamalala context. Having earlier discussed how they could not share such things with women in the community, they interestingly placed one of the foci of the play on the trust and support that women had amongst themselves. The play opened with one woman screaming loudly that her daughter had been raped. Others then ran to her assistance and called a community meeting. The play ended with them all marching to the police station with a memorandum. This opportunity to act out rape in the community was an articulation and enactment of what is normally hidden. The group had come to represent the safe site in which to do this. This articulation and enactment in turn fostered greater trust amongst the women, as is reflected in the following conversation that took place a few weeks later (BSG, 19 August 1999, Nxamalala):

TM: *Uma sithembana nje ungakwazi ukuxoxa nabantu obonayo ukuthi niyathembana, mhlawumbe njengoba sihlala kanje sizothembana sijwayelane. Uma nithembana ningakwazi kodwa uma ningathembani ngeke nikwazi. Ngoba ngicabanga ukuthi Mfundisi njengoba esihlanganisa kanje kushuthi ukuhamba kwesikhathi sizokwazana sithembane futhi. Siyabonana angithi ja...*

If we trust one another you can talk with the people that you trust, perhaps as we sit like this here we will end up knowing each other and trusting each other. If you trust one another you can but if you don't trust one another you cannot. Because I

think *Mfundisi* has called us to this place it means that in the long run we will trust each other and trust each other. We are teaching each other, yes...

TK: *Angithi mama uMdluli uchaza ukuthi kuyimanje siyafundana ukuthi singomama abanjani?*

Mama Mdluli do you mean that right now we are learning from each other as to what kind of women we are?

TM: *Ehe, ngoba umuntu umbona nje ekhuluma exoxa ukuthi lomuntu unje unje, ngicabanga ukuthi namanje sesiyazana.*

Yes, because you can easily see a person as she talks, I think even now we know each other.

As our group sessions increasingly became a safe and sequestered social site, the women began to refer to it as “our organisation”. This had a direct reference to other church women’s organisations and *manyano* groups. Even though the group did not wear a uniform, it began to take on a life of its own with its own rituals: how we arranged the benches each week, where people sat on the benches, choruses to begin with, opening and closing the meeting with prayer, and so forth.¹⁵ As it took on this ritualised life, the women themselves began to identify the group as their “organisation”. In a closing prayer at one of the sessions, God was asked (BSG, 19 August 1999, Nxamalala),

...Phuma nathi Nkosi yami kuyona lenhlangano sesiphinda emakhaya ethu ahlukene Moya oNgcwele maqede Nkosi yami usisize kuthi imithwalo esinda ngaphakathi uvume Nkosi yami siyithwale ngokubekezela maqede bese sesiza kuwe Nkosi eNgcwele...

¹⁵ A bench was always put in the middle of the group on which the tape recorder was placed. Even in its presence the women felt safe. It too had become part of our ritualised life.

Be with us my Lord as we depart from this organisation, as we are going to our different homes, Holy Spirit. May you help us, my Lord, so that the burdens that are heavy within us will be borne with patience and then we will come to you Holy Lord...

From early on in the Bible study process, there was an application of the Biblical text to their lives of struggle. This often referred to personal issues experienced by a particular member. The group was used as a place where the Bible brought comfort and solace and the members embraced their pastoral role to one another. While studying the book of Ruth, Mrs Thoko Zitha, a young widow, was comforted by other members of the group who encouraged her to remember that God helped Ruth and the same would be true for her (BSG, 30 July 1998, Nxamalala):

TK: *Sasihamba nomakoti sibuzana ngelinye isonto sikhuluma ngayo lendaba kaRuth uthi umaSibiya awu mama kodwa uyayizwa lendaba nje ukuthi ingathi ikhuluma nami. Yena ke usemncane njengoba esehlala yedwa nje, ngithi mina impela nje yamhlaba umxhwele kodwa siyabonga ukuthi isigcino nasiya mhlambeni naye ngelinye ilanga uNkulunkulu uyomsiza.*

We once asked each other one Sunday, we were talking about this story of Ruth. MaSibiya [Mrs Zitha] was saying, Mama do you hear this story that it seems as if it is directed to me? She is young as she is staying alone, it really impressed her. But we are thankful because this is the end, perhaps one day God will help her.

TM: *Uzomthola umkhwenyana.*

She will get a husband.

TK: *Noma engatholile indoda nje ngenye indlela uNkulunkulu ayomsiza ngayo enhliziyweni yakhe kodwa uNkulunkulu*

akusize.

And not just by getting another husband but in a certain way that God will help her within her heart, but God will help you [speaking to Mrs Zitha].

During a study on 2 Kings 5:1-14 in which we focused on the young slave girl who had been taken from her home. As the group meeting was about to end, Mrs Khoza, whose daughter had disappeared without trace during the political violence in the area, broke down crying and said (BSG, 3 September 1998, Nxamalala):

...kubhulungu ngempela ukulahlekelwa wumtanakho njengoba sifunda lento nje uma singabheka mhlambe abazali balengane abaphindanga bakhululeka. Ngithanda ukudlulisa kodadewethu ukuthi ngempela abanakelele uma sesiya lapho ngoba ayikho into ebhulungu njengaleyo ngoba umtanakho uma wamthuna...buyadlula lobhulungu obuzwayo, manje uma ungaboni lutho nje kumane kube bhulungu nje. Ngithanda ukubatshela ke odadewethu ukuthi into eyenzeka lapha ibhulungu kodwa yaphila ke yona kodwa kwakubhulungu kubazali balentombazane.

...it is too difficult to lose your child. As we are reading this, if we can look at it we can find that the parents of this child never felt free again. I want to convey this message to my sisters here that they must be careful in this because there is nothing so painful like that because if you buried your child... the pains pass away, but if you didn't see anything, it is painful. I want to tell my sisters that what happened here is painful even though she [the young slave girl] was alive, but it was painful to her parents.

Others in the group immediately comforted her and acknowledged her pain.

What also developed over time in relation to the application of the Biblical text to their context was the increasing spontaneity with which they overtly referred to the patriarchal

oppression that they experience in their homes and in the wider community within which they live. They were able to share not only their personal struggles, but also their common oppression as women. This hidden transcript was being articulated and enacted with increasing frequency, which enabled aspects of their subjugated survival theologies of faith to begin to emerge more clearly.

7.5.4 Emerging survival theologies

Survival, to many liberationists, is seen to be a minimalist notion that merely keeps poor women locked in their oppression. But for these women, their faith is what keeps them alive, literally. When asked how God has helped them in their lives, their immediate and spontaneous response is, “I am alive”. This response evokes no pity, in fact to the contrary. It is filled with a sense of thanksgiving and acknowledgement of a God who saves, protects, nurtures, and keeps them and their children safe against all odds. At the heart of survival theologies is a lack of distinction between material and spiritual realities. This lack of distinction between these two realities results in these theologies being “incarnational” whereby “the rhythms of the spiritual life are inextricably and ontologically intertwined with the daily rhythms of material, physical existence” (Cochrane 1999:13, 174.) The incarnational nature of survival theologies is what distinguishes these incipient theologies from dominant theologies.

Literal survival is inextricably linked to an understanding that God is working in their lives as *women*. Survival of the human race is attributed to women.¹⁶ This is evident in a discussion on Exodus 1:8-22, where the Hebrew midwives are ordered by the king of Egypt to kill all male children born to Hebrew women. Towards the end of a group meeting, I asked the women what they thought this text could teach us as women today. Mrs Thandiwe Mdluli responded (BSG, 12 August 1999, Nxamalala):

Isifundisa ukuthi bonke lababantu abaphilayo lapha emhlabeni baphila ngenxa yomuntu wesifazane ngoba ukuba baqhubeka babulala abantu lababelethisi kushuthi abantu ngabe bancane.

¹⁶ Mercy Oduyoye (1996:131) argues the identical point.

It teaches us that all the people are living on earth because of women, because if the midwives continued killing people there would be fewer numbers of people.

Survival theologies as incipient theologies have a gendered face. Their context is the extended family in which women are seen to ensure the survival of communities by holding the family together. Mrs Janet Nzimande had this to say on the matter (BSG, 12 August 1999, Nxamalala):

...abantu besifazane bayakwazi ukuhlala nemindeni yabo noma abantu besilisa bengekho kodwa abantu besilisa bayahluleka ukuqoqa nabantwana abantu besifazane bengekho...Wukuthi amakhosikazi ngicabanga ukuthi mhlawumbe asizwa nguNkulunkulu awanike amandla okuthi akwazi ukuthi ahlale aqoqe abanwana ahlale nabo.Amadoda ayehluleka abone sengathi mukhulu kakhulu lomthwalo ashiye phansi...Ngicabanga ukuthi amandla isuke iwaphiwe nguNkulunkulu ngoba nalapha eBhayibhelini kuyashiwo ukuthi wabenzela ukuthi babe nemizi.

...women are able to stay with their families even without men but men are not able to keep their children without women...I think women do that with the help of God who grants them power to keep their children together and to stay with them. Men fail and they tend to think that it's a heavy burden and they leave...I think they [women] get the power from God because even here in the Bible it says that God gave them families.

Implicit in Mrs Nzimande's response is a critique of patriarchy. The women of Nxamalala do not doubt that the burden of holding the family together rests on their shoulders, and even in some cases they need to mediate and protect children from the wrath of the patriarchal home. In a discussion that arose around their children becoming involved in crime, Mrs Them bani Khoza made this statement (BSG, 9 September 1999, Nxamalala):

*Yebo nathi siyethemba sithemba yona iNkosi, nathi njengoba singomama nje
sihlala emakhaya sikhulisa izingane kukhona into eyenzekayo ingane yenze
icala uthole ukuthi yicala alivumi manje ukulunga ubabab wayo uyavutha.
Manje ungazike ukuthi lento uzoyibuyisela kanjani esimweni sayo ngoba
indoda uyayithanda ingane uyayithanda mhlawumbe kufanele isolwe kahle
ingane uthole ukuthi indoda nje ivuka uKhayini ithatha umshiza ekhaya
nemikhonto. Zonke lezozinto ezinjalo zike zibe nzima.*

Yes we also trust in the Lord, as women who are raising up the children there is something that happens when a child has committed crime, and you find that his/her father becomes too hot [very angry]. Then you don't know what to do to bring this to order because you love a child and you love his/her father but you feel that the child is supposed to be treated fairly. The husband would just act like Cain, he would just take a big stick and a spear, such things are too hard.

When I probed further about how they dealt with such situations, Mrs Khoza responded by saying that she prays to God for help to calm down her husband. Mrs Thandi Mdluli then suggested,

*...sisebenzisa wona lamacebo lawa mhlawumbe uma kune family yakhe,
uhambe ucele ukuthi ayimncenge.*

...we use these strategies, like if there is his family around, you go and ask them to talk to him.

Prayer and practical strategies work hand in hand in the lives of these women. Each day as they are confronted with illness, hunger, unemployment, even death through political warfare, their talk is about how they prayed to God and “made a plan”.

Biblical texts that overtly raised these survival themes, and even those that did not, evoked responses that show how their lives in the world are bound to their faith in God. Through reading the Biblical text contextually and collaboratively, elements that constitute their

survival theologies are evident. Memories of the political violence were evoked through the story of the women who anointed Jesus' feet with her hair in Luke 7:36-50. The presence of an elderly woman in the group on that day, who had been deeply affected by the political violence and spoke about the need to forgive one another, prompted Mrs Khoza to respond (BSG, 5 August 1999, Nxamalala):

Ngisacela ukusho okunye okuthile nje ngokuthethelela, kulikhuni ukuthethelela kodwa lomama lona ungumakhelwane wami kakhulu ulaphaya eduze kwami. Lomama lo washiswa ngesikhathi sodlame washiswa yizihlobo zakhe ezashisa umuzi wakhe, babembulala nje eqinisweni wasinda ngoNkulunkulu. Wamuka ke wahamba wayohlala eBulwer zangafa ke izingane kodwa wafa ke umuzi wakhe waphela nya. Kodwa ke uzithethelelele izitha zakhe ababulali bakhe kade ebangcwaba nje ngoba yizona esezife kuqala. Ngamncoma ke ukuthi unesipho esihle ngoba ukwazi ukuthethelela umuntu okade embulala, besikuxoxa nje khona manje naye unesipho esihle yena ngoba uyakwazi ukuthethelela umuntu.

I want to say something about forgiveness, it is too hard to forgive but this woman is my neighbour, she is very close to me. This woman got burnt during the times of violence, her relatives burned her houses. In fact they were trying to kill her and she survived for God's sake. Then she moved to Bulwer her children survived but her houses got burnt. But she forgave her enemies, she attended the funerals of the people who were killing her because they have already died. I was happy for her because she has a gift of being able to forgive somebody who have tried to kill her.

As the woman in the text needed forgiveness, so did everyone who had killed family members during the political violence. The survival faith of the women of Vulindlela enabled them to make the connection between faith of the tradition and faith as a lived reality of survival.

This is further illustrated when we read the story of the healing of the man at the Beth-Zatha pool in John 5:2-9. Reading this text became a reminder of how God had healed daughters or

mothers of group members that had nearly died. In the discussion, many of the women attested to this fact, the testimony of Mrs Lindiwe Khumalo being but one example (BSG, 12 February 1998, Nxamalala):

Ngibona sengathi lencwadi ivulelwe mina ingivusela ubuhlungu. Ngangingomama wagula buhlungu kabi enganakwe wumuntu, kodwa ngamandla kaNkulunkulu wahlala emhlabeni kwaze kwafika isikhathi wamthatha. Ngase ngifuna nokucela emsebenzini ngizohlala ekhaya. Ehlala yedwa ekhaya esegaqa ngamadolo. Aphumele esigcakini alale koze kuqhamuke noma onext door bazomthatha bamfake endlini. Kuze kuqhamuke namakholwa amanye ke azomgeza amfake endlini. Esehlala nabantu bangaphandle kanjalo kubukuqhamuke uBhuti sometimes ezombheka, lento ke engathi iqondene nami.

I feel that this scripture is directed to me. It brings pains to me. I once had a mother, she was seriously sick and nobody was taking care of her. But due to the power of God she remained until the time came for her to pass. I even wanted to leave the job and come back home to her. She was alone crawling outside to the sun until the neighbours came to bring her back to the house. Sometimes the Christians come to wash her and bring her to the house. She was always with the people who are not relatives, sometimes my brother used to come to see her. This is directed to me.

Likewise, the story of Martha and her sister Mary (Luke 10:38-42) was a reminder of how women work in the kitchen and are refused entry into the party by male family members (BSG, 20 August 1998, Nxamalala):

TK: *Kodwa isigcino futhi kugcina uNkosikazi ngoba iphathi uma izokwenziwa ekhaya nguNkosikazi ozolungisela yonke lephathi ukuze umcimbi, ube muhle uNkosikazi uma engalungisanga awuphumeleli umcimbi.*

But there is a woman at the end because if there is going to be a party at home, it is a woman who prepares everything for this party so that the party goes well. And if a woman does not prepare for it, an occasion does not become a success.

BH: [Laughing] Ja, they just sit and enjoy themselves.

TK: *Ja bona bafuna ukuzojabula phela ngoba okokuqala nje nisaxoxa ukuthi uyoba nini kufalele ukhaya uqoqe zonke izinto ezodingeka ngalelolanga kodwa umbono wakho awubalulekile uma esehlangene namadoda akubo.*

Yes, they just want to come and enjoy themselves, when you are initially talking about when the occasion is going to take place.. you have to start cleaning the home and prepare the things that will be needed in that day, but your views are less important when he is with his brothers.

All: [Laughing]

NS: *Uma sebefikile, “mfowethu hayi wena mfowethu asikhulume nawe”. “Hayi wena uthule ke nawe uphumele phandle”.*

When they have come, “my brother let me talk with you, my brother”. “Not you, and you just shut up and go out”.

TK: *Kodwa umcimbi uphumelele nje nguwena.*

But the occasion becomes a success because of you.

NS: *Nguwena obukade wenza zonke izinto lezi.*

You are the one who has been doing all these things

Connections made between the stories in the Biblical text and the lived reality of survival faith indicated a reliance on prayers to God by the women who simultaneously are proactive in deciding what action to take against the threatening circumstances of their lives.

Threatening circumstances for women in Nxamalala can be associated with cultural practice. Reading Biblical texts contextually as a group, particularly those where cultural patterns between indigenous African and Israelite cultures are similar, provide hints of a cultural critique. As suggested earlier (section 6.7.3), the Ruth-Naomi story is an example where some cultural critique took place on the oppressive elements in the relationship between mothers and daughters-in-law. In reading this story, kinship and family relationships also took on significance as the women made a connection between Ruth's relationship with Boaz and what they perceived to be an oppressive practice in Zulu culture of widows being obliged to marry their brother-in-law on the death of their husband (BSG, 16 July 1998, Nxamalala). There was an acknowledgement that in order to physically survive they are forced to participate in this practice. As one member exclaimed (Pumla Ngema, 16 July 1998, Nxamalala):

Leyonto iyakhubekisa kufuneka ubenjani ugwinye ilitshe iyakhubekisa leyonto kufuneka ugwinye ilitshe inhliziyo yakho iqine ngaphakathi ingaphatheki kufanele uhlale la.

This thing is tempting, you have to swallow a stone and your heart should be strong inside, and you should stay here [alone].

A similar connection was made when we read the Joseph story (Genesis 37) as portrayed in the woodcut of the artist Azariah Mbatha. The fact that Jacob had sons from different wives and showed various measures of love to each, raised issues pertaining to polygamy and the implications of the practice for women (BSG, 27 May 1999). Group members began to share experiences of how they had been personally affected by polygamy within their families, as is illustrated in the following example (BSG, 27 May 1999):

TK: *Nakhona lapha kumaZulu nami umama wami babebabili
kubaba sengiyayibona lento ukuthi wo kanti yayifanele yenzeke.*

To Zulus my father had two wives now I understand why this happened.

BH: So are you the child of the *indlovukazi* [the first one] or the *intandokazi* [the loved one]?

TK: Intandokazi.

All: [Laughing]

NZ: *Nguyena owayedla ubhedu umama kalona, sasakhe kanje
nguyena owayedla ubhedu, ezakandlovukazi izindlu zazisindwa
ezakubo kalona zazishelela uma ungena.*

Her mother was a favourite we were neighbours she was a favourite, the houses of the *indlovukazi* were cleaned with cows' dung but her mother's houses were shining.

TZ: *Lona omunye yena?*

What about the other one?

NZ: *Kwakungubulongwe.*

It was cows' dung.

TK: *Kuyinto embi kakhulu kabi.*

It is a very bad thing.

NZ: *Kodwa babezwana omama ubaba wakhe wayekwazi ukuphatha abantu, kodwa ke uswidi isitikiswidi asikwazi ukufana noshokaleti.*

But her mothers liked each other her father was able to handle them, but a stick sweet will always be different to the chocolate.

All: [Laughing]

Perhaps even more threatening than these cultural practices for the women of Vulindlela, are social problems faced by the community (see Chapters 3 and 4). There are numerous examples of how our contextual study of the Bible raised social issues that highlighted women's experience of survival faith in the face of near death. I have already referred to the example of AIDS that emerged from the reading of Mark 5:21-43 and the issue of rape and domestic violence from the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22. In studying the story of the Hebrew midwives in Exodus 1:8-22, women began to discuss the questions surrounding the abortion debate. While implying that abortion was equal to killing children, stories were told in the group of the extreme measures some women take when they feel desperate about another mouth to feed (BSG, 19 August 1999, Nxamalala):

TK: *Ibucayi kakhulu lendaba.*

This thing is too delicate.

CN: Ja, too much.

TK: *Lubucayi kakhulu kabi loludaba ngempela, kushuthi ke manje siveza imibono yethu ukuthi uma kungathiwa yimina, singabuka sengathi wudaba engingalugcina mina ngedwa kodwa ngazi ukuthi ngeke ngiyibulale ingane kodwa futhi ngingatsheli muntu kube yimfihlo yami ngoba lubucayi kakhulu loludaba.*

This thing is too delicate indeed, we are raising up our own opinions about this, if it was me I feel that it is something that I would just keep as a secret, but I wouldn't kill a baby, but I wouldn't tell anyone because this thing is too delicate.

CN: *Kodwa abanye bayakwenza lokho kunamhlanje bayazikhipha izisu zezingane zabo.*

But other people still do that today they help their children to abort babies.

All: *Ehe* [Yes]

NZ: *E Edendale laphaya ethoyilethi, intombazane yathatha ingane yayilahla ethoyilethi.*

At Edendale in the toilet, a girl took a baby and threw him in the toilet.

NM: *Ingane yakhe?*

Her own child?

NZ: *Ehe, wayifaka kucwazi kwadla ukuthi nali iphoyisa liyabuka lathula kancane.*

Yes, she put him in a plastic bag but the policeman was watching and observing.

TM: *Esibhedlela?*

At the hospital?

NZ: *Cha emizini yabantu wayifaka ethoyilethi.*

No in a homestead, she put him in the toilet.

TK: *Labantu?*

A public toilet?

NZ: *Ehe, bambona kodwa abantu igazi seliyehla... wabuza wathi, "kwangena wena lapha ethoyilethi ngathola igazi seligcwele phansi..."*

Yes, but people saw her and the blood was pooling and running down on her legs...he [the policeman] asked her, "you have entered here and I am finding this blood all over the floor...".

TK: *Bambopha yini pho?*

Did they take her to jail?

NZ: *Ehe wathathwa ngamaphoyisa.*

Yes she was taken by the police.

All: [Amazed] Hmm

In discussing social problems such as abortion, there are often allusions to the complicity of patriarchy in exacerbating women's struggle to survive these rampant external forces, without consensus necessarily being reached as to how women should respond. However, the corporate articulation and sharing of life experiences increasingly became important to the process of securing a safe social site which in turn enabled survival theologies to begin to emerge.

Subjugated survival theologies have begun to emerge in an embryonic form in this safe, sacred, and sequestered site that we have forged together. The effects of studying the Bible contextually in this social site where differences of race, class, culture, and language have been embraced, has had an impact on all of us: myself, Nonhlanhla, and the women of Nxamalala. We all agree that we have been changed and that we articulate our faith in new ways because of our collaborative work.

7.5.5 Effects of our collaboration

As I earlier suggested (section 2.6), Nonhlanhla Magubane attested to the impact that participating in the group had on her life. It has alerted her to cultural patriarchy and has caused her to rethink what it meant to be an *African* woman. Aspects of her faith have been challenged as she has journeyed away from a pietistic understanding of salvation to a view that integrates faith with daily life struggles. Through this collaborative work, asserts Nonhlanhla, she has become more confident in challenging gender oppression in the church and in society.

Nonhlanhla increasingly became more prominent in the group process over the two and a half year period. In the early weeks, she simply got on with the task at hand, which was to interpret the proceedings. The first signs of her taking her own initiative in the process began about two months later. Soon thereafter, I began to notice that the women themselves began to use her as a mediator between myself and themselves. Initially, before our site was secured, the women sometimes felt unable to ask me about personal matters directly because I was the priest. Nonhlanhla's presence enabled the women to find a way of communicating with me as *woman-priest*.

As trust grew in the group, so did Nonhlanhla's position within it. It was the beginning of a new year, about six months after we began meeting, that Nonhlanhla did not arrive for our meeting. The women were unnerved by her absence. While this manifested itself in the fact that we were all nervous about the implications of trying to cross the linguistic barriers, I believe it also related to a deeper sense of the importance of her role and connection to us all.

Reflecting back, I realise it was after this session that I began to engage with her more consciously about the dynamics of the group on our journey home to the suburbs where her work was based. In turn, as I did this more, she started taking more initiative in offering opinions as to how she saw things developing in what was taking place in our interaction in the group.

Increasingly as the trust between her and I developed, I began to ask her to help me interpret more than just the words the women spoke, but also their actions which were so often coded in forms unfamiliar to me. While usually speaking about unfamiliar cultural practice in the group discussions, I also drew on her insights into cultural issues when I did not feel free to ask the women themselves. This was usually the case when I was afraid of being offensive or of already having offended through some form of cultural insensitivity. In one session, the discussion moved into deep sharing about the time when the community was wracked by political violence. In facilitating the discussion, I probed quite directly about what had happened and then became worried that I had pushed the women into saying things they had not wanted to. Nonhlanhla allayed my fears and helped to bring a necessary perspective on the boundaries of the space we were creating. It was a reminder too, that the women of Nxamalala *speak or remain silent* as they choose.

Discussing cultural issues that effected us all as women, prompted Nonhlanhla to discuss with me personal issues effected by cultural practices. Many of these had arisen as a result of our work together and her contact with other indigenous African women who held more explicitly feminist views.¹⁷ I remember having a conversation around marriage and how to deal with family expectations concerning the “way things are done”. We talked about what she should do if she is “proposed”¹⁸ and unhappy about the arrangement, and how could she resist her family pressure to conform. Through this discussion it became clear that working with myself, the Nxamalala women, and other women’s groups enabled her to resist marrying against her will.

¹⁷ She was by this stage also working with the gender worker from the Institute for the Study of the Bible.

¹⁸ A way of saying that a man has asked a senior male family member for her hand in marriage.

It was also at this point that she began to assert herself in an independent role in the group. She began a ritual at the beginning of the meetings whereby she would lead the women in singing and dancing. Significantly, she assumed this role one week when I had to leave the group to go and make a phone call at one of the homes nearby. I returned to find her having taken charge and there was much merriment and enjoyment all round. She commented afterwards that she had been inspired through working with the staff of the Institute of the Study of the Bible. But this ritual continued and the women themselves marked this day out with this comment: “now Nonhlanhla feels at home with us”.

In the final months of our working together, the relationship between Nonhlanhla and I became more collaborative as we jointly reflected on the process on the way home. I would seek her advice over difficult personal encounters in the group, as well as concern over decisions made concerning money which I saw as potentially divisive. During these final stages, I remember Nonhlanhla asking me my view of ancestors as she was in a dilemma concerning a personal family matter and needed advice! As was indicated earlier (section 7.5.2) by Mrs Them bani Khoza, Nonhlanhla’s church denomination frowned upon Christians acknowledging the ancestors in their lives. The group process, however, had re-created her and re-constituted her understanding of faith to such an extent that she was questioning the views she had previously held.

Nonhlanhla also began to extrapolate what we were learning together as women in the group to her church context. Our discussions on AIDS as a result of studying Mark 5:21-43, prompted Nonhlanhla to begin talking about needing to “do more” concerning the AIDS issue in her church which is situated in the rural area of Bulwer, KwaZulu-Natal. Shortly thereafter, she initiated a youth programme in the church which included AIDS education.

I too began to extrapolate my group learnings to other contexts. This has primarily been through theoretical reflection on African women’s theology in the academy and in my practice as *woman-priest* within church structures. Coming to understand *survival* as a theological construct crucial to the women’s theological project, has had a strong impact on my theological reflection and practice. It has challenged the way I personally view myself as

a women seeking liberation from gendered oppression and also the way in which I speak about women's theology in the academy. I have become bolder in foregrounding poor and marginalised women's situations of survival, and speaking out about their oppression in meetings of the regional and diocesan structures of the church. I am now convinced that without the voices of poor and marginalised women altering our theological agendas in the church and the academy, social transformation will not ultimately become real for those who need it most.

The women too have been changed. Actually studying the Bible as a text communally and collaboratively has had a particular impact on their lives. In a session after we had been meeting for about a year, a reference was made to how "listening to *Mfundisi* and to the teachings" had helped them face their problems. Prompted by the comment, and particularly because it highlighted my role, I probed more directly by asking how attending the group has helped them? Mrs Ntombi Shabangu replied (BSG, 20 August 1998, Nxamalala),

Kuyasisiza ngoba okunye loku esikukhuluma lapha uye uthi uma usuxakekile ekhaya bese ucabanga ukuthi wo konje Mfundisi wathu kukuthi nokuthi uyabona ikusize leyonto...

It helps us a lot because some of the things that we talk about here, when you get frustrated at home then you think and say, Wo! *Mfundisi* said this and that, and that helps you...

Mrs Thandiwe Mdluli continued,

Njengoba sihlalene kanjena sifunda nokuxoxa ufunda nento obukade ungayazi ngoba ekhaya awukwazi ukuthi ukuthole loko ...

As we are gathered like this we learn to talk and you learn something that you didn't know about because you don't get it at home...

In an attempt to deflect the emphasis on my role I continued the discussion by saying,

... I am interested in what Nkosikazi Shabangu has said; you said that when things happen to you, you think aah that's what *Mfundisi* said, but I think most of the time you say things to each other, its not the *Mfundisi* saying it... its actually what you are teaching each other. A lot of the time you are talking I don't even understand what you are saying, what you are talking about to each other.

Mrs Shabangu reponded ,

Kushuthi phela Mfundisi yena usivulela iBhayibheli asifundele kungene ke emadlebeni ethu noma sesikhuluma sodwa kodwa sisuke sazi ukuthi umfundisi ovule iBhayibheli.

It means that *Mfundisi* opens up the Bible for us and reads and then it gets into our ears. And we talk alone but we know that *Mfundisi* has opened up the Bible.

So she continues to emphasise my role while at the same time giving recognition to the fact that my sharing of critical theological resources stimulates their own discussion and enables her understand the Biblical text with new insight. My additional reading strategies and tools “provide increased capacities for interpretation and appropriation” (West 2000:603) of the Biblical text by the women. While often emphasising my role, the women also acknowledge that they learn from their communal reading of the text and this enables them to articulate their theologies at home. As Mrs Mdluli stated (BSG, 23 September 1999, Nxamalala),

...yini kade ngitshela umkhwenyane wami ngithi uyabona nje uma sifunda iBhayibheli silifunda noMfundisi ngiyakwazi ukuthi ngifike ngimxoxele nje...

I have been telling my husband that if *we* [my emphasis] read the Bible with *Mfundisi* here I am able to go home and tell him about it...

They learn from one another because the group is a safe site where they can articulate their

views. The women explicitly acknowledge that it is a place where I also learn; where we “as women guide each other” (BSG, 13 May 1999, Nxamalala):

TK: *Sesisebenze kakhulu nomfundisi asazi lutho nathi kodwa nje sihlala sizisholo into esiyithandayo. Nikhululeke ke nje batakwethu kusekhaya nje lapha uMfundisi naye uyafunda kithina...*

We have worked very hard with *Mfundisi*, we also don't know much but we always say what we want. You should feel free my sisters this is a home, *Mfundisi* also learns from us...

TZ: *Uthi sicorrect sonke nje.*

She always says that we are correct.

TM: *Naye kuyamjabulisa ukufunda nathi ngoba naye wazi izinto ekade engazazi.*

It also makes her happy to study with us because she gets many things that she didn't know before.

TK: *Ehe, njengomama nje siyaqondisana.*

Yes, as women we guide each other.

By opening up for the women neglected and forgotten texts through the contextual Bible study process (see West 2000:603), meaningful connections with the Biblical tradition were made more clearly than before. They were also able to see ways in which they could use their readings of the text to effect change in their lives. The women began to feel excited by the fact that when Biblical texts that we had studied together were read and preached on in church, they could understand and perhaps even re-interpret was being said by the preacher.

This was expressed indirectly many times, but also directly in responses like that of Mrs Khoza in one of our sessions (BSG, 23 September 1999, Nxamalala),

Mhlawumbe ngingathi ngiyabonga ukuthi umfundisi uye athi uma esesenzela incazelo bese kuyezwakala. Ngempela umfundisi ngesikhathi efunda iLizwi emi laphayana ezoshumayela kushuthi uye ahume nje, uyabona manje siqala ukujulisa umqondo ukuthi sithole ukuthi ene wayethini wayekhuluma ngani. Manje umfundisi uma eshumayeke mhlawumbe uthatha elilodwa nje aqhubeke nayo angachazi incazelo enhle kangaka. Kodwa manje okuningi njena sesiyakwazi siyabonga.

Perhaps I should give thanks to *Mfundisi* because whenever she makes an explanation we understand it. In fact when an *uMfundisi* reads the word upfront there as he preaches, he just goes through it, but now we are starting to go deep in our minds in trying to understand what he [Jesus] was talking about. When *Mfundisi* is preaching he would just pick up one [verse] and preach about it without explaining like this. Now there are many things that we know, thank you.

It was, however, not just in the context of the Sunday worship that the women of Nxamalala felt more theologically equipped as a result of our communal readings, they now also felt that they had more of a contribution to make to the monthly inter-denominational *manyano* meeting in the area. Mrs Khoza had this to say (BSG, 13 May 1999, Nxamalala):

Uyabona uma kungolweSine emthandazweni ufika avule iLizwi ovula iLizwi maqede bese ngiyasukuma sengithi mina ngijoyina emazwini kodwa ngibe ngingakwazi ukuchaza. Njengamanje lapha ukhuluma ngento oyazi kahle...ngijoyina emaZwini ngisho nje ngidlula engikucabangayo...

You see on a Thursday meeting the one who opens a word opens it, then I would just stand up and say that I am joining on her words but of which I could not explain. Now here we are talking about something that we know...I

am joining on the word, but I just say what I think...

Mrs Khoza is indicating that the Bible studies have enabled her to feel that she can join in the preaching around texts with greater confidence (see section 7.4.2). Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the new knowledge gained through studying the Bible together, is that it empowered women to feel they could use texts directly relevant to their lives. These texts and the issues that arose out of them, can now be shared in *manyano* meetings. A striking example, is a conversation that arose out of a study on the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22) (BSG, 22 April 1999, Nxamalala):

TM: *Mhlambe usungakwazi ukuthi uma kuthiwa phatha inkonzo nawe ufunde ngalendaba ngoba usuyakwazi nokusemveni kwaloko usuzochaza ehe usuyakwazi ukukhuluma ngoba yincwadi osuyazi usuyakwazi nokukhuluma ngayo. Kusho ukuthi ukufunda kwethu noMfundisi kuyasisiza.*

Now when you are required to open the service you can be able to read about this story because you know it and you know what happened after that. You can clearly explain, you will be able to talk because you know the text and you are able to talk about it. That means that our study with *Mfundisi* is helpful to us.

All: *Ehe* [yes].

TZ: *UNKulunkulu usibusisile lapha kaNxamalala ngoba kuningi esesikwazi...*

God has blessed us a lot here at Nxamalala because we know many things now...

TM: *Wawungeke nje uze uyizwe lendaba esontweni.*

You wouldn't hear this text in the church.

All: [Laughing].

This Biblical text had such an impact on Mrs Mdluli that after the first study she went home and read it “many times” and discussed it with her husband as she reported to us the next week. But even more significant was the assertion by her that it was a text to be used when “opening a service”, referring to the MU of which she had just become a member. Not only was it a text to be used, but a new text, never before heard in church, that she now understood and could use in a MU service to say something about rape. It is in this transfer of learning from one location of women's theology to another, as the rumblings of resistance grow, that possibilities reside for the social transformation of poor and marginalised women's lives.

7.6 Interconnecting theological sites

Women's theology in South Africa is located in multiple sites. My interest in this study is the subjugated theologies of poor and marginalised women and their potential locations. This interest, I argue, requires that I as an activist-intellectual re-locate my actual work to places where Christian women, who do not primarily consider themselves feminist, gather. I have located two important sites for the potential recovery of subjugated survival theologies in this chapter: the MU and a Bible study group in Nxamalala. As I have shown, in each of these sites, there are clear manifestations of survival theologies that integrate the spiritual and material realities of women's lives. Their literal struggle for survival is integrated with their survival practices of faith.

Recovering subjugated survival theologies is not only a complex process, it is difficult. Women's survival theologies are hidden for good reasons. Exposing them to the public realm could be a threat to the very reason they exist: *survival*. The MU is an established site where various expressions of survival theologies such as the church uniform, praying and preaching at Thursday meetings, and raising funds are evident. These practices have been forged over decades of meeting together. But recovering their subjugated theologies is complicated because of its origins in colonialism and its formal relationship with patriarchal church

structures. Male priests continue to have a measure of control over the activities of the MU. On the other hand, the Nxamalala Bible study group is a less established site where survival theologies are being given expression for the first time in an embryonic form. Sites such as Nxamalala, established entirely away from the public domain of patriarchy and where “difference” between women is particularised and foregrounded, offer greater potential for the recovery of subjugated survival theologies.

As I indicated at the conclusion of the previous section, there is an interconnection between these two sites because often women belong to both groups. Already there were signs of ways in which women’s sites such as the Nxamalala group could impact and build on the survival theologies of the MU. Both sites, as I will argue in the next chapter, show that survival theologies are theologies of resistance. Interconnections between these two important locations of women’s theology suggest enormous potential for the recovery of subjugated survival theologies as women begin to feel more safe in the climate of gender equity within South Africa. My task in this chapter, however, has primarily been to *recognise* that subjugated survival theologies exist and to describe and analyse two important *locations* for their potential recovery. The recovery of subjugated survival in a comprehensive and systematic way, while crucial to theological reflection in South Africa, is beyond the scope of this study.

7.7 Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that recognising and recovering the subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised women is crucial to the women’s theological project in South Africa. These theologies are subjugated knowledges that, once recognised and recovered, offer new knowledges that help to bring about social transformation in the church and the academy.

Subjugated survival theologies are incipient community wisdom that is located in gatherings of poor and marginalised Christian women, most of whom would not be considered “feminist”. In recognising and recovering this theological wisdom, a complex theoretical understanding of discourse is required. I have argued that discourse operates for both

dominant and subjugated groups, in both the public and the hidden realms. Subjugated survival theologies often operate at the level of infrapolitics, between the public and hidden realms, and are coded practices and rituals that appear to mean one thing publically, but have another meaning altogether to the women themselves. Infrapolitical responses enable women to deal with their subordination while at the same time giving them dignity and autonomy.

I have suggested two locations for the potential recognition and recovery of survival theologies in this chapter: the indigenous *manyano* [church women's prayer union] movement, particularly the MU, and a contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala, in the Vulindlela region. I have argued that the MU, in spite of its colonial heritage, has aligned itself with the *manyano* movement. It embraces the survival practices of the wearing of a distinct church uniform, the use of extempore prayer and preaching in Thursday meetings on *manyano* day, and public, ritualised forms of raising funds. These, I have argued, are expressions of the survival theologies of indigenous African women. In the second instance, I showed the Nxamalala contextual Bible study group to be a safe and sacred site which had been sequestered over a period of time. I used illustrative examples to show how this site began to reveal emerging survival theologies of the participant women. Through reading the Bible contextually, communally, and collaboratively, I indicated how myself, Nonhlanhla, and the women of Nxamalala had all been impacted by our work together. In my role as an activist-intellectual and woman-priest, I showed how I assisted in securing a site for the exploration and recovery of survival theologies and how I offered my critical and interpretive theological resources in our communal readings. I also showed how the women, including Nonhlanhla, offered their resources of faith which had been forged out of their experience of the struggle to survive. Together, I argued, we have begun to circumscribe the terrain of new interpretations, symbols, and rituals of survival theologies. Locations such as the MU and the Nxamalala Bible study group, and the interconnections between the two through women belonging to both, offer, I suggested, enormous potential for a transformative and liberative South African women's theological agenda.

In the next, penultimate chapter, I seek to address the relationship between liberation and survival, an issue that has been lurking in the shadows throughout the study. Crucial to this discussion is the extent to which agency and resistance exist in theologies of survival. I

discuss this question by again using the location sites of the MU and the Nxamalala Bible study group as two case studies. I argue that poor and marginalised women are under enormous constraints in their attempts to overtly resist their oppression. Much of their resistance occurs either at the level of infrapolitics or in the hidden transcript. Nonetheless, there are strong liberatory impulses which align their theologies with the broader project of women's liberation. These impulses need to be nurtured in and through collaborative work carried out by the activist-intellectual as she seeks to open up new spaces for the recovery of these theologies.

CHAPTER 8

AGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN SURVIVAL THEOLOGIES

8.1 Introduction

[W]e get the wrong impression, I think, if we visualize [subordinate] actors perpetually wearing fake smiles and moving with the reluctance of a chain gang. To do so is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor appropriating the performance for his [sic] own ends (Scott 1990:34).

In the previous chapter I argued for the necessity of recognising and recovering the survival theologies of poor and marginalised women. Locating two potential sites in which these theologies may be recognised, the Mothers' Union (MU) and a contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala, I showed the potential for their recovery. I suggested that survival is often understood by liberationists to be a minimalist notion. From within this understanding, recovering *survival* theologies might be understood to be keeping poor women locked in their oppression. But this understanding of survival for the women of Vulindlela is, as Scott (1990:34) suggests, to get the wrong impression. Within the subjugated survival theologies of these women are concerted autonomous acts that bring dignity and a quality of life, that move beyond the material reality of the struggle to survive. Inherent in their working theologies are less obvious forms of resistance. Elaborating on the work of James Scott (1990) discussed in the previous chapter (section 7.2), I argue for the presence of resistance discourse in survival theologies. Resistance to oppression occurs within both the hidden and public realms. For poor and marginalised women, much of their resistance, occurs at the level of the hidden transcript or at the realm of infrapolitics, disguised forms of resistance that operate in the public realm. These "the arts of resistance" (Scott 1990) challenge our liberationist understandings of agency and activism within the women's project, and force us to rethink our roles as activists and as intellectuals.

In this penultimate chapter, I explore the relationship between liberation and survival by

focusing on the extent to which poor and marginalised women assert agency and resistance in their struggle to survive. I begin the chapter by asserting that survival is resistance. In as much as this is so, unexplored locations of survival theologies such as the MU and the contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala are ripe for an exploration of their resistance strategies. I explore each of these locations in turn.

Within the Mothers' Union I investigate its movement from being an organisation of the colonial church to its alignment in form and practice with the indigenous *manyano* [church women's prayer union] movement. Disguised practices of resistance against the control of colonial and patriarchal leadership of the church (section 7.3.5) are explored. I then discuss the ways in which the *manyano* movement, in general, has been involved in political action and its potential for future involvement in overt forms of resistance to oppression. I conclude this section with a discussion of the MU, in particular, as a site of overt political resistance.

In the next section, resistant discourse in the contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala is explored. During the two and half years of our collaborative work, I suggest, there were signs of a move towards organisation that could lead to overt action. However, there were no definite indicators that this would happen. This begs the question as to whether marginalised women, given the tremendous constraints and surveillance on their lives, will act once they have secured a safe and sacred site. Discussing the potential of this site for overt resistance, I discuss the conditions that inhibit this form of political activity and show the movement in the group towards a solidarity against oppression. I conclude the section by exploring the role of the activist-intellectual in collaborative resistance activity in working with poor and marginalised women.

8.2 Survival is resistance

Patricia Hill Collins (2000:201) traces the foundations of black women's activism in the United States back to the struggle for survival of slave women for themselves and their children. This struggle for survival, argues Collins (2000), is in itself a form of resistance. An aspect of this resistance process was the need for slave women to shape their world view by a "self-definition", "self-valuation", and "a movement towards self-reliance" (Collins

2000:201). It has been through a self-conscious rejection of controlling images of victimisation that slave women have laid the foundations for the black activist movement. For in rejecting these images, group survival has been possible. “Historically African-American’s resistance to racial and class oppression could not have occurred without an accompanying struggle for group survival” (Collins 2000:201).

Similarly in the South African context, it can be argued that marginalised women throughout the period of colonisation, apartheid, political violence in KwaZulu Natal, and now with the threat of the AIDS pandemic, they too have resisted images that reflect their “victim” status. Through their faith in God and in locating safe sites in which to express their survival theologies, they have reshaped these images with a self conscious dignity. It is this dignity that has held together communities ravaged by poverty, apartheid legislation, civil war, and AIDS. Women, as was asserted in Nxamalala, “hold the family together” (section 7.5.4) and in the process ensure group survival. Overt resistance to apartheid and the realisation of liberation would not have been possible without the daily and concerted acts by millions of women to keep families alive and so ensure the survival of the indigenous African community.

Yet, argues Collins, “popular perspectives on Black political activism often fail to see how struggles for group survival are just as important as confrontations with institutional power” (2000:202). Focus tends to be on the public and visible political action, with little recognition to what takes place in the “private and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization” (Collins 2000:202). With Scott (1990), Collins argues that as domination is organised and operates via intersecting oppressions, resistance too “must show comparable complexity” (2000:203).

It may be more useful to assess Black women’s activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women’s beliefs systems - whether they hold conservative, reformist, progressive, or radical ideologies based on some predetermined criteria - and more by Black women’s collective actions within everyday life... (Collins 2000:203).

Collins (2000) is thus arguing that the survival strategies that make up the “practice of everyday life” (de Certeau 1984) are in themselves forms of resistance. Rather than reducing activism to an essentialist core of what constitutes “authentic” activism, space needs to be created for the potential participation of diverse forms of resistance in activist struggles (Collins 2000:203). Williams (1993) would concur. She argues that strategies of survival, as everyday practices of life, are “*arts of resistance*” that prevent the community from falling into despair and have been used “to keep the community alive and hopeful” (Williams 1993:236).

8.3 Arts of resistance by poor and marginalised women

African American women have for centuries been involved in acts of devotion, commitment, and love for their children and community, employing the “*art of care*”, which has preserved the life of their community (Williams 1993:237-238). Likewise, countless indigenous African women have sacrificed their own lives for the sake of their children, and ultimately for their community as they looked to a better future for all. This is most poignantly expressed through the labour of domestic workers who for decades were separated from their own children, becoming surrogate mothers for white children in order to earn money to feed, clothe, and educate their own (Cock 1980). Today, thousands of African children who are now employed in professional positions in various sectors of society will attest to the love, care and devotion of their mothers who made it possible for them to have opportunities that she never enjoyed. This is evidenced in life stories of indigenous African women who kept their community alive and hopeful throughout the twentieth century (Barrett *et al* 1985; Bozzoli 1991; Kendall 1995; Mathabane 1994).

Survival of the family required the “*art of cunning*” (Williams 1993:236) as women devised, with “wholesome shrewdness”, economic strategies in the face of poverty and hardship (Williams 1993:236). Examples of how poor and marginalised South African women have done this include the establishing *stokvels* and burial societies (section 4.2.4) and their religious practices which include the raising of funds (section 7.4.3).

Devising economic survival strategies is rooted, I have argued, in the faith practices of

religious groups of women. As Williams (1993:238) argues, African American religious women developed the “*art of connecting*” to form networks across differences within the community that ensured that any crisis was taken care of. As slave women would learn skills and pass them onto others, so indigenous African women have done the same. The *manyano* movement is an important example of this connecting (section 7.4). Within the movement there is a strong emphasis on connecting with other women to pray and preach together, even across denominations. But also within *manyano* groups there is a strong emphasis on seeking out the sick and bereaved, collecting money and offering financial resources to those in need.

There is a final way in which poor and marginalised women deal with their oppression that keeps the community hopeful and alive, and that is through the “*art of encounter*” (Williams 1993:237). As these women encounter the forces of oppression, they carefully and strategically choose when to openly *resist* and when to *endure*. “It seems as if black women knew when to exercise resistance strategies (such as Rosa Parks giving birth to the Civil Rights Movement) in relation to their and their community’s oppression and when to endure” (Williams 1993:237). Recent work by Bonnin (1998; 2000) has shown how women during the political violence of the mid-1980s to early 1990s in Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, both “endured” and “resisted”. At times they devised strategies amongst themselves to try and keep the violence around them in check. At other times they took to the streets to threaten the police, understanding that their role as mothers afforded them a measure of protection. One of these resistant encounter strategies was to drop their panties and protrude their bums [*sidinusela*] at the approaching policemen in an effort to get them to retreat (Bonnin 2000:311).

In Scott’s (1990) terms, this multi-layered response by the women in KwaZulu-Natal to political violence is at the level of infrapolitics (see section 7.2). Both Collins (2000) and Williams (1993), in their work with African American women, echo Scott’s view that response to domination is complex and occurs at a number of different levels. My work with the women of Vulindlela attempts to account for this complexity.

Scott argues that “much of the active political life of subordinate groups has been ignored because it takes place at a level we rarely recognize as political” (1990:198). This political

life lies in between the realm of domination on the one hand and the realm of public resistance on the other and manifests itself in disguised, low profile acts of resistance which Scott terms “infrapolitics”. These disguised acts of resistance that are an explicit critique of power relations, where each “is the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance” (Scott 1990:199). Oppressed groups are not passive actors on a fated stage of hopelessness; they are subjects that understand their situations of surveillance all too well and act accordingly to ensure they retain their dignity within their situations of constraint, and by so doing attain a degree of autonomy. The women of Vulindlela operate daily under the patriarchal surveillance of their cultural and ecclesiastical traditions. From girlhood they have understood their subordinate “place” in relation to their father, brother, husband, *inkosi* [traditional leader], and priest and each has developed arts of resistance, at the level of infrapolitics, that enable them to endure the burden that is theirs: to be African, a woman, and uneducated.

In situations of extreme oppression such as that experienced by the women of Vulindlela, Scott (1990:91) argues that revolutionary thought is always possible, but opportunities to act openly and fully on that thought are rare. Unlike Antonio Gramsci (1971), who suggests that hegemony operates primarily at the level of thought as distinct from the level of action, Scott suggests that subordinates are less constrained at the level of thought and ideology and more constrained at the level of political action “when the daily exercise of power sharply limits the options available to them” (1990:91). Extreme situations of surveillance require that subordinate groups resort to a strategic form of resistance that is a dialogical engagement with the dominant. “No public claims are made, no symbolic lines are drawn” (Scott 1990:199). Instead, these acts of power from below, “...will largely observe the ‘rules’ even if their objective is to undermine them” (Scott 1990:93). The political action of subordinates is intended to obscure their intentions and “studiously designed to be anonymous” without any obvious purpose (Scott 1990:199-200; see section 7.2). Therefore, “[t]hings are not exactly as they seem” (Scott 1990:200). Things not being “exactly as they seem” has stood as a cautionary note in my facilitative, reflective, and interpretative work with the women of Vulindlela (see also Peterson 1995). I have come to understand that their resistance within the realm of infrapolitics is, nonetheless, “real politics” (Scott 1990:200). The survival theologies of the Vulindlela women are resistance theologies that are “conducted in more

earnest, for higher stakes, and against greater odds...” (Scott 1990:200) than in any other sectors of the South African population.

In this study, I have identified two specific locations of survival theologies. The first is the established location of the MU, an example of a *manyano* group where women have created their own space and indigenised their Christian faith. The second location is that of the contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala which is a less established site for the recovery of survival theologies. In the next two sections, I explore in each of these locations the agency and resistance of indigenous African women as they express their subjugated theologies of survival. Both these discussions have implications for the women’s theological project in particular, and the women’s project as a whole in South Africa.

I begin by exploring the disguised practices of the MU in its response to the colonial church who were attempting to shape its identity away from the indigenous *manyano* movement. I indicate the moves that were made in this process: from being an organisation of the colonial church to becoming an indigenous movement. I seek to show the ways in which the MU appropriated missionary efforts at “women’s work” and began to create space for themselves and their own forms of spirituality within the broad structures of the organisation. In so doing, they aligned themselves more closely with the indigenous *manyano* movement than with white Anglican women in the organisation. Today, in my experience, the colonial history of the MU continues to manifest itself in a number of ways, yet the heartbeat of the organisation is indigenous. It is this contradiction that makes the MU so important to understanding the disguised resistance strategies used for survival by poor and marginalised women. I conclude the section by focusing on overt practices of political resistance within the *manyano* movement generally, and the MU specifically.

8.4 Resistance to domination in the Mothers’ Union

8.4.1 The encounter between colonial and indigenous Christianity

The Church of England saw the evangelisation of women as key to the missionary enterprise and the work of the Mothers' Union (MU) was a crucial aspect of these endeavours.

Archival material suggests that early missionary attempts to establish the MU in South Africa appropriated written materials directly applicable to the English context (MU London B: March 1946-March 1947; MU London C: March 1946-March 1947),¹ or especially written with "Bantu" branches in mind (MU London D n.d.). There appears to be a zealotry with which the three Objects of the MU as set out by the founding foremother Mary Sumner were implemented in this overseas work (see section 7.3.4). They are constantly cited in MU literature and are the focus of the work amongst indigenous African women.

Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA) archival material seems to suggest that the relationship between the largely African membership and almost solely white leadership of the MU was contested. This observation would be in keeping with the extensive study carried out by anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (1991; 1997) on the encounter between the Tswana people and missionaries during the nineteenth century. The Tswana people were constantly having to re-negotiate the terrain of their faith practice as they sought to gain control of this encounter as missionaries increasingly attempted to prevent the indigenisation of the Christian faith (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:87). John and Jean Comaroff (1997:86) argue that early converts adopted missionary Christianity "through a particular cultural lens". Insofar as the Christian message was adopted, "Africans did so on their own terms", incorporating their own prior spiritual orientations which resulted in "hybrid practices" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:86). Tensions mounted between converts and the missionaries which led to some indigenous Christians severing their ties with the missionary church and becoming prophets [*baprofeti*] (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:88-93).

¹ Handwritten notes on MU London B (March 1946-March 1947) indicate that preparation was underway for the document to be prepared in the vernacular (language not specified), "deleting certain parts". This is the only indication that I could find in my current research to a need for written materials in the vernacular. It is unclear as to whether the "Handbook for the use in Bantu branches" (MU London D n.d.) postdated these publications. The instruction on the three Objects in this publication suggests that it is of a later date.

These prophets drew on both *setswana* and Judaeo-Christian traditions in their teachings (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:96) and they laid the foundations for a variety of African Independent Churches (see Comaroff 1985).

These prophets were male leaders, and indigenous African *women* were not as easily able to secede and form their own churches (Gaitskell 1995:216). The missionary model of church gave preeminence to male leadership as did traditional cultural patterns of leadership (Gaitskell 1995:216; see section 7.4.2). For women then, the *manyano* movement became “a virtually independent church of prayer for women within the mission churches” (Gaitskell 1981:11).

However, for MU women, the colonial encounter was more contested than in other denominations (Brandel-Syrier 1962; Gaitskell 1981; see section 7.3.5). Unlike other denominations where the *manyano* group were solely the terrain of indigenous African women, MU women were in constant negotiation with the colonial enterprise. In this process of negotiation, there appears to be, at times, an embracing of the values inculcated by the missionaries such as the emphasis on family life and training of young girls. At other times indigenous African women found ways to claim religious space and began reshaping the MU to suit their own forms of spirituality. However, it is also apparent that at certain points they were unsuccessful in resisting the domination of the colonial church. These various responses indicate the complexity of the resistance discourse of subordinated groups as they encounter colonial domination.

There are a number of examples within the history of the MU that illustrate the way in which indigenous African women resisted domination from the colonial church. An important example is the issue of membership eligibility of the MU. This was a hard fought battle that was finally won, it appears, not by the women, but by the church hierarchy who insisted that only women married by Christian rites were eligible to join. This became the prevailing practice of the organisation, at least within the public realm.

8.4.2 Resisting the membership criteria of the colonial church

Eligibility for membership of the MU was terrain that the missionary church fought hard to control, but not without resistance. When the MU was introduced into South Africa, there were two categories of membership: Ordinary membership and Associate membership (see section 7.3.4). The membership issue became “messy” in the South African context. African women did not seem that prepared to hold to the strict and legalistic criteria for membership required by the missionary church. While baptism was initially the only requirement for being “in good standing”, confirmation later also became a requirement. This measure appears to have been introduced as a direct attempt by the bishops to control what seems to have been a situation where women were resisting attempts to “regularise” the membership of the organisation.

The Johannesburg diocese makes an interesting case study, as it was “the only diocese of the South African communion not to link its African women with the Mothers’ Union once regular prayer meetings had been organised” (Gaitskell 1981:159). Deaconess Julia Gilpin, who had arrived in Johannesburg with two helpers in 1907, decided to start a branch of the Church of England Women’s Help Society (WHS), as she felt that “a simple guild was needed to bind their Anglican women together and help them lead a better life” (Gaitskell 1981:158). Membership of this society was less stringent than that of the MU. Its intention was to impart “Christian virtue” through giving a simple rule of life that would help them remain faithful Christians through providing “bright, friendly meetings, classes and addresses, provident club, and lending library” (Gaitskell 1981:159). Members were not expelled for a single breach of the rules, nor was there a rigorous inquiry into the past life of those interested in joining (Gaitskell 1981:160).

In an interview conducted by Gaitskell with Mrs Nettie Mguli, a member of the MU in the Cape who joined the WHS on arriving in Johannesburg, Mrs Mguli indicated that all women who were interested in joining the WHS were encouraged to go along, whether married by Christian marriage, or a divorcee, or an unmarried mother (Gaitskell 1981:161). She went on to say:

there was no strictness, and nearly every woman was so interested to become a

member because there, that's where we had a chance of preaching, those who were able to preach, and those who had the inspiration of praying were allowed to pray (Gaitskell 1981:161).

Mrs Mguli was indicating two important differences between the MU and the WHS, namely that entrance requirements for membership to WHS were more flexible, and that there was a freedom there for women to preach and pray as they felt "inspired", a practice that the authorities of the Anglican church in the 1950s sought to control (see section 7.3.5).

Membership of the WHS grew rapidly and by 1912 African "Guardian" Members were appointed to ensure regular meetings were being held in the various mine and farm locations which were separated by long distances and so made regular visits by the missionaries impossible (Gaitskell 1981:162). In Gaitskell's (1981:162) assessment, pressure was mounting from the African Anglican women for more autonomy. Reports were surfacing that in one location, the women in the prayer meeting were praying that "no white priest or white women worker should come to them at all". The women were carving out a sacred, safe, and sequestered site for themselves. In addition, they had begun to shape their meetings according to their own needs and by the mid-1920s Anglican women were bound, first, to a uniform for prayer consisting of black skirts and headscarves and white jackets and second, to a Thursday as a set prayer day in keeping with practice in the *manyano* movement (Gaitskell 1981:164).

Scott suggests that the "strongest evidence for the vital importance of autonomous social sites in generating a hidden transcript is the strenuous effort made by dominant groups to abolish or control such sites" (1990:124). This is precisely what the missionary church began to do as the WHS increasingly appeared to be becoming one of these autonomous sites.

Fortuitously for the church hierarchy, the London headquarters of the WHS disbanded in 1937, "leaving Reef African women members of branches of a non-existent society" (Gaitskell 1981:166). The MU president in London, Mrs Woods, wasted no time in touring South Africa and organising a conference attended by 250 women with all but two voting in favour of transferring their membership to the MU (Gaitskell 1981:167). The transfer from the WHS to the MU meant that theoretically indigenous African women were now part of a

multi-racial women's organisation (Gaitskell 1981:167).

Missionary women were instructed by their bishops to enroll WHS members in the MU. Scott (1990:55) argues one of the functions of the public transcript of the dominant is to create the appearance of unanimity which is essential to the control of the dominated. The disbanding of the WHS provided the opportunity for this "unanimity". But African women resisted this control, as Archdeacon Jenkin's wife reveals on her return to England:

You cannot imagine the trouble all this caused. For a year or more the women refused to join the MU. However, the long and the short of it was that they *did* give way and, after due preparation those who were eligible were admitted as members of the MU. But they still wear the WHS badge on the same string as the MU medal... The next thing to contend with was a uniform! The Wesleyan African women had a bright scarlet uniform and the Lutheran women a blue one! So they *must* have a uniform!.. we chose... a very neat tunic buttoning on the shoulder and thus serving a very practical purpose in hiding all the curious strings and rags they wear around their necks. We chose white tobralco for the material and very nice they all looked with their white tunics, black skirts and "doeks", the native women's headgear (MU South Africa B 1956:3-4).

By initially refusing to join the MU, indigenous African women were overtly resisting the control of their WHS site where they had more autonomy. But because domination by the colonial authorities was too severe, the women eventually had to capitulate. Their resistance now moved to the realm of infrapolitics. They joined the MU, but re-appropriated the old WHS badge as a sign of their resistance as it dangled on their breast together with the colonial symbol of the MU. Insisting on a church uniform which identified MU members with the *manyano* movement was a resistance strategy that set the stage for the indigenisation of the MU and for the creation of a site that was "offstage" and away from colonial control (see section 7.4.1).

Further attempts at controlling the WHS women and ensuring "unanimity" were made

through strict guidelines on eligibility for membership of the MU. Colonial authorities attempted to scrutinise the marital status, particularly on the issue of divorce, of prospective members and whether they had been married by Christian rites (Gaitskell 1981:167). This process was not successful. According to missionary reports, “members were admitted in large numbers” before the church authorities had time to ensure that the scrutinising process was in place (Gaitskell 1981:167). The subordinated women had found a way of subverting the practice of joining the MU by not giving the colonial authorities time to implement the procedures of control.

Having focused on the diocese of Johannesburg, I want to turn to St John’s diocese, in what is now known as the Eastern Province, where similar membership issues were being negotiated. The diocese of St John’s is an important comparison to that of Johannesburg, not least because there is documented archival material available in the CPSA archives, but also because of its significance as a “missionary” diocese with a solely indigenous African membership.

Earlier in this section, I noted the two forms of MU membership as prescribed by the office in London: Ordinary and Associate. Within St John’s diocese there appears to be a third category of membership known as *Amadlelane* introduced during the 1930s. This category of women members were communicants in good standing, but who were not married by Christian rites (MU South Africa C 1957). In understanding how this indigenised category of MU membership evolved, the MU history in the St John’s diocese is relevant.

The MU was introduced into the diocese of St John’s in 1904 by a missionary deaconess known as “Catherine” (MU South Africa C 1957:1). Women themselves chose to primarily meet in what was known as the *Abokokelikazi* [General Women’s Meeting] to which they wore a uniform and met on Thursdays for preaching and praying (MU South Africa C 1957:1). This description of the *Abokelikazi* is consistent with that of *manyano* groups throughout the churches in the Johannesburg area during the early twentieth century. After Catherine’s death, “the MU seems to have been confused with what was known as the General Meeting to which all Christian women could attend” (MU South Africa C 1957:1). The three Objects of the MU “were forgotten” and the only activity to take place in this

meeting was extempore praying and preaching (MU South Africa C 1957:1). This was a source of concern to the colonial authorities and so the bishop appointed a committee to investigate the matter. The committee's findings resulted in the establishment of an MU Council, with a formally adopted constitution, and affiliation to the London office (MU South Africa C 1957:1). Membership of the MU was only open to those married by Christian rites. This, as in the Johannesburg diocese, was an attempt by the colonial authorities to bring "unanimity".

As was the case in the Johannesburg diocese, it seems that women joined the St John's MU without adhering strictly to the eligibility criteria. In dealing with this resistance, a proposal was made by the St John's Diocesan Council in 1933 that women who were not married by Christian rites, be allowed to become Associate members of the MU. The London office agreed to this step as a *temporary* measure, but asked that an alternative name be given to this category of women. "Associate" membership, it was pointed out, referred directly to unmarried women. At this point the MU Constitution was altered by Diocesan Council to include women not married by Christian rites, who were to be called *Amadlanelane* (MU South Africa C 1957:1).

Criteria for *Amadlanelane* membership was regulated by the church authorities. These members had a different membership card, were not allowed to wear the MU brooch, could not vote at business meetings, and were not forced to pay membership fees. By 1957, when a reassessment of the practice was underway, it was acknowledged that these differences had almost entirely disappeared (MU South Africa C 1957:1). Differences between full members of the MU and the *Amadlanelane* members was clearly a non-issue for the *women* themselves. There appears to have been a blurring of the distinctions between the two types of MU membership. The *Amadlanelane* women strategically chose which rules to abide by and which to ignore, as it suited their own interests. They defied regulations and wore the MU brooch and voted at business meetings, but chose to use a different membership card which meant they were not obliged to pay membership fees (MU South Africa C 1957:1). In their infrapolitical resistance responses, they negotiated the church rules for their own ends, thus frustrating the attempts of the dominant to keep them in line. For women, marriage by Christian rites did not define the boundaries of MU membership. Faith and commitment did.

Amadlanelane membership continued as an official practice until 1956 (MU South Africa D 1957:2). It was during this period that there was a concerted attempt throughout the CPSA to “regularise” the membership and practice of the MU (see section 7.3.5).

The “*Amadlanelane* situation” was dealt with firmly by the Diocesan Council by announcing that as from 31 December 1956, women would no longer be admitted into *Amadlanelane* membership (MU South Africa E 1957). Prior to the ruling, priests were given preliminary warning and MU Organisers were sent out by the bishop and senior clergy to visit parishes to “state” the new rule and answer questions (MU South Africa E 1957:2). They found that “there was quiet opposition” amongst the women (MU South Africa E 1957:2). Once the ruling was made, MU Organisers, who by this stage in the diocese included indigenous women, were sent out once again to set the record straight and to convince MU members of the “rightness” of this restriction (MU South Africa E 1957:2). Woman, not married by Christian rites, it was asserted, “cannot uphold the sanctity of marriage” (MU South Africa E 1957:2). Furthermore, restricting MU membership in this way, would also serve an evangelistic purpose. By forcing women to be married by Christian rites an impetus would be created for her to “convert her husband and be married” (MU South Africa E 1957:2).

It does not appear that women themselves were invited to respond to the new ruling. Rather, the “quiet opposition” uncovered by the MU Organisers was met with a confidence “that by persuasion and teaching they would over a number of years (say 20) get the MU not only to accept, but also to like the new rule” (MU South Africa E 1957:2). In not giving the women a formal opportunity to respond, the church effectively attempted to silence their voice. The male priests and preachers who were given the opportunity to respond formally were ambiguous in their response, seemingly at times speaking on behalf of women in their congregations. While arguing that women were resisting the restrictions out of “ignorance and conservatism”, they also expressed a pastoral concern that the restriction would hinder the spread of the gospel (MU South Africa E 1957:3). They clearly felt that women carried within their own organisation a power that countered that of the diocesan leadership. Women were arguing, the male clergy reported, that if they were accepted by the church as full members, communicants, and paying the same assessment as women married by Christian rites, there was no obvious reason as to why they could not be members of the MU (MU

South Africa E 1957:3). This mediated resistance response of the women was met with arrogance by the church authorities who asserted:

The MU is not the church, though many members think it is far more important than the church. The MU is a society within the church and exists for a special purpose and a special witness..." (MU South Africa E 1957:3).

Some of the clergy continued to represent the women's voices and expressed further pastoral concern for the women. They defended the *Amadlelane's* right to MU membership by arguing that "the woman married to a heathen husband is very anxious to learn to bring up her children as Christians, and she regards her marriage as binding, why cannot she [therefore] be in the fellowship of Christian women?" (MU South Africa E 1957:4). The clergy were now silenced. Their argument was rebutted by the assertion that in the majority of cases the children belonging to "such a home" are not trained in the Christian way, but are more influenced by the "heathen" father (MU South Africa E 1957:4). Furthermore, it was argued, "reform" was needed and this could only be achieved by those who had taken the MU promises. Besides, most of the *Amadlelane* were "elderly widows who have lived all their lives as heathens; and far from wanting to LEARN anything when they join the MU, they expect to do the TEACHING" (MU South Africa E 1957:4).

...[T]he new converts, who are largely old ladies, will not allow anything else to be done except preaching and praying; the old have the authority, and they pull everyone down to their own spiritual level, and will not allow anything else to be learnt or attempted. The one is acclaimed as the best preacher is more often than not the one who regularly sends her child to the witchdoctor - who has a filthy home - drinks like a fish (MU South Africa E 1957:5).

This vitriolic patriarchal tirade against the women was excessive in its force. The colonial authorities, it appears, seem to have had much at stake in seeking to take control of the "*Amadlelane* situation". They continued in their desperate efforts to control, what they argue were, a group of "heathen old women". "If we do not take this opportunity NOW of teaching what the MU really is, and really stands for, we shall never do it; the influence of the whites

is waning fast” (MU South Africa E 1957:3). Their racial, cultural, and patriarchal “superiority” was being challenged. The safe social site of the General Meetings of the *Amadlanelane* was posing too great a threat and church authorities sought to shut it down at all costs.

8.4.3 Maintaining a resistance site

The women had not yet lost the battle. Their “quiet opposition” to the *Amadlanelane* ruling had been supported by some clergy, recognising what was at stake for their ministry, defended the opinions of women in their congregation. As a result, Diocesan Council conceded that there were *Amadlanelane* who were already part of the General Meeting, which had by now come to be known as the MU meeting (MU South Africa E 1957:4). So while continuing their attempts to “regularise” the MU meetings, they suggested a compromise to accommodate existing *Amadlanelane*: MU meetings were to be held twice a month for MU members. These meetings were to include both a devotional and a practical aspect (MU South Africa E 1957:5). The components of the devotional meetings were to include: the MU service book, a talk given on a Bible story (“the Bible is never read at the [General] Meeting”), parts of the Handbook to be read aloud, teaching by the priest on aspects of the Christian faith, and teaching by the Organiser of the three Objects of the MU (MU South Africa E 1957:5). The practical aspect of this bi-monthly MU meeting was to ensure that members learnt “something good for their homes” such as handwork, cooking, and sewing (MU South Africa E 1957:5). On the alternate weeks, the General Meeting was allowed to take place to which all women could attend. This concession was seen as an attempt to give *Amadlanelane* the opportunity to exercise authority outside of the bounds of MU meetings. The MU meetings, then, could be surveyed and controlled in accordance with church policy.

Church authorities, however, acknowledged that progress in implementing this system of meetings “was slow”. While the weekly General Meeting continued to thrive, attendance at MU bi-monthly meetings was small. *Amadlanelane* attended these MU meetings “without permission” and were once again blamed for frustrating the “evangelistic” efforts of the church. “[T]he old ladies grumble throughout the practical meetings and preach throughout the devotional meetings” (MU South Africa E 1957:5). Women, in the diocese of St John’s,

resisted through infrapolitical responses as they pushed the boundaries of surveillance and control by the oppressive patriarchal, colonial, and ecclesiastical forces.

Ten years later, women in St John's diocese had established their own alternative "solution". They met *twice* a week. To appease the church authorities, MU members met separately on a Tuesday, while the General Meeting continued to operate on a Thursday (MU South Africa F 1965:1). The Thursday meeting was renamed the Open Meeting which suggested the women's own agenda: all women were welcome on *manyano* day. The women had re-appropriated the compromise "solution" of the church leadership in their own way and whether or not they had a safe site to meet, remained under their control. They had managed to accommodate church policy while at the same time maintaining a site for the practice of their survival theologies of resistance away from domination.

Within the Open Meeting (OM) on a Thursday, their safe social site, women managed to ensure that it was the *nomqulu* [leader of the group] that was involved in instituting members, not the priest (MU South Africa F 1965). Church authorities could not ascertain the exact involvement of the priest in the Thursday meetings, so a meeting with MU representatives was called. Shortly afterwards, through her commissioned investigation, the MU Organiser asserted, "[t]heoretically the Priest-in-Charge is the head of the OM (as he is of the MU) but often leaves the women to run the OM themselves" (MU South Africa G 1965:1). The MU Organiser also noted, that in trying to investigate leadership and membership issues concerning this Thursday meeting, there was "confusion" about the situation (MU South Africa G 1965:1). Women were unclear, she reported, about who could be members of the Open Meeting, whether a woman should first be a member of this meeting before being an MU member, who was "allowed" to wear the uniform and so forth (MU South Africa G 1965:1). It seems that these women had learnt their lesson. What is construed as "confusion" by the authority structures (or their representatives) is no confusion at all. These women asserted their agency by sowing seeds of confusion, rather than exposing the hidden practices that operate within this site. The Thursday meeting was then, and continues to be, a sequestered, safe, and sacred site that women have forged for themselves, even years later when their *Amadlelane* sisters have long since passed on.

8.4.4 Disguised MU resistance in Vulindlela

The struggle of MU women to negotiate their own space in the Anglican dioceses of Johannesburg and St John, and so to ensure that the organisation moved from being a colonial institution to being part of the indigenous *manyano* movement was protracted and circuitous. Some battles were eventually won, others remained struggle terrain. Through practices such as the church uniform and the praying and preaching style of the MU meetings, the women were able to transform the organisation and share these characteristics with the indigenous *manyano* movement. The membership issue was more difficult to negotiate. As membership criteria became increasingly restrictive, Anglican women resisted colonial domination at the level of infrapolitics which, at the very least, forced the protraction of the issue over many decades. They did not give in without a fight! Today, membership of the MU is restricted to women married by Christian rites as the colonial church authorities intended.

The extent to which women resist this ruling through coded practices and the ways in which women leaders of the MU collaborated, is not easy to establish. In my experience at St Raphael's Anglican church where there is a large MU membership, there are hints that women themselves "bend" the rules as they feel is appropriate in their local contexts. There are some women who over the years have become faithful and devoted worshippers at the church. They are unmarried mothers working as domestic workers and, like most, struggling to survive. While I know of at least one woman who longed to be a "joining woman" (the term used for committing yourself to put on the MU uniform), she was unable to do so because of she was unmarried. She has now joined the St Agnes Guild, an organisation established for adolescent girls (see Gaitskell 1981:212-213). Here there are other unmarried women of her age, who make it their business to "train" the adolescent daughters of the MU members, creating a new space for themselves within the legislated church structures.

In reflecting on the practice of women, I am always aware that "things are not exactly as they seem". The women, young and old, married and unmarried, have their own connections and networks of operation in the church that I recognise from time to time but do not fully understand. At St Raphael's church there are two key women leaders who are not married

yet are given recognition by the MU leadership. There exists an ambiguity in their relationship with the organisation. Elsie Ndlovu, an ordained community deacon,² continues to wear the white hat of the St Agnes Guild, the organisation for young unmarried women. Yet, she is recognised as a woman with authority and is welcomed at all MU meetings and participates as fully as any of the married women. A similar situation exists in the case of Sibongile Mhlongo, a church warden and one of the few women in the congregation that is university trained. Ms Mhlongo is recognised for her leadership skills, and even the elderly MU members would defer to her on certain issues that they feel ill equipped to handle, such as dealing with the diocesan office. Both these women are given authority and respect, and indeed deferred to at times, by MU members. “Regular” practice would ensure that only senior MU members are given recognition as leaders within a congregation. At St Raphael’s church, the space for women themselves to reconfigure these relationships as they feel appropriate is made possible by my colleague, Lincie Cele, who, as priest, does not see himself as the final authority over the women. He has “bent” the church rules deciding not to exercise authority over the MU, and instead allows women greater flexibility in negotiating their own terrain.

Women in Vulindlela do re-appropriate and contest “rulings” in ways that are even more clear. The MU as a national organisation awards long service certificates to women who have been members for either twenty five or fifty years. This significant occasion is marked at a celebratory regional service annually. When describing the parameters of the series of interviews we conducted with the MU members for this study, I limited the number to women who had received a fifty year certificate. This was not as neat and circumscribed a parameter as I had first imagined. Through the interviewing process it became apparent that not all women who had received the certificate had been members of the MU for fifty years. Younger women who had demonstrated strong commitment to the organisation at St Raphael’s Church had the gold fifty year certificate proudly displayed on the walls in their home. Even more significantly for this discussion, it became apparent that the *umkhokheli* [parish leader], an elderly and long standing member of the congregation, had ensured that women who had been a *manyano* woman for fifty years were awarded a certificate.

² A *community* deacon is ordained by the bishop to function within her local church community alongside the priest.

Denomination was not the issue here, service to the *manyano* movement was. For her, the Anglican certificate of long service is re-appropriated and rewarded for the more important service: service to all *manyano* women.

Forms of this coded resistance to domination are not easily recognised in the MU in Vulindlela. But, through my work as woman-priest, there were moments when women were prepared to own publically to me what had been hidden. This occurred during the interviews when we discussed their church uniforms which had been banned in Natal during the 1950s (see section 7.3.5). Anglican women had had a particularly difficult time in claiming their space and asserting their indigenous appropriation of their spirituality over against the missionaries. Gaitskell (1981:221) argues that friction over the uniform persisted long after the Second World War. “White Anglicans continued for decades to show reluctance to tolerate the very great intrinsic value and significance which devout African churchwomen found in uniforms...” (Gaitskell 1981:221). When Anglican missionaries finally conceded that resistance to the restriction on the wearing of church uniforms was more powerful than their domination, they then attempted to standardise the practice. This point is illustrated in Mrs Jenkins’ discussion on the transition of the WHS women to the MU, whereby, in conceding to the wearing of a uniform, she decides its specifications (section 8.4.2). When it became apparent that attempts to de-emphasise the uniform were not succeeding, missionaries continued their efforts to “regularise” this space (Gaitskell 1981:221).

While missionaries were planning strategies to bring indigenous women “into line” with their colonial values, resistance discourse continued to operate. Elements of this discourse became apparent in interviews with Miriam Zondi and Lilian Ngcobo. Mrs Zondi, as was previously discussed (section 2.4.2), identifies the banning of the wearing of the church uniform as a key moment in her life story (Miriam Zondi, 24 April 1998, Sweetwaters):

Kwasekuba khona uMkhathekisi uGule wathi kufuneka sibe neyunifomu wathi asibe neziketi ezimnyama nanablawzi aphephli. AbaBhishophi abamhlophe bathi , abafundisi babelungu bathi uGule uzzonqunywa enkonzweni ngoba uthatha ingubo yabaBhishophi uphephli athi awugqokwe ngomama yayekwa ke iyunifomu ayangaba khona abanye basebewathengile amablowse aphephli

ayekwa. Bangavuma yayekwa ke iyunifoma leyo kwahlalwa ke kwahamba kwahamba nje sengimdala nje kwaba yikhona iqhamuka futhi leyunifoma ukuthi asigqoke ublack and whithe ehe...

Then there was Gule, the catechist, he said we should have a uniform. He said it should be white skirts and purple blouses. The white bishops said that Gule will be removed from the church because he is saying that mothers should wear the bishop's dress. Then the uniform was taken off. Some had bought some purple blouses, it was taken off. Then it remained like that until when I was old, the uniform came back again, that we should wear the black and white.

Mrs Zondi circumscribes the restrictions on the wearing of church uniform around the wishes of priests. In her understanding, indigenous priests were supportive of the women, but nonetheless still in control of the discourse. Mrs Ngcobo's account presents a more complex picture of what took place when uniforms were banned (Lilian Ngcobo, 24 June 1998, Sweetwaters):

BH: Gogo I want to come back to the uniform that you put on right when you first became a member of the Mothers Union, so the white *umfundisi* didn't want you to wear the uniform?

LN: *Wayengayithandi phela yena ngoba sabona thina ukuthi phela ngoba amakhosikazi abeLungu abayigqoki inyufomu wayethatha ngalelohlangothi.*

He didn't like it, we felt that it was because the *mlungu* [white] mothers didn't wear the uniform, he took it that way.

BH: So when that *umfundisi* used to come and take a service you didn't wear the uniform?

LN: *Hayi abanye babeyithanda owayengayithandi kakhulu*

uMjophuka uyayithanda lo umBhishopi uyayithanda.

No others liked it, the only person who didn't like it was Mjophuka [the name of the priest], the Bishop likes it.

BH: The *umfundisi* didn't like the uniform and he used to come and you didn't wear it for that service?

LN: *Uma kuthiwa nje kuza uMjophuka yisonto elikhulu singayigqoki.*

Whenever Mjophuka was coming for a Holy Communion service we wouldn't wear it.

BH: But the next Sunday when another *umfundisi* comes then you put it on?

LN: *Ehe noma kuza omunye nje umfundisi womlungu sasiyigqoka sasazi nje ukuthi wo kuza umfundisi omunye.*

Yes and when another *mlungu umfundisi* was coming we used to wear our uniform [laughing], we used to know that another *umfundisi* was coming.

In this account, Mrs Ngcobo indicates that not all indigenous clergy were supportive of women wearing the uniform.³ More importantly, she shows that women were not passive but were actively resisting the restrictions placed on them by the church authorities. In a delightful public irruption of what was once hidden, she confessed *to me* a hidden strategy against the restriction of the wearing of church uniforms: women only wore the church uniform to services where sympathetic clergy were officiating. They had a keen grasp of which priests were on their side and harnessed clergy support in tactically continuing their

³ Racial dynamics in the censure of the church uniform by priests, as alluded to by both Mrs Zondi and Mrs Ngcobo, would be an important area of further research but is beyond the scope of this study.

protest. Strategically navigating the church politics of the day, they resisted until they had ultimately secured the space they now enjoy to freely wear their church uniforms.

The MU as a part of the indigenous Christian women's movement is a sacred, sequestered, safe site which has been forged by women themselves. It is a site where resistance survival theologies are given expression. In this sense it is a radical movement that poses a challenge to women's theology in the academy and to the activist women's liberation project in the church and society. But to many South African Christian women outside of the *manyano* movement, it is seen as a place of theological conservatism. This study attempts to provide a more nuanced analysis of the survival theologies of these women. Social commentators have also stressed the political conservatism of the *manyano* movement, arguing that despite the potential for political mobilisation within such a movement, it does not occur (Brandel-Syrier 1962:102). Given Scott's (1990) analysis of the complexity of resistance discourse in climates of extreme surveillance, as was the South African case prior to 1994, it is unlikely that this political critique is the whole story. In the next section, I turn to explore signs of overt political resistance within the *manyano* movement during the last century.

8.4.5 Overt political resistance and the *manyano* movement

Brandel-Syrier asserts that "women keep their *Manyanos* outside political life as well as outside life together" (1962:102).⁴ Others have confirmed this view by suggesting that historically, the *manyano* movement has "tended to be a-political, showing little concern for the affairs of the wider community" (Holness 1997:28). This view is said to be held even by Lilian Ngoyi (an activist discussed in section 5.4.2) who, on observing church women weeping over Christ's suffering at Easter, "felt there was something very wrong, for after weeping nothing would be done. They all waited for some power from God" (Joseph 1963:165; see Gaitskell 1990:270). There is, however, an alternative understanding of the political life of the *manyano* movement. Walker (1995:427) asserts, that it was these women's church organisations that shaped the collective identity for Christian mothers which

⁴This has also been said about African Independent Churches. Comaroff 1985; Mosala (1985); and Petersen (1995) have countered this argument by attempting to show the political agency in the practices of these churches.

in turn laid the foundation for the political agenda of the African National Congress Women's League and the Federation of South African Women (see section 5.4.5). These two organisations were key to women's activist struggles in the 1950s.

Gaitskell (1990:270), in adopting this view further, argues that the judgement on the *manyano* movement as being unwilling to organise their potential power for political ends might be premature. Drawing on the work of two historians, Julia Wells (1983;1993) and William Beinart (1987), she suggests that there is emerging evidence that women involved in the *manyano* movement were involved in various forms of political protests in their communities.

Wells (1983; 1993) focuses on women's resistance in the towns of Potchefstroom and Bloemfontein during the 1910-1930 period of South African history. As Gaitskell (1990:270) points out, in Wells' work there is evidence of involvement by two active *manyano* women in the protest against the pass laws in Bloemfontein in 1913 (Wells 1993:41-42). For me, this in itself is not that significant as it could be argued that they were isolated cases. What I do find more compelling is Gaitskell's (1990: 270) astute observation from the work of Wells (1983) that women's resistance in Potchefstroom contained elements that were strikingly reminiscent of *manyano* revivalism.

[Women] organised mostly at night, with some meetings lasting virtually the whole night long, where they carefully planned strategies for how to deal with various court cases, organised meetings and demonstrations, and planned deputations... Women gathered for these meetings by singing in the streets, moving from street to street until all women had been collected (Wells 1983:286).

This intriguing connection warrants further investigation and is certainly suggestive of a religious element to these women's protests. A less opaque example of the strength of the involvement of *manyano* women is that of William Beinart (1987) who explores rural protest in the Herschel district in the 1920s. Beinart (1987) has systematically shown how the foundation of the women's protest movement during this period was the "dressed women" of

the Methodist *manyano* groups. In defending their access to, and control over, rural resources, they adopted programmes of “defensive communalism” (Beinart 1987:262). “This programme came to entail, in differing degrees for differing groups in the district, an African Christianity, separate schools, a fight for ‘communal’ tenure, and support for restored chieftaincy” (Beinart 1987:262; see Gaitskell 1990:270).

The extension of the migrant labour system during the 1920s left Herschel women to fend for themselves and they were caught up in spiralling poverty as they were forced to sell their grain, needed for subsistence, at ever decreasing prices to the local white traders (Beinart 1987:234). Women decided to protest by organising a boycott of white owned trading stores in the area. This strike involved thousands of women who decided that people should stop buying from the white shopkeepers until they cut their prices and in turn paid a fair price for the wheat sold to them (Beinart 1987:235). It appears that the women were quite aggressive in their militancy, and no one dared cross their line (Beinart 1987:235).

In discussing the role of Christian women in this protest action, Beinart (1987:238) argues that they had greater scope for control over property through their religious status. The *manyano* movement itself had brought a measure of religious and economic independence which was asserted in their meetings and fundraising activities (Beinart 1987:238-239). In Scott’s (1990:xi) terms, the dignity and autonomy of women had been affirmed in their *manyano* meetings. Beinart (1987:239) expresses an uncertainty as to exactly how the *manyano* groups became vehicles for political protests in Herschel. What is certain, he asserts, is that activity within a Methodist *manyano* meeting triggered the political protest.

A Methodist teacher reported to his white missionary that “some women of our church, including women of our women’s association... went to Makobeni’s homestead and held a prayer meeting”. Their prayers, however, had more than religious content. They prayed that Makobeni should become headman again, indeed chief headman of the whole district, and that all means should be used to stop land registration (Beinart 1987:246).

This account of what took place that day suggests that in the safe site of the *manyano*

meeting, the women had been practising “offstage” for the day when they would take to the public stage (Scott 1990:119; see West n.d). These women re-located their site to the place where they assumed political power should reside, and as their socio-religious discourse demonstrates, paved the way for political action. When the time was right, the *manyano* women were ready to take to the public stage and boycott stores with a militancy that prevented people from “crossing their line”. The effectiveness of the Herschel protest was in no small measure due to women’s organisation which was nurtured within the *manyano* movement (Beinart 1987:239).

From this convincing study by Beinart (1987) and the suggestive evidence in the work of Wells (1983; 1993), I contend that any exploration into the history of indigenous African women’s lives and into their religious and political mobilisation, “cannot afford to ignore what was happening in the supposedly ‘closed’ world of the *manyano*” (Gaitskell 1990:271). Having said this, what is clear from Beinart’s study, is that the *manyano* women involved in the Herschel protests were involved in resisting forms of oppression that equally affected all their lives. This was not the case in the Mothers’ Union (MU), where white women who had access to economic and political resources controlled the organisation at regional and national level almost exclusively until the mid-1970s. In the next section I explore overt resistance, or lack thereof, in the MU, given its racial mix and the contested interests within its membership.

8.4.6 The MU and overt political resistance

When an assessment is made of overt political protest by the MU, it needs to be remembered that it was theoretically a multi-racial organisation. The lived reality of the women’s lives in the organisation was very different from one another. In fact, the large, almost exclusive indigenous membership was controlled at a regional and national level by the small white membership, who occupied all the key leadership positions until the mid-1970s.

This division of the organisation along racial lines is not surprising given the colonial history of the Anglican church and the strong control which the Church of England maintained over its missionary dioceses. Scholars such as Cock (1990) and Labode (1993) have shown the

ambiguity in the efforts of women missionaries in the late nineteenth century with regard to their training of young girls for domesticity (see section 7.3.2). From the outset, these missionary efforts, at least to some extent, collaborated with the colonial authorities⁵ in training the young women as servants. Apartheid, with which the Anglican church also collaborated (Cochrane 1987), reinforced this relationship of servitude between women of different races. This pattern of servant and employer both being members of the MU was present until white women left the organisation in large numbers to join the Anglican Women's Fellowship during the 1970s.

Given the colonial roots of the Anglican church, and the lack of involvement of white women in political resistance to oppression of black women in any significant numbers (see section 5.4.2), it is not surprising that there is not a great deal of evidence that the white-controlled MU was not involved as an organisation in political action during the twentieth century. Indigenous African women were subjected to appalling social conditions as a result of legislative discrimination. From my limited archival research, there appears to be little documented evidence of white Anglican women speaking out against the social injustice experienced by their African sisters in the organisation. Relationships between white and indigenous African women within the MU were fractured. As a result, African women chose to align themselves with other *manyano* groups rather than with their white counterparts.

⁵This is not to suggest that all female missionaries colluded with colonialism to the same extent. Gaitskell (1997) shows that in the work of five Anglican missionaries in the Transvaal during the period 1907-1960, they collaborated with colonial authorities in differing degrees.

It was only in 1960 that there seems to have been some protest effort at the “disruption of African family life”. Concerns over the effect on family life of the pass laws⁶ and the migratory labour system had surfaced at a MU Provincial Council meeting the previous year (MU South Africa R 1959). As a result, the Secretary of the Council, Miss Margaret Snell, wrote to Archbishop Joost de Blank requesting that he organise a day of prayer within the Province “for the restoration of family life” (MU South Africa O 1960). This seemingly reasonable request by MU women was met with some antagonism by the bishops of Bloemfontein, Kimberley, and Natal (MU South Africa S 1960). No other concrete or concerted action was carried out against these discriminatory pieces of legislation, despite the mass action that was taking place at the time within African communities.

It appears to have taken a further ten years before any other reference was made to social issues concerning African women. At the MU Provincial Council meeting held in March 1971, a resolution was passed with regard to the migrant labour system. The resolution called upon all women to, firstly, assert the right of every wife to live with her husband and children in a family home, and, secondly, to urge the Government of the Republic of South Africa to recognise that family life for African women is a right and not a privilege (MU South Africa P 1971). A copy of this resolution was posted to all Members of Parliament of the South African government and also to all Anglican clergy. The clergy were urged in a letter to discuss the matter in their churches. They were also encouraged in this letter to initiate lobbying action against the government through approaching individual Members of Parliament, women’s organisations, and writing letters (MU South Africa Q 1971). The effect of this initiative or the extent to which women and clergy heeded the call remains questionable. Elsewhere I have shown that the Church of the Province of Southern Africa often responded to social issues by passing resolutions without implementing concrete action, thus rendering it ineffective as a social change agent (Haddad 1998b; see also Cochrane

⁶ During apartheid every indigenous African person was required to carry identification known as a “pass book” which circumscribed where they could reside. It was partly introduced to control the migration of Africans to the cities. No person could work in the city without permission which was endorsed in their pass book by the authorities.

1987).

In 1973, two more Objects were added to the existing three (discussed in section 7.3.4) in the mission statement of the MU in South Africa. This amendment had already been ratified by the London Central Committee. These additional Objects were more obviously focused on the social context into which the organisation operates. The mission statement of the MU was extended to include, firstly, the need to promote conditions in society favourable to stable homes and a happy childhood, and, secondly, to help those whose family life has met with adversity (MU South Africa J 1973). In reality, the MU as an institution has done little in the last thirty years to fulfill these objectives which, if taken seriously, would have required (and still does) a serious engagement with political transformation to bring about a more just society.

Earlier I suggested that since liberation in 1994 women have been afforded more political opportunity than ever before to assert their rights for gender justice (section 4.2.2). Throughout the twentieth century, when they had no political rights, indigenous African women have found a safe and sacred space in the *manyano* movement for resistance activity. They have at times during this period strategised to maintain this space as sites of resistance as was the case in the diocese of St John's (section 8.4.3). At other times they have used these sites to nurture overt political protest as is shown in the Herschel district (section 8.4.5). I have argued in this chapter that resistance discourse occurs at a number of levels. For decades, *manyano* women have been resisting their domination at the level of infrapolitics. Anglican women have had a particularly difficult time in securing their site because of the particular racial dynamics between women within the organisation. In this post-liberation period, new potential exists for these MU sites of resistance to be places where women continue to nurture their faith and transform their survival struggle into one of liberation.

In the previous chapter, I showed how new sites, such as the Nxamalala Bible study group (section 7.5), could impact the established site of the MU in socially transformative actions (section 7.6). It seems to me that the activist-intellectual has a role to play in the point of inter-connection between these two sites and so enabling poor and marginalised women to own what is liberating and life-giving. Through collaborative work, it is possible to help

secure new sites and in so doing foster liberatory practices. My collaborative work in the contextual Bible study group with the women of Nxamalala, many of whom are *manyano* members, is an attempt to assume this role. I want to return to this group as a location of survival theologies and explore the potential of such a project for overt practices of resistance to women's oppression. In concluding the section, my role as an activist-intellectual in collaborative resistance activity with poor and marginalised women will be discussed.

8.5 The contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala

8.5.1 Resistant speech in the Bible study group

The Nxamalala Bible study group became a safe, sacred, and sequestered site through our collaborative work as women (section 7.5.3). The securing of such a social site is necessary for the articulation of hidden practices of resistance, and in itself is an achievement of resistance. “[T]he social spaces where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (Scott 1990:119). Nxamalala women chose to attend in spite of difficult social constraints, to be together and to talk with one another about their lives of faith. The patriarchal, social, and economic forces that dominated their lives did not prevent their determination to forge that space where increasingly I witnessed the emergence of what was previously hidden. The group was not only an achievement of resistance in itself, it also became the “offstage site” where hidden transcripts began to be “practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated” (Scott 1990:119).

Much that was previously hidden before began to be articulated in the group as the site increasingly became a safe and sacred space. In this social site, the “bitten tongues created by the relations of domination” found a “full-throated vehement expression” (Scott 1990:120). Women began to speak openly in the group about sexual matters such as rape and the virginity testing of their daughters, about women's oppression through widowhood, polygamy, and being forced to live after marriage with her husband's family. They not only articulated what was previously unspoken, they also at times enacted through role playing overt liberatory resistance actions, such as mass community action to stop rape in the community. They disseminated information amongst other women in the community about

the dangers of AIDS and virginity testing, speech which had been practised in the group beforehand. And all the while they were practising for the day when they might speak out what was previously hidden, no longer a threat to their survival, and resistance might erupt into the public realm (West n.d.).

However, to suggest that this safe social site means that their “speaking” progresses in a linear fashion deeper and deeper into the depths of the hidden realm of discourse does not do justice to the actual process. Experience has shown that in reality, even within this safe space, the “speaking” is full of contradictions, retractions, and even withdrawals. When disclosure becomes too threatening, the women retract what they have said and revert to the public transcript. This “retreating” is illustrated in the example of the women speaking out against the oppression of church leaders, and then retracting their views the following week (discussed earlier in section 7.5.3). This example not only highlights the ambiguities of trying to penetrate the hidden realm, but confirms the level of surveillance and resulting fears that pervade the lives of these women, not only in the home and community, but significantly even in the church. Importantly, it also indicates the contradictions and ambiguities that exist in the very space that the women have created for themselves, and in the way the women perceive themselves in relation to one another, to myself as priest, and to the church. When they speak out and later perceive this to be a threat to their survival, they retreat.

Spivak (1988) might interpret this “retreating” as capitulation to hegemonic forces which silence and render the women passive. John and Jean Comaroff (1991:19-32), together with Scott (1990), would argue that this is too thick a view of hegemony which they emphasise as unstable and vulnerable. For them, hegemony functions along a continuum together with ideology, existing in reciprocal interdependence, with the hegemonic proportion of any dominant ideology being greater or lesser depending on the context and the control of the dominant (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25). Together they constitute the two faces of power. Ideology is the agentive face of power, that which enables people to exercise a measure of control over the productive forces of their lives. Hegemony on the other hand is non-agentive power at work in everyday forms of life and often ascribed to supernatural forces that cannot easily be questioned (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:22). It is made through the exercise of control over symbolic modes of production such as education, ritual

processes, patterns of socialisation, political and legal procedures and so forth. It is when the control is so sustained that it becomes deeply inscribed in the signs and practices of everyday life and hence becomes invisible (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25). However, the ideology of the dominant cannot occupy non-ideological terrain, so while it may establish itself at the expense of prior ideologies, it cannot totally subject what was there before (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25). This suggests that hegemony “is always threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts” and consequently “is constantly being made - and, by the same token may be unmade” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:25).

This process of “continuous creation” and re-creation of the hegemonic, implies that those who are oppressed constantly experience a tension between “the world as represented” and “the world as experienced” - cognitive dissonance. Gramsci (1971:333) would term this “contradictory consciousness” which, as has been argued by some, determines the extent to which oppressed people tolerate and rationalise their subordination (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:26). Their resulting actions thus consist of “a complex admixture of tacit (or even uncomprehending) accommodation to the hegemonic order at one level and diverse expressions of symbolic and practical resistance at another...” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:26). Scott (1990) would disagree (see section 8.3). Actions of the oppressed are seldom uncomprehending because for him, their constraints are not at the level of consciousness. If their actions appear to be an accommodation to the hegemonic, remember that “things are never what they seem” (Scott 1990:200). For John and Jean Comaroff “things are never what they seem” for slightly different reasons. For them, the notion that consciousness is all or none, present or absent, is problematic (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:28). They find it more plausible to see knowledge and experience as situated along a *chain of consciousness* that is akin to the hegemony/ideology continuum (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:28). Consciousness is “a continuum whose two extremes are the unseen and the seen, the submerged and the apprehended, the unrecognized and the cognized” which corresponds to the hegemonic and ideological poles (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:28). As hegemony and ideology shift, so too consciousness shifts between the two poles. It is this domain that lies between the two poles of the conscious and the unconscious that is critical to an analysis of domination and resistance.

[This domain] is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and sometimes of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into the narrative descriptions or even articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs are observed, but in a hazy translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their fingers on quite what it is. It is from this realm, we suggest, that silent signifiers and unmarked practices may rise to the level of explicit consciousness, ... and become the subject of overt political and social contestation - or from which they may recede into the hegemonic, to languish there unremarked for the time being (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:29).

Let me return to the Nxamalala Bible study group. The example of the women speaking out against the oppression of their church leaders was an articulation from this realm of partial recognition. In this instance, their oppression did rise to the level of explicit consciousness but was then retracted. In my view, however, and here I lean towards Scott's (1990) analysis, it is insufficient to suggest that their unanimous voice of regret at having spoken out meant that their speech receded into the hegemonic. For the women of Nxamalala, to speak out against ecclesiastical oppression had become too dangerous (Scott 1990:223). Their sacred, safe, sequestered, site was not safe enough. This discussion took place in the early phase of the group's life when it lacked a cohesiveness (see section 7.5.3), which might explain why the space was not safe enough at this stage of the process. The issue of the oppression of women by the church leadership was not raised again through a study of the Biblical text in the later stages of the process and thus it is difficult to know how safe the space became for the women to speak out on this issue. My sense was that our safe space never became safe enough to speak out against patriarchal church leadership. This was perhaps, in part, because as a priest my presence in the group always partially represented patriarchy.

In reflecting on why our safe social site did not, at times, necessarily feel safe enough for the women to speak out about all forms of oppression, led me to also question the conditions under which women under heavy surveillance are likely to engage in overt political action. This dimension of our collaborative work hovered in the background of my interpretative

reflections throughout the group process.

8.5.2 Internal and external constraints on overt resistance

Because our space was not safe enough to speak out against ecclesiastical oppression, the women were unable to corporately *own* this articulation (West 1999:140). Around issues of ecclesiastical oppression the Nxamalala women retreated. They spoke out and then withdrew. My presence as priest might have been a factor, but there could have been other reasons, such as a fear of surveillance from other women. Mrs Thembani Khoza, who initiated the retraction statement, is married to a key lay minister. She feared that the church leaders would get to hear that they, as churchwomen, were talking about them at their meetings: “ *Mabeke bezwa ukuthi kanti silana, sikhuluma ngabo ngeke kube kuhle*” [If they can hear that as we are here, we are talking about them it won't be a good thing] (BSG, 30 October 1997, Nxamalala). I then reassured her that I would not say anything, and if we all did not say anything, no-one outside of the group need know. The other women agreed and replied, “*Akube yimfihlo yethu*” [Let it be our secret]. But Mrs Khoza was not convinced, and insisted, “*Ayi, saba nephutha*” [No, we made a mistake]. Thereafter, other women began to retract their previous statements. Their articulation had not become the social property of the whole group. When the women realised this, they retreated. Their ability to articulate and *own* their common oppression depends, it would seem, on the safety of the site. Mutuality and trust must provide sufficient cohesiveness for shared owning of the hidden transcript, which can then lead to overt resistance against oppression (Scott 1990:223).

But our safe and sacred site has enabled Nxamalala women to articulate on many occasions other aspects of their oppression that had never before been owned. Partial recognition did at times give way to articulated understandings of silent signifiers in their lives which were then corporately owned as the social property of the group. Often, it took just one articulation of what was hidden before for others to recognise themselves in the speech (Scott 1990:223).

Others shared their experience, re-articulated the experience and began to own for themselves this hidden discourse. This collective articulation, and the process of owning this articulation as a shared experience of oppression, can lead to open contestation and social transformation if it becomes the social property of the group (West 1999:141). When it does not, internal group constraints and external social constraints pose too great a threat. Survival becomes the overriding priority.

The Nxamalala Bible study group can be seen as “a latent power grid” made up of individual women (Scott 1990:224; see West 1999:110-111). When there is a collective articulation and owning of the hidden silent signifiers of their lives, “social electricity” moves through this power grid. Scott (1990:224) argues that for overt and organised action to occur, there needs to be sufficient cohesiveness within the grid to generate the electricity that can ignite such mobilisation.

Small differences in hidden transcript within a grid might be considered analogous to electrical resistance causing losses of current... the grid itself, as defined by the hidden transcript, delimits the maximum possible symbolic reach of such acts... (Scott 1990:224).

The loss of current which delimits the potential of this social electricity is a result of either *internal differences*, and hence the definition of the hidden transcript within the group, or else *external constraints* on the women pose a threat to their survival. When this loss of social electricity occurs, there is a “leaking” of power from the grid leading to a regression into the realm of public discourse and seeming passivity (Scott 1990:224). However, in this relative safe space the group keeps practising and enacting the hidden transcript, refining their infrapolitical responses to domination and waiting for the day when conditions are ripe for organised action that brings about social transformation (see section 8.4.5).

Clearly, external social constraints in the community manifest themselves within the group. These external constraints include those factors associated with culture, which for example gives authority to certain women according to age and marital status. Conflictual internal differences can also be the result of external constraints such as differing access to economic

resources and the past history of political violence in the area. There are also internal factors, however, such as church affiliation and unstable individual personalities which are unpredictable and integral to the group which contribute to a lack of cohesiveness. All of these factors are interconnected and have a role to play in weakening the cohesiveness of the electrical grid and thus constrain overt resistance against oppression by the Nxamalala women.

Culturally, authority is ascribed to age and marital status in the community. Younger women have been taught to defer to older women, which is most clearly expressed in the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Some of these tensions were expressed through some of our discussions on the book of Ruth. Married women have more authority than those who are single. Within the group, the position of “most senior woman” was ascribed to Mrs Thembani Khoza because of her age and position as a grandmother, her marital status as a married woman, and her position as a wife of a lay minister. She took it upon herself to open the meeting by appointing someone to pray. If she was not present at the meetings, one of the other grandmothers would assume this role. At times I intervened and appointed one of the younger women to this task in an attempt to shift power relations within the group. This was partially successful, as younger women took this initiative in the later stages of the group life. But, when daughters of some of the women were present, all women were more guarded in their responses, reflected most obviously in our discussions on the book of Ruth which foregrounded age between women as a factor in relationships. A brief poignant example, discussed earlier (see section 7.5.4), will illustrate my point. During one of the sessions when we were discussing the book of Ruth, the women all shared about the difficulties they experienced at the hands of their mothers-in-law (BSG, 11 June 1998, Nxamalala). The next week when there were young unmarried women present, there was a retraction of much of what had been said about the harshness of mothers-in-law towards daughters-in-law. In fact there was an overt attempt by Mrs Khoza to “instruct” younger women in how they needed to respect their mothers-in-law. There was too much at stake culturally which prevented the older women from openly confessing to their daughters that life in the homestead of their in-laws was difficult. The cultural surveillance on this matter made speaking out too dangerous. If any of the woman did want to instruct her daughter away from the culturally accepted practice of moving to the homestead of the husband’s

family, it was done more safely in the privacy of one's own home. This moving in and out of the hidden and public realms of their discourse weakens the social electricity of their social grid, and hence the effectiveness of their resistance.

Differing access to economic resources was also an external constraint that manifested itself in internal differences between women. Both Mrs Khoza and Mrs Thandiwe Mdluli were more financially resourced than the other women. As water pipes were laid, electricity made available, and telephone installation became possible in the Nxamalala area during the latter part of the group process, the differing ability to access these resources became more pronounced. Interestingly, my access to wealth was expected and never openly contested. In fact when I purchased a new car that could transverse the hill to church, there was much joy at what I had "received from God". This did not always seem to be the case in relation to one other.

Discussions between Mrs Khoza and Mrs Mdluli often ensued in the informal discussions before the meetings about the problems that they were experiencing with Eskom⁷ or Telkom⁸. Immediately other members were precluded from this interaction, exacerbating any sense of embarrassment they might have at their poverty. Mrs Phumla Ngema, as an elderly widow, seemed to dwell on her lack of economic resources in relation to others. Even in the formal discussions she would raise the issue which, at that stage of the group's life, resulted in others falling silent or attempting to move the conversation on in an embarrassed fashion. A study on John 4:1-30, the story of the Samaritan woman meeting Jesus at the well, sparked such an incident. The only obvious connection to the Biblical text in Mrs Ngema's response is the access to water which Jesus was requesting from the Samaritan women (BSG, 22 October 1998, Nxamalala):

TK: *Lendaba ingishayisa ngovalo ngibona isimangaliso
enenhlanhla enkulu yena uJesu ekhetha yena esezonweni zakhe
kodwa athole uMoya oNgcwele impela loku kuyangimangalisa*

⁷ The parastatal providing electricity to the area.

⁸ The parastatal providing telephone services to the area.

ukuthi hawu Nkosi yami nathi siyakudinga loku ukuthi ngelinye ilanga asithinte uNkulunkulu njengoba athinta lonkosikazi nje wayesezonweni zakhe. Siyacabanga ke ukuthi ngesikhathi esebone yonke into esembulelekile waba noshintsho waba ngumlandeli kaJesu.

This story is frightening me, it is wonderful because she was too lucky, Jesus chose her while she was in her sins but she received the Holy Spirit, this is wonderful. We also need the Lord to touch us like he did to this woman who was in her sins. We are thinking that by the time when she saw everything she changed and became the follower of Jesus.

[Silence]

PN: *Kona akufanele umuntu simbukele phansi kungathi uma unesitofu sikagesi ngingenaso bese ungibukela phansi ngoba akufani.*

We do not have to look down upon others, if you have a stove and I don't have it you don't have to look down upon me because it is not the same.

All: [Laughing]

BH: [Laughing] Gogo would you like to talk about that, hey Gogo?

PN: *Njengoba sihleli nje kwangena ugesi phela manje loloshintsho lukhona hayi ukuthi alukho singeluphike. Ehe kwangena ugesi lapha manje uma kungena ugesi ngakomunye ubone omunye evala umnyango angathi uphethwe ngumkhuhlane ... Singambhekeli phansi onako unako nguNkulunkulu.*

As we are residing here there was an installation of the electricity, that change does exist, we cannot deny that. Yes there is an electricity here, then when one gets it and you'll see others closing the door as if they have a flu... We don't have to look down upon them the one who has it because of God.

Mrs Ngema felt “looked down upon” because she could not afford electricity and running water. Long after she left the group in the final year of our collaborative work, the fractured nature of access to economic resources continued to lurk in the shadows of our discourse. During a session where we were studying, Mark 10:17-22, the story of the rich man that was told by Jesus to sell all his possessions, far from this study eliciting a recognition that the man had put wealth before Jesus as in other poor communities who read this text (see Draper and West 1989; West 1999:21-33), it evoked tensions about the wealth that some members had and were not sharing with others (BSG, 16 September 1999, Nxamalala). Mrs Nozipho Zama personally attacked Mrs Mdluli, whose husband owned one of the few general dealer stores in the area, for not sharing what she owned. While Mrs Zama had made personal comments before against other women outside of the group, this incident directly affected relationships within the group. Mrs Mdluli reacted defensively and we all felt extremely uneasy. I intervened and attempted to defuse the situation directly, something I did not often do. I somehow felt responsible for exposing Mrs Mdluli, as I had chosen the passage to study, assuming it would evoke a very different discourse. That particular session was so threatening to *my* sense of safe space, that I chose not to resume the study of that Biblical text the next week.

By far the greatest external constraint that had implications for the cohesiveness within the group was the legacy of the political violence. During that period of history, you trusted no-one, not even your neighbour. Political affiliation often defined whether you lived or died and surveillance by others in the community had become sinister and frightening (see section 3.6). Our collaborative work in the group occurred in the aftermath of this tumultuous period in the life of the Nxamalala community. It is unclear to what extent women themselves felt vulnerable in this regard with one another, but I was aware that I did, knowing first hand of the toll this period of violence had taken on the church life of St Gabriel's. Within the

context of the group, it never felt safe enough for me to ask. Perhaps because I also feared that I would then need to own my particular political convictions in an environment that would jeopardise my relationship with some of the women. Women seemed to know strategies of how to deal with this legacy that I did not understand. In moments, something of what was hidden in those times would be articulated. Mrs Mdluli confessed that they would hide their men from those attacking their homesteads by dressing them up as women (BSG, 12 August 1999, Nxamalala):

Nangesikhathi kuliwa lapha ngangiyiye, ngibone mhlambe umuntu uma ngabe umuntu wesilisa bemfica laba abalwayo umuntu wesifazane athathe iphinifa amgqokise amnqwazise neduku bangakwazi ukumbona.

During the times when there were fightings here, what I used to see was when the fighters run after a man, a woman would take a pinafore and dress him up and cover his head with a cloth so that they won't see him.

The conversation moved on after this articulation to other forms of survival strategies that women employ in the face of danger (see section 7.5.4). Therefore the extent to which the political violence contributes to the surveillance that women feel from each other did not become self-evident in this discussion. However, the following week, another incident occurred indicating that it is a contributing factor. We were studying the text Exodus 1:8-21, the story of the Hebrew midwives that were ordered by the Egyptians to kill the male children of the Israelites. This led to an assertion by Mrs Chiki Ngcongco that women cannot be trusted: “*Isifuba asisekho*” [We can't keep secrets] (BSG, 19 August 1999, Nxamalala). Mrs Khoza responded by declaring,

Ngesikhathi sodlame thina sabona amakhosikazi ayemabi kakhulu, yiwona ayedayisa eminye imizi yabantu, athi umuntu uma engakuthandi avele athi lo uyilenhlangano kanti unamanga akayona naleyonhlangano. Amakhosikazi ayemabi kakhulu futhi namanje mabi.

During the times of violence women were very bad, they were the ones who

were mostly selling the other people. When she doesn't like you she would just lie and tell the people that you are a member of a certain political organisation. Women were very bad and even now they are still very bad.

Mrs Mdluli responded to this articulation by saying that when political leaders used to call a meeting, she would run away. I then suggested that it feels dangerous to talk about such things in the community. All the women affirmed this fear.

Speaking about what feels dangerous is also linked to internal dynamics within the group which are integral but unpredictable, such as the individual personalities of some members. I have alluded above to the incident involving Mrs Zama, whose responses to situations was often extreme. Mrs Zama made *me* feel unsafe in my collaborative work and I experienced her as a threat to our cohesiveness. On the way home, I often found myself discussing her role in the group with Nonhlanhla, and perhaps others were doing the same. Mrs Zama was an unstable person who easily verbally attacked women within and outside of the group. On several occasions she did this to draw attention to herself and thereby become the focus of the group. Nonhlanhla would assure me that it was not a major issue for the women, "as they knew how to handle her". Sometimes they did. It was usually Mrs Khoza who would intervene by diverting her conversation or singing a chorus. But I was always left wondering to what extent she created a "leak" in the electrical current of the social grid that had developed in the safe and sacred site.

During our collaborative work over two and half years, no overt resistance against oppression took place. But, given all the internal and external constraints upon the group, there *has* been a movement towards an organisation that suggests a potential for the power grid to be ignited. They are embryonic signs and are consistent in form with the emerging survival theologies that are being articulated in this new location of women's theology.

8.5.3 Movement towards organisation

The above discussion might suggest that the odds are against ensuring sufficient cohesiveness in the group to enable the mobilisation of organised and overt action to take place. However,

Scott asserts:

Solidarity among subordinates, if it is achieved at all, is...achieved paradoxically, only by means of a degree of conflict. Certain forms of social strife, far from constituting evidence of disunity and weakness, may well be the signs of an active, aggressive social surveillance that preserves unity (Scott 1990:131).

Within the group, as the site increasingly was secured as safe and sacred, there were signs of a movement towards a unity and solidarity expressed in embryonic organisation. The internal and external constraints, far from fracturing our unity, became an expression of our identity as we collaborated with one another. Herein, potentially, lies the seeds of overt and organised resistance against the injustices experienced by women in the community.

The movement towards organisation has been slow and undramatic as a solidarity began to emerge within the group. This solidarity is evident in moments such as the enactment in role play of marching together down to the police station to demand the arrest of the rapist. It is also evident in the enthusiasm with which the report back from a workshop on virginity testing was received. Perhaps, most of all, it is evident in the last weeks that we were together, as the women decided that they should begin to plan a party for the final meeting of the year. They expressed to me that they needed to show each other, and women outside of the group, that they could “organise”. The previous year an end of year party had been arranged but with little corporate planning and they wanted to improve on these efforts. During this movement towards internal organisation, a secretary and treasurer were elected to oversee the financial arrangements of this end-of-year event. For the last few weeks of the year, time was set aside at each meeting to “do their fundraising”. The group decided that each woman would contribute a fixed amount at regular intervals. Survival theologies in the group were now being given practical expression as the group, like other *manyano* meetings, adopted *stokvel* principles of fundraising (see sections 4.2.4; 7.4.3).

Initially, at the onset of this process, I felt nervous, perhaps fearing that the emphasis on money would bring further contestation, rather than unity and solidarity. From my

perspective this process raised a number of problems for women who might not be able to keep up with regular payments. We talked about my concerns and they went ahead with their plans. At the party, the last session of the year, the women sang and shared gifts. Many of their plans for the day had not materialised and from my perspective there was an over emphasis on honouring me and Nonhlanhla. Nonetheless, for the women themselves, it fostered a unity and solidarity, and expressed a measure of internal organisation that was not evident before in the life of the group.

We resumed meeting at the beginning of the following year. The Nxamalala women arrived ready to move into the next stage of collaborative work. It would be a new phase for all of us. Nonhlanhla did not return as she had found full-time employment, and I participated for only two more months before relinquishing my position as priest in the community. During these two months, the gender co-ordinator of the Institute for the Study of the Bible at the University of Natal, Phumzile Zondi, began collaborating with the project. She continues to facilitate Bible studies with the group.

My work with the women of Nxamalala has shown that the move to overt organised action is heavily constrained by the forces of surveillance on the lives of marginalised women. But having secured a social site in which the hidden can be articulated and practised, there is now more potential for these women to engage in liberatory acts than existed before. In and through the group process, there have been moments of liberation. The women have tasted a different way of being. They, like both myself and Nonhlanhla, have been re-shaped and re-created. They will never be the same again. In articulating for one another what was previously hidden, they given expression to aspects of their oppression and elements of their theologies of survival. This has shaped who they are, and will potentially shape who their daughters will be in the future. Surveillance is becoming less extreme in the climate of gender equity within South Africa. And so there is more hope in the midst of the contradictory impulses of despair and quality of life found in the struggle to survive that, at the very least, their daughters will experience gender justice. The door to a solidarity with the broader women's liberation project has been opened as I have assisted in securing this safe site and crossed the boundaries of their world and activist-intellectual struggles. And so I turn once again, to the role of the activist-intellectual in collaborative resistance activity

with poor and marginalised women.

8.5.4 The activist-intellectual and collaborative resistance activity

The role of the activist-intellectual in her work with subordinated women can be understood from within two different analytical trajectories (West 1999:37-38). The first trajectory emphasises the role of the intellectual in “organising” resistance activity and helping the oppressed to “create their own language” through conscientisation (Frostin 1988:10; see West 1999:39). Within the second trajectory, the faith categories and concepts of the poor and marginalised are foregrounded. Here, the role of the intellectual is to unify and structure these understandings of faith, and also to ground and defend its practices (West 1999:38). My work throughout this study has attempted to do the latter. In insisting that poor and marginalised women do speak out and act against their oppression, I have adopted a thin view of hegemony. I also show in my work that forms of resistance are present, but that they are dictated by the agendas of poor and marginalised women themselves. It is my conviction that it is in the realm of infrapolitics, those disguised forms of resistance, where ground is lost and won for the vast majority of indigenous African South African women, and probably for most women of the third world. These forms of resistance are “conducted in more earnest, for higher stakes, and against greater odds” (Scott, 1990:200) than many of us activist-intellectuals will ever experience. No longer can our experience alone be determinant of the nature of activism, or for that matter “liberation”.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has made a similar point (see section 8.2). Collins (2000:203) cautions against a universal definition of activism that focuses primarily on an ideological commitment, rather than paying attention to the context and survival practices of resistance in everyday life. For the women of Nxamalala, as indeed for the whole of the Vulindlela region, their context is crucially important to their resistance strategies: for them their forms of activism are literally related to matters of life and death. Just as postmodern notions of identity and subjectivity are crucial to understanding the discourse of marginalised indigenous African women (see 5.5.4), so too are these notions crucial to a description of “activism” and to the role played by the activist-intellectual in her work with oppressed women. There needs to be much greater attention to the detail of local historical spaces in

our work, while at the same time retaining a national perspective on the women's liberation project.

Giving agency to poor and marginalised women in the face of their seeming silence, arguing for a destabilisation of traditional notions of activism, and stressing the local particular struggles of women, raises questions as to the nature of the role of the activist-intellectual, if, indeed, there is one at all. West (1999:111) has argued for a "more modest" role of the activist-intellectual than we would like to think is ours. This does not mean that there is no role at all. The very *presence* of the activist-intellectual helps, as I have argued, to secure a safe social site and she also contributes a range of critical resources for engaging with the Biblical tradition and which challenge traditional understandings of oppression. There is a third aspect of the role of the activist-intellectual: she acts as a "boundary crosser" (West 1999:111). The "boundary regions" of the marginalised are "the site of 'unremitting struggle' between the dominant and the dominated" (West 1999:111). As a boundary crosser inhabiting both worlds, the activist-intellectual "charts more clearly where the boundaries are" between the two (West 1999:111). It is in these three aspects, that of creating space, bringing additional critical resources into the group, and being a boundary crosser that I see as my major contribution to collaborative work with poor and marginalised women.

Let me return to Scott's suggestion that a group, such as the women of Nxamalala, are a latent power grid which, with sufficient cohesiveness, will allow social electricity to move through the grid so as to generate political mobilisation. The Nxamalala experience has shown me that the greatest obstacle in the move to political activism has not been "unconscientised" minds that have permanently receded into the hegemonic, but rather the lack of creative social space to develop sufficient cohesiveness to generate this necessary "social electricity", largely because of external constraints on subordinated women.

I have described the way in which I helped to secure a safe and sacred site in Nxamalala (see section 2.5.1). My role as priest in the community had a major role to play in this process. This role, given the inherent power relationship it establishes between me and the women, has, as I have indicated (see section 8.5.2) also remained as an ambiguous presence throughout our work together. But my priestly position has never overshadowed the fact that

I am *woman-priest*, and that as a woman I have a place in the group. When I made an invitation to the women in the congregation to join a Bible study group where we discussed issues that concerned us a women, this was not regarded as threatening for the men in the congregation. As *woman-priest*, they expected that I would meet with women and together we would discuss their pastoral concerns. Because this was the case, women felt able to attend the group session, free from the normal patriarchal surveillance on their lives. The women themselves experienced me as priest, but also as a woman who shared aspects of their oppression.

As that space has become a “safe site”, so their investment in making sure the space is secure increased. They made sure that our meetings did not interfere with their cooking or washing duties and planned according, but used my presence strategically to ensure that it remained secure. In an informal discussion on how their husbands (for those who have husbands) perceived their attendance of the group, their response was unanimous that they come home “with a smile on their face which pleases their husbands”. In the same discussion, Mrs Thandiwe Mdluli acknowledged that “her husband was glad that I was married because usually educated women are not married - and if that had been the case with me, he would have been worried that I was saying bad things about men”. Inadvertently, my married status had become another way in which I secured space for these women. My married, priestly status had prevented the group being written off as an attempt to subvert the women away from their “family duties”.

But as I have suggested throughout this study, I as *woman-priest* am also an outsider to the community. Throughout my work with the women of Nxamalala, I was deeply conscious of working on the boundaries between their subordinated world and the world of the dominant which I inhabited as a female activist-intellectual. I understood that their struggle to survive was defined by the boundaries of macro socio-economic matters raised by the gender and development debates (see Chapter 4). I regularly crossed the boundaries between their lived reality and theoretical debates in the academy and within church structures. Being able to cross these boundaries meant that potentially I enabled them to recognise, understand, and navigate their constraints. I tried to do this through informal discussions that they raised around what they had seen on the television, and even sometimes through more formal

discussions. Attendance at workshops on gender issues hosted by advocacy groups, such as the one on virginity testing, became a practice in the lives of some of the women that had not been there before our work together. The two women who attended, now have direct links with the organisers of the workshop which is a coalition of activist women's organisation in midlands of KwaZulu-Natal. Potentially, these connections might enable the women of our group to become part of a broader network of women resisting gender oppression.

As a women-priest I also crossed the structural boundaries of the church that defined their silenced status, in ways that they could not. I had access to the bishop and to clergy as colleagues, could speak to community leaders, and sat on diocesan committees, all of which was possible through my status as priest. Being able to cross these boundaries meant that in church life, I was in a position to enable them to navigate these constraints as well. My presence at large diocesan gatherings often represented for the women of Vulindlela, who are usually marginal to the proceedings, a position in the gatherings which did not defer to this prescribed status. Within the national women's liberation project, through my experience as both woman-priest and activist-intellectual, I now chart more clearly the boundaries of church and society as they pertain to poor and marginalised women. Religion, far from being a conservative force in their lives, acts as a catalyst for liberatory action. I have stood in the gap between the macro issues of women's liberation that my education and priestly role enable me to articulate, and the micro local issues of the women's daily struggle to survive, contending that these local struggles are enormously important for the agenda of this larger project.

Standing in this gap, through collaboration, has continually required the unlearning of my privilege as loss and a constant allowing of myself to be partially constituted by their discourse (see section 5.5.5). And as I have engaged as an activist-intellectual-priest in a process of collaboration with the women of Nxamalala, I have been surprised by the ways in which my presence has secured them space and the ways in which I have been able to cross boundaries. Perhaps even more importantly, I have been *open* to being surprised at what my role might be. But perhaps the most surprising aspect of all has been the realisation that while there is a role for the activist-intellectual, it is not the prominent role that I previously imagined. This recognition presumes the agency of poor and marginalised women as

expressed in their subjugated theologies of survival and I believe, poses a challenge to both the church and the academy that can no longer be ignored.

8.6 Survival theologies as resistance: a challenge for the church and the academy

Women in South Africa have been marginalised within the church and within society. Since 1994, there is more political opportunity for an assertion of gender rights than ever before in South Africa. While gender equity has been a priority within government structures, in theological education and in the practice of the church, patriarchal forces are still firmly in control. There is little active commitment to policies of gender affirmative action within leadership structures of the church and within theological teaching institutions. Within the Anglican church, women, like myself, who have chosen to embrace ordained leadership, have had to find ways of operating with integrity within a patriarchal climate where there is little real commitment to gender equity by the almost exclusively male hierarchy. Within theological institutions, there are only token attempts to bring about gender equity to their structures and to teaching theology from a feminist liberationist and African women's theology perspective. Women's discourse continues to be marginalised and is not integrated into the academic curriculum, and as a result is not *integral* to current theological reflection in South Africa.

But, as I have argued in this study, the vast majority of the faith community are poor women who live by theologies of survival. Because of their marginal position within society generally, but especially in the church, their voices are not taken seriously and are usually interpreted and represented by the male leadership of the churches to which they belong. I have suggested that economically privileged women too, even activist-intellectuals, have not given sufficient agency to poor and marginalised women resulting in our theological project not representing the voices of *all* South African women.

When indigenous African women meet together in their *manyano* groups, they do not sit back and listen to the priest as they do on a Sunday. The history of the *manyano* movement, including that of the Mothers' Union (MU), has shown that throughout the decades of colonial mission and beyond, women have been engaged in forms of resistance as expressed

in their survival theologies. New sites, such as the Nxamalala Bible study group, also reveal emerging expressions of these working theologies. These incipient and subjugated knowledges are not even recognised, let alone shape, the theological agenda of the church and academy. In this study, I contend, that as long as “theology” is shaped by the dominant, rather than through an engagement with community wisdom of poor and marginalised women, South African theological reflection in the academy is inadequate and church practice is theologically flawed.

Survival theologies as expressed in the MU are marginal to the dominant theological discourse of the Anglican church and make little impact on its practice. Yet, for the large numbers of MU women who make up a sizeable portion of its membership, it is the place of an alternative discourse of resistance. There are at least three areas in which these theologies critique the practice of the Anglican church: in issues of gender equity, in the raising of financial resources, and in liturgical expressions of worship.

The Anglican church in South Africa continues to be a bastion of male domination, in spite of allowing the ordination of women to the priesthood in 1992. Women priests have yet to make any real structural impact on the church. Poor women, who are in the majority, are seldom represented in important decision making bodies. These structures, such as diocesan councils and synods, employ intricate and technical procedures that require certain skills, such as public speaking, a good command of “church language” inherited from England, and awareness of procedural “etiquette” which has been shaped by its colonial roots. Navigating this territory requires a reasonable command of the English language (certainly in the case of the diocese of Natal in which the women of Vulindlela reside) and a high school level of education. Many women of Vulindlela have neither. Yet their faith, shaped by their daily struggle to survive, is an expression of the lived reality of most Anglicans. As long as church practice continues to favour its colonial and patriarchal past, it will never become a relevant agent of social transformation nor a place of contextual South African Christianity, relevant to both women and men.

Not only is the Anglican church a colonial and patriarchal institution, unwilling to account for the majority of its female membership, it is also a middle-class institution which ignores

the lived reality of *survival* that women face each day. Financial matters pertaining to congregations reflect an expectation that church members have a measure of disposable income which can be dispensed on a regular basis. As fundraising practices of the MU show (section 7.4.3), financial strategies are constructed by poor women to suit their particular situation of poverty. The church hierarchy would do well to heed their voices and include their financial strategies into church policy.

Both the areas of gender equity and the raising of financial resources are complex structural issues that require fundamentally transformed structures. However, in the area of liturgy, there are less complicated practical ways in which the survival theologies of poor women can impact the worship life of the Anglican church. Lectionary readings for Sunday Eucharist services exclude texts such as the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-22) which resonate deeply with the lives of women such as those in Vulindlela, as our Nxamalala Bible study revealed. Readings that reflect the lived reality of these women, in themselves, would give a public voice to this experience. Marginalised women, who have to create an alternative site to the Sunday worship in order to give expression to their desire to pray and preach, must be drawn directly into the preaching ministry of public worship. Preaching by these women in services attended by men and women on texts that reflect their experience has enormous potential to shape the theological agenda of the church. The theological agenda of survival is crucial to the potential transformation of Anglican worship into a contextual and inclusive practice.

Survival theologies as resistance also offer a challenge to the transformation of both the academy and the women's theological project itself. As I have suggested in this study, poor and marginalised indigenous African women have been practising forms of resistance and solidarity for decades away from public view. They have resources that are vital to the construction of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) in our theological work as women. For it is in their voice that questions are raised that would otherwise be forgotten within a dialogue amongst intellectuals. They are questions that question academic definitions of activism, resistance, and solidarity. They are questions that force us intellectuals to question the choices we make in shaping our identities. They are questions that arise out of a struggle for survival, liberation, and life which, I believe, lies at the heart of the women's theological project in South Africa. The voices of poor and marginalised women have been neglected or

eclipsed in the women's theological project and must become an integral aspect of our theorising. As subjugated knowledges, they have not just been subjugated within the academy, but also within women's theology in South Africa.

With the increasing emphasis on a cultural critique of traditional theology in South African reflection, it is crucial that theological reflection includes the voices of indigenous African women. Survival theologies introduce a critique of African patriarchy which is crucial to a cultural critique of traditional theology. African women theologians have shown that culture operates as a contradictory force in women's lives (section 6.8.1). While survival theologies are shaped positively through the identity that culture offers to marginalised women, cultural practices are also a major source of surveillance in their lives. It is precisely because of surveillance, in part through cultural practices, that everyday acts of resistance are carried out by poor and marginalised women. These acts of resistance bring dignity and a quality of life to their existence in the face of severe oppression. If resistance, so crucial to the project of women's liberation, is indeed an aspect of survival theologies, then the view that holds to survival and liberation to be binary opposites must be challenged. The Nxamalala women, in their readings of Biblical texts that resonate with their cultural experience, have a wealth of community wisdom that needs to impact the way in which male African theologians theologise in the academy. Any theological reflection on the transformation of the social deprivation of Africa experienced as a result of colonialism and apartheid, needs to recognise gender oppression as integral to colonial *and* cultural practice.

Survival theologies of indigenous African women, in which their material and spiritual realities are inextricably intertwined, can no longer be ignored by activist-intellectuals. In feminist theology rooted in a first world epistemology, there is little integration of the spiritual and material realities of women's lives resulting in little theological reflection on the alleviation of the material conditions of poverty experienced by millions of women throughout the third world. Survival theologies of poor and marginalised women thus become both a challenge to feminist liberation epistemology, and a motivation for organised action against material oppression. South African women's theology needs to embrace an agenda of liberation that deals with the structural oppression of women as expressed in this ethic of survival/quality of life (Williams 1993). We, activist-intellectuals, need to recognise

that until we are prepared to be re-shaped and re-made by the struggle of poor and marginalised women, we cannot truly claim to be in alliance with *the* struggle for survival, liberation, and life.

8.7 Conclusion

Subjugated survival theologies are a discourse of resistance. I argued in this chapter, together with Patricia Hill Collins (2000), that survival in itself is a form resistance. Indigenous African women, through self affirmation, resist controlling notions of victimisation and hence ensure group survival. They have throughout the period of colonialism and apartheid ensured the survival of the family. It is in their daily struggle for survival that poor and marginalised women employ *arts* of resistance (Scott 1990; Williams 1993). I argued, with Scott (1990), that these arts of resistance employed by subordinated groups operate within both the hidden and public realms, and mostly within the realm of infrapolitics which lies between the two. It is in this realm of infrapolitics, where disguised and coded forms of resistance operate, that most of the political life of poor and marginalised women takes place. In exploring the two potential locations of survival theologies identified in this study, the Mothers' Union (MU) and the Nxamalala Bible study group, I showed how these disguised forms of resistance have operated as expressions of their survival theologies.

Throughout the history of the MU, indigenous African women responded to colonial domination, I argued, with disguised practices of resistance. Women resisted colonial domination and today the MU is an integral part of the indigenous *manyano* movement rather than an institution reflecting the character of its colonial English roots. Throughout this discussion, I showed that resistance to domination was circumscribed by women's experience of survival as expressed in their working theologies. While some scholars have suggested that the *manyano* movement is a conservative and a-political, I suggested that there is some evidence to suggest that organised resistance has been fostered within *manyano* Christianity. In the MU, however, there have been few signs of overt resistance. In this post-liberation period, I argued, new potential exists for MU sites of resistance to be places where women can continue to nurture their faith and transform their survival struggle into one of liberation.

Identifying a discourse of resistance within the survival theologies of the women

participating in Nxamalala Bible study group was more difficult. This is an embryonic site in which survival theologies are just beginning to emerge, and this is true too of their resistance discourse. Nonetheless, I showed how aspects of a resistance discourse did emerge within the group over a period of time. Cohesiveness of the group, I suggested, was crucial to overt resistance taking place. This movement towards a greater solidarity within the group occurred despite the internal and external constraints on the Nxamalala women. I argued that as this occurred, what was previously hidden was increasingly being articulated in the group. With these articulations of survival theologies as resistance, foundations are being laid for a time when conditions are ripe for an organised and overt resistance to domination.

Giving agency to the Nxamalala women raises the question as to the role of the intellectual. I argued against the position which sees the role of the activist-intellectual as conscientising poor and marginalised women, and suggested a more modest role. I indicated three areas in which the activist-intellectual can contribute to collaborative resistance activity with women she works with. These included: helping to secure a safe social site, offering critical resources that challenge the Biblical tradition and traditional understandings of oppression, and being a boundary crosser between the worlds of the dominant and the dominated.

In concluding this chapter I suggested that survival theologies as resistance pose a challenge to the church and academy. Church practice, in taking seriously these survival theologies, will need to address gender equity and the poverty of women and so bring about transformation within its structures. Practically, these theologies can be addressed, as I showed, through a more inclusive set of lectionary readings which takes the survival experience of women more seriously, as well as drawing these women into preaching at public services of worship. Survival theologies challenge the academy to ask a different set of questions in their theorising, questions which are defined by the lived reality of poor and marginalised women. This requires, I suggested, that activist-intellectuals reflect theologically on the material conditions of poor women and place a liberatory plan of action against this form of oppression on the agenda of the women's theological project in South Africa.

As this study moves towards its conclusion, the emergent intersection of faith, feminisms,

and development needs to be clarified. I have sought to locate this study within three related yet distinct fields of women's reflections within the African context. These three areas include the field of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. In intersecting these three fields of study around the notion of survival, it is clear that my work affirms, critiques, and undergirds aspects of theoretical reflection in each of these areas. It is to this discussion that I turn in the next and concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 9

INTERSECTING FAITH, FEMINISMS, AND DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

9.1 Introduction

This study is an attempt to amplify the voices of poor and marginalised women of faith in academic debates concerning the material conditions of their lives through an intersection of the common theoretical threads within the three disciplines of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. Because of the ambitious nature of this project, the emphasis has been on those theoretical aspects within each of these disciplines that are useful to a paradigm in which the amplification of the voices of poor and marginalised women is stressed. It is imperative that such a paradigm must address questions of representation, identity, subjectivity, and agency, and these questions are thus a theoretical locus in intersecting the academic debates. This task implicitly requires a detailed exploration of the contribution of postmodernism to the feminist political project, as they are essentially postmodern questions. In extending this theoretical reflection into the field of women's theology, I have limited the discussion to those aspects of our theological methodology in the current work of some South African, African, and African American women theologians that highlight these questions as they pertain to work with poor and marginalised women of faith. This study, through contextual analysis of the setting of Vulindlela, a historical inquiry into the indigenisation by African women to mission Christianity expressed in the *manyano* movement, and through field work conducted in Vulindlela over a three year period, specifically raises and extends the implications of these postmodern questions for the women's project as a whole in South Africa.

In Chapter 2, the main characters were introduced through personal stories. These included the stories of the women of Vulindlela, myself, and field assistant Nonhlanhla Magubane. Within the feminist oral history tradition there is an emphasis on biographical and autobiographical narratives, which as a methodological tool in this study serve to place at the

centre of the study the identities and subjectivities of all women concerned. These stories do not form a continuous, coherent narrative, but do reveal the varied life experiences of all the women involved. They represent the various and multi-faceted layers of “women’s experience” that is ours as South African women. Telling my story first is a specific acknowledgement of my subjectivity within the research process, something highlighted throughout the study. In this personal narrative I attempt to illustrate my shifting identity through various significant stages, highlighting factors that shaped and re-made me. This process of my shifting identity shows how I moved through a period of confusion of identity, to a recognition of its complexity, to a recognition of the need to re-construct who I am. While not wanting to suggest that this is a linear process that is final and complete, I do assert that I have chosen to constitute my identity as a South African African in collaboration with *women* who are “other” than myself.

The stories of the women of Vulindlela and that of Nonhlanhla Magubane, all begin to allude to the fact that for poor and marginalised women, life in the world and life in the church are intricately intertwined. Life in the world is characterised by poverty, illness, and crises, but also by a deep faith in God who enables them to survive in the face of death. Life in the church is not neatly polarised as the opposite experience. Rather, in the church women also face the struggle to survive as they are confronted with the forces of colonial and ecclesial oppression. So they create spaces for themselves within the formal structures of the church where they are able to experience a God who enables them to survive.

The extent to which physical survival is a daily reality for women becomes vividly apparent in Chapter 3 in which a detailed analysis is given of the political economy of the context of the study, Vulindlela, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A political history of Africans in the city of Pietermaritzburg provides a background to the marginalisation of the indigenous people of the area through colonial and apartheid forces. Vulindlela is described in terms of its demography, housing and land issues, and social infrastructure. Through this description it is apparent that the area is impoverished with an inadequate social infrastructure and little employment opportunities. It is also apparent that women experience the effects of poverty most severely. In addition to the impoverishment of the area, residents, particularly women, have had a series of crises to face. These include the 1987 floods, the political violence of

the late 1980s to early 1990s, and more recently the AIDS pandemic which is visibly affecting families. The women of Vulindlela represent a sample of semi-rural/peri-urban indigenous African South African women. They also represent the most marginalised grouping in South Africa. Addressing the issues facing their lives is crucial to the development of the country as a whole and to the well-being of all women in South Africa. It is the integration of the religious dimensions of this well-being that impacts the women's *theological* project in particular.

Following on the contextual analysis, Chapter 4 engages this global discussion by introducing a gendered poverty analysis of the South African situation in which the strategic role religion plays in the struggle for survival by women is demonstrated. In engaging the global gender and development debate, gender as a development issue is introduced and the gendered nature of poverty in South Africa analysed. Arguing that African women remain the "poorest of the poor", the structural effects of poverty on all aspects of their lives is illustrated. It is further argued that while the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme of the South African government offers a vision for poverty relief, the current macro-economic strategy, GEAR, spells greater socio-economic doom for poor women. Despite this reality, poor women nonetheless employ micro survival strategies in their fight against poverty. Religion, it is argued, is one of these micro-strategies and is a key survival resource. The gender and development debate, with its focus on strategies of survival, has neglected to integrate these faith resources into its methodology, nor have these theological resources been harnessed by the institutional church in the fight against poverty.

While women themselves employ micro socio-economic strategies, the macro strategies that effect structural change cannot be ignored. Because the ideologies lying behind macro-economic strategies deeply influence the approach adopted by planners and researchers in the field of gender and development it is important to situate my discussion in the global context. This is done through a critical analysis of various theoretical approaches to gender and development planning: Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN), and Gender and Development (GAD). It is this last approach that has been adopted by the South African government as expressed in a number of policies and structures that monitor gender equity. Some feminists have critiqued

the adoption of GAD in our context, arguing that while it has given government credibility, it masks the real issue of poverty alleviation which is being hampered by the simultaneous adoption of GEAR. While sympathetic to this analysis, it is argued in this study that, given the severe oppression that poor and marginalised women face, this emphasis on structural equity is important at this juncture of our history. Throughout the debate on gender and development debate, the notion of “third world” women (which includes women of Vulindlela) as apparently helpless victims is critically discussed. Given the current climate of gender equity in South Africa, there exists the possibility that poor women’s micro strategies of survival, which include religious aspects, can potentially impact macro policy and procedures. As a way forward in the debate, the contribution of postmodernism is shown and it is argued that the employment of postmodern analytical tools in critical engagement with the political feminist project is crucial.

It is this strategic engagement between postmodernism and feminism in the South African context that is the focus of Chapter 5. It begins by problematising “feminism” and shows that how this discursive practice is defined depends largely on which group of women is controlling the agenda. The “feminist” agenda is understood to be white and western in origin and has been critiqued extensively by women from the third world and black women from the first world. For black women from Britain and the United States, the feminist agenda is seen to ignore race. Women from the third world, including Africa, have critiqued western feminism as a form of colonial and imperialist discourse. Within the South African context, it is argued that the fractured nature of the women’s project is deeply embedded in issues of race, class, and culture that are historically linked to our colonial and apartheid past. Showing how the women’s project is divided along activist/academic lines, it is argued that women’s resistance to apartheid is not always seen to be legitimately “feminist” by academic feminists, who have tended to be white. This discussion arises out of the broader international debate on whether organising around “bread and butter” issues of survival rather than around gender equity constitutes feminist practice or not. Further to the South African debate is the question of the legitimacy of “motherhood” as a valid basis for organising in the future as it has been in the past, particularly amongst black women. Race, as a persistent marker in the post-apartheid women’s project, is highlighted as a potential factor in ongoing divisiveness between activists and intellectuals. In attempting to cross the

divide, I name myself an “activist-intellectual” and choose to refer to our work in South Africa as the “women’s project”.

Accounting for our “fracturedness” as women is crucial for our future work in transforming society and the church to which the majority of women in South Africa belong. It is for this reason that a critical dialogue between postmodernism and feminist theory is argued for. Given our divisions, it is suggested that postmodern impulses that acknowledge subjectivity, particularity, and agency potentially provide a way out of the impasse in our theorising. Postmodernism is thus introduced more fully and feminists reactions, both positive and negative, to this theoretical paradigm outlined. It is suggested that the issue of representation raised by postmodern feminism is useful to South African theorising as it has become crucial to future work in the women’s project. In raising this debate, it is argued against Spivak (1988), that the subaltern can “speak”, and given the continued marginalisation of poor women, it is their voices that need to make a significant impact on our socially transformative future work. Chapter 5 concludes by pointing to the personal theoretical implications of this “speech” for the activist-intellectual, arguing that there is a need for a re-shaping of the activist-intellectual through an “unlearning of her privilege as loss”, working collaboratively through actual work together with poor and marginalised women, and a choosing to be partially constituted by women “other” than herself.

While postmodern impulses are useful analytical tools in foregrounding difference, identity, agency, and location, they must be rooted in a political commitment to change the structural oppression of women. The women’s project is a political project. Survival is a political issue. And so is faith. In South Africa, politics has always had a theological dimension. For poor and marginalised women of faith, their survival theologies, which embrace a life in the world and a life in the church, are crucial to the women’s liberation project as a whole.

Before attempting to locate and expand on “survival” as a theological concept, the third theoretical leg of the study, namely women’s theology, is discussed. The focus of Chapter 6 is on the work of women theologians who highlight issues that pertain to poor and marginalised women within the African context. This chapter begins by sketching the origins of third world women’s theology within the Ecumenical Association of Third World

Theologians and shows how African women's theology emerged from within this Association. The formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians at a conference in Ghana in 1989 is described, and it is argued that this network of women theologians has been instrumental in linking women's theology in South Africa. It is at meetings such as those of the Circle that the latent issues of difference and solidarity emerge as South African women meet across race and class. In analysing the fractured nature of the women's theological project, I contend that we need to confront our difference before we can effectively work towards a solidarity that transforms the church and society.

To illustrate our difference as women in the theological project, short biographical sketches are given of three prominent women in the academy, Denise Ackermann, Christina Landman, and Madipoane Masenya. Three important issues for the South African theological women's project are raised by their work: solidarity and difference (Ackermann), the representation of poor and marginalised women (Landman), and the naming of our theology (Masenya). How their work describes the theoretical terrain of each of these issues is discussed in turn. In my own theological reflections on what I have termed the "survival theologies of poor and marginalised women", the various strands of women's theological reflection that have been helpful to my work are also outlined. An important concern of my work is that we actively engage poor and marginalised women in our theological reflection. Ackermann's "contextual liberating praxis", Landman's "telling women's stories", and Masenya's focus on culture and the use of the Bible in our hermeneutics have been useful critical tools in this process. Also useful to this process is the contribution of African women's theology, particularly in its cultural critique of patriarchy and its emphasis on engaging women from the church in theological reflection. In addition, the contribution of womanist survival theology as expressed by Delores Williams, who emphasises the survival experiences of African American women, is discussed. Williams employs the notion of survival extensively in her work, stressing the importance of acknowledging the everyday lived reality of African American women as a theological category.

Building on her work, Chapter 7 argues that recognising and recovering the subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised women is crucial to the women's theological project in South Africa. These theologies are subjugated knowledges that, once recognised and recovered, offer new knowledges that help to bring about social transformation in the

church and the academy. Subjugated survival theologies are incipient community wisdom that are located in gatherings of poor and marginalised Christian women, most of whom would not be considered “feminist”. In recognising and recovering this theological wisdom, a complex theoretical understanding of discourse is required. It is argued that discourse operates for both dominant and subjugated groups, in both the public and the hidden realms. Subjugated survival theologies often operate at the level of infrapolitics - the zone of contestation between the public and hidden realms - and are coded practices and rituals that appear to mean one thing publically, but have another meaning altogether to the women themselves. Infrapolitical responses enable women to deal with their subordination while at the same time giving them dignity and autonomy.

In Chapter 7, two locations for the potential recognition and recovery of survival theologies are suggested: the indigenous *manyano* [church women’s prayer union] movement, particularly the Mothers’ Union (MU), and a contextual Bible study group in Nxamalala, in the Vulindlela region. It is argued that the MU, in spite of its colonial heritage, has aligned itself with the *manyano* movement. In so doing, it embraces the survival practices of the wearing of a distinct church uniform, the use of extempore prayer and preaching in Thursday meetings on *manyano* day, and public, ritualised forms of raising funds. These, it is argued, are expressions of the survival theologies of indigenous African women. In the second instance, it is shown that the Nxamalala contextual Bible study group became a safe, sequestered, and sacred site over a period of time. Illustrative examples from group discussions show how this site began to reveal emerging survival theologies of the participant women. Through reading the Bible contextually, communally, and collaboratively, I indicated how Nonhlanhla, the women of Nxamalala and I have all been impacted by this work. Together, we have begun to articulate the terrain of new interpretations, symbols, and rituals of survival theologies. Locations such as the MU and the Nxamalala Bible study group, and the interconnections between the two through women belonging to both, offer enormous potential for a transformative and liberative South African women’s theological agenda.

Implicit in liberative work is the necessity to resist oppression. In Chapter 8, it is argued that subjugated survival theologies are a discourse of resistance. The very act of survival is in

itself a form of resistance. Indigenous African women, through self affirmation, resist controlling notions of victimisation and hence ensure group survival. Against the odds, they have throughout the period of colonialism and apartheid ensured the survival of the family. In this daily struggle for survival, poor and marginalised women employ *arts* of resistance (Scott 1990; Williams 1993). This study argues, with Scott (1990), that these arts of resistance employed by subordinated groups operate within both the hidden and public realms, and mostly within the realm of infrapolitics which lies between the two. It is in this realm of infrapolitics, where disguised and coded forms of resistance operate, that most of the political life of poor and marginalised women takes place.

In exploring the two potential locations of survival theologies identified, the Mothers' Union (MU) and the Nxamalala Bible study group, disguised forms of resistance have operated as expressions of survival theologies. Throughout the history of the MU, indigenous African women responded to colonial domination with disguised practices of resistance. Women resisted colonial domination and today the MU is an integral part of the indigenous *manyano* movement rather than an institution reflecting the character of its colonial English roots. This resistance to domination was circumscribed by women's experience of survival as expressed in their working theologies. While some scholars have suggested that the *manyano* movement is conservative and a-political, it is argued here that there is some evidence to suggest that organised resistance has been fostered within *manyano* Christianity. In the MU, however, there have been few signs of overt resistance. In this post-liberation period, new potential exists for MU sites of resistance to be places where women can continue to nurture their faith and transform their survival struggle into one of liberation. Identifying a discourse of resistance within the survival theologies of the women participating in Nxamalala Bible study group is more difficult. This is an embryonic site in which survival theologies are just beginning to emerge, and this is true too of their resistance discourse. Nonetheless, aspects of a resistance discourse have emerged within the group over a period of time as greater cohesiveness has developed. As this occurred, that which was previously hidden increasingly began to be articulated in the group. With these articulations of survival theologies as resistance, it is argued that foundations are being laid for a time when conditions are ripe for an organised and overt resistance to domination.

It is assumed and even stated in some feminist debates that the agency of women is only present in overt resistance. However, this study argues that for poor and marginalised women who experience extreme surveillance in their lives, hidden forms of resistance expressed in survival practices demonstrate agency. But in giving agency to the Vulindlela women, the question as to the role of the intellectual is raised. I have argued against the position which sees the role of the activist-intellectual as conscientising poor and marginalised women, and suggested a more modest one. Drawing on my experience in the Nxamalala Bible study group, I have suggested that there are three areas in which the activist-intellectual can contribute to collaborative resistance activity with women she works with. These include: helping to secure a safe social site, offering critical resources that challenge the Biblical tradition and traditional understandings of oppression, and being a boundary crosser between the worlds of the dominant and the dominated.

As this study moves towards its conclusion, the emergent intersection of faith, feminisms, and development needs to be clarified. I have sought to locate this study within three related yet distinct fields of women's reflections within the African context: gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. In intersecting these three fields of study, it is clear that my work affirms, critiques, and undergirds aspects of theoretical reflection in each of these areas. This concluding chapter addresses this intersection by attempting to understand more closely survival theologies of poor and marginalised women and the difference they ought to make to the theory and practice of gender activists in the church and in the academy.

9.2 Survival revisited

In Chapter 1 it was asserted that *survival* runs as a thread throughout the study as a point of intersection between the academic disciplines of gender and development, feminist studies, and women's theology. Development, feminisms, and faith are key constructs of this study. In this section, the notion of survival as it pertains to each of these constructs and as it intersects all three will be explored by drawing on the particular contribution made by this study as an inter-disciplinary project.

9.2.1 Survival and development

Survival is a material reality of millions of poor and marginalised women's lives. Inasmuch as this is so, gender activists and intellectuals working in the field of development are confronted and deal with this reality as fundamental to their work. Over the past thirty years, attempts have been made on a macro-level in gender and development planning to effect change in global structures that will impact the lives of poor women (see Chapter 4). Gender activists working in the field of development understand that their socially transformative work must operate at this macro level of intervention, as well as the micro level of practical strategies that effect immediate relief for women struggling to survive.

Life needs to be different for the women of Vulindlela. Daily they are subjected to extreme conditions of poverty as they live in a community with an inadequate social infrastructure and where access to land and housing depends on their relationships with male family members and their practical building skills. For many women, their daily routine includes fetching water from local streams and walking miles to the forests to obtain firewood. Formal employment is scarce and when it is secured, it is usually as a domestic worker which brings in a meagre cash income through exploitative working conditions. Their children are taught in local schools that are overcrowded and under-resourced and when ill have to be taken on public transport to hospitals outside of the area. Crises of enormous proportions await the community at every turn: first the floods, then political violence, and now AIDS. The smell of death is ever present in the lives of the women of Vulindlela.

Oppressive material conditions do not have a neutral gender face. They impact women more significantly than men in poor and marginalised communities and poverty affects women in particular and more severe ways. The women subjects of this study have testified to their own efforts in ensuring the survival of their families. Without their efforts, communities would not survive. Yet, patriarchy continues to circumscribe their lives. Culture plays an ambiguous role in the lives of indigenous African women, both affirming their dignity and also hampering their sense of self-worth. Women continue to be seen to be subordinate and are sometimes denied access to basic human rights. For instance, education continues to be denied to girl-children in favour of boys in the family when financial resources are limited.

Formal roles in community leadership often remain in the hands of men. The church too denies women, particularly those who are poor and marginalised, equal access to leadership training and formal positions within the structures. Women of Vulindlela survive oppressive material conditions that are visible, and are also dealing with a less visible reality in the home, community and church: patriarchy.

But in spite of all these potentially devastating material conditions, they choose to live. They do so neither grudgingly nor with a sense of resignedness. Their suffering does not paralyse them, but rather is acts as a catalyst in spurring them on to seek a better life for themselves and a future for their children. This study asserts that it is this wilful choosing to live that has not been sufficiently accounted for by gender activists in their advocacy work with global institutions, and more particularly in their understanding of the micro strategies undertaken by poor and marginalised women themselves.

On a macro level, there is much debate amongst gender activists in South Africa as to the role of the state in providing a climate of gender equity versus poverty alleviation. I have argued for the importance of the linkage between the two. This study asserts the agency of poor and marginalised women in their struggle to survive and, as will be further discussed in a later section, argues that faith practices are key to this struggle. Given this agency in the face of immense odds, structural change that fosters a gender equity climate potentially opens up space for less obvious survival strategies that operate in kinship and religious networks of women. Affirming the agency of poor and marginalised women in setting their own agendas for a better life, gender activists perhaps need to assess their role more modestly. Advocacy work on a macro level is crucial, but it must be carried out by activist-intellectuals who genuinely do not see the women they represent as victims and passive agents. Asserting the active agency of poor and marginalised women should profoundly affect the way in which gender and development planning is understood and undertaken by those lobbying the places of global power. Poor and marginalised women as active agents also presupposes that the activist-intellectual, in embarking on micro-strategies with small groups of women, recognises the sharing of resources as a mutual process. Perhaps even more importantly, it recognises that the survival strategies of these women do not only engage the public realm. If this is so, then a crucial role of gender activists in development work should be to assist in

the securing of safe social sites where women themselves can explore these hidden strategies without fear of exposure in the public realm. In terms of development practice, this suggests a far less prominent role of the activist-intellectual in work with poor and marginalised women than some current gender and development methodologies suggest.

This study has argued that one of the less obvious arenas where micro survival strategies occur is in the religious practices of women's lives. Dealing with survival issues is infused with a faith dimension within the South African context. In planning programmes of development action, faith as an integral part of women's lives must be acknowledged as a community resource. Further to this, it is networks of religious women such as the *manyano* [prayer union] movement that should be recognised by gender and development activists as a key site of survival practice and a place where poor and marginalised women are taking control of their lives. The *manyano* movement accounts for one of the largest groupings of indigenous African women in South Africa. Through these church women's prayer groups, poor and marginalised women find courage, strength, and resources to persevere in the face of near death. *Manyano* groups, such as the Mothers' Union of the Anglican church, are a place where women gather together, without men present, and prescribe their own agenda of faith and practical daily living. By meeting separately on a Thursday, they do this away from the public realm and its dominant discourse. The *manyano* movement is the one place in the lives of the women of Vulindlela which they are able to control and therefore is a strategic site in which development discourse occurs.

Importantly, this network of religious women also plays a role in practically ensuring the survival of each other's families. Integral to the practice of this movement is the raising of financial resources through employing *stokvel* principles, and these fund raising projects often contribute directly to practical needs of members. Material resources are also shared with members in other ways in times of need. During illness or a bereavement, groups of *manyano* women visit each others homes, tend to practical needs such as food and money, but also offer spiritual resources of prayer, comfort, and strength. This religious network opens up space for women to engage in the development of their lives, so circumscribed by extreme forms of oppression. This fact needs to be acknowledged and recognition given to the development practice of poor and marginalised women that occurs without the assistance

of activist-intellectuals. Rather, it is God's assistance that is called upon.

This is not to minimise the major contribution that gender activists within the development sphere have made to the women's project as a whole in their recognition of the material conditions of poor and marginalised women's lives and their tireless efforts to alleviate physical suffering. This theoretical analysis of the lived reality of a daily survival struggle for most women must inform all our reflections. Too often these material conditions as they are described in studies such as this one are understood to provide the context of the more important theoretical work that is to follow. The material conditions of the women of Vulindlela described in this study are not a background to what is to follow, they are integral to my argument. These material conditions must be analysed and understood as crucial to both the feminist and the theological dimensions of this study. Gender and development debates, with their stress on the material realities of poor women's lives, help to inform and challenge the parameters of both feminist and theological thinking and the intersection of the two terrains. Both these latter areas of theoretical reflection have neglected to emphasise the material dimension of women's lives. The implications of survival for each of these terrains and their respective contributions to this inter-disciplinary project will be discussed in the following two sections.

9.2.2 Survival and feminisms

Survival within the feminist liberation paradigm is generally assumed to be a minimalist concept; liberation is the real issue. Very often, survival struggles have been interpreted to mean a passive acceptance by poor and marginalised women of their victimised state. While stressing the need for an agenda of liberative political action, this study argues that survival, as a resistance strategy, is more complex than feminist theorising suggests. Survival embraces a dignity, a quality of life, that is intricately intertwined with these women's understanding of God in their lives. Church women of Vulindlela, the subjects of this study, employ strategies that show agency and resistance to their material conditions of oppression. For feminist theorising and women's theology strategies of *liberation* have been emphasised, masking the literal struggle for daily survival of millions of women throughout the world.

Political liberation might have arrived, but surviving the daily realities of life continues to prescribe the lives of most South African women of faith. While liberation from oppression undergirds the epistemological framework of gender studies, the context of *survival* must first be understood and analysed. If not, our understanding of “liberation” from oppression will remain flawed and our political agendas will continue to have little impact on the lives of poor and marginalised women. Religion itself, so integral to this marginal discourse of poor women, is often neglected in feminist debates. To speak of “women’s development” or of “women’s liberation” without including the faith dimension excludes a large part of the lived reality of these women’s lives. This study has shown that the interconnectedness between faith and material conditions is crucially important to both survival strategies and to resistance practices that can lead to social transformation. The context of survival engenders faith practices of women, which offer new insights to the women’s project of liberation, particularly with regard to the nature of resistance to gender oppression.

The feminist liberation project generally only acknowledges overt resistance as a liberation strategy. This study argues that resistance operates at a number of levels: both in the public and hidden realms. Furthermore, it is argued that the very act of survival is resistance. Each day poor and marginalised women choose to be alive in the face of constant life threatening reality. This choice is an active act, not a passive submission to the inevitable. The women of Vulindlela do not put on fake smiles and move through life with the reluctance of a chain gang. They are active agents, who, aware of the constraints on their lives, resist their oppression in disguised practices that assert autonomy but also ensure survival. So while liberation from structural oppression must be the goal of all our work as gender activists, failing to recognise survival as a form of liberation amidst the oppression reduces the dignity and autonomy of poor and marginalised women in organising and setting their own strategic agendas.

This study argues that subordinated women do speak out against their oppression, but often in ways that are not easily recognised or understood. My work with the women of Vulindlela has shown that their resistance occurs mostly in the hidden realm or within the realm between the hidden and the public, of infrapolitics, in disguised and coded resistance practices. It is in this realm of infrapolitics that the survival struggle of resistance is fought against tremendous

odds for the majority of women in South Africa. Anglican *manyano* women have throughout the twentieth century continuously engaged the patriarchal and colonial powers of the church to ensure that they are able to give expression to their faith in indigenous and gendered ways. The newly located theological site of the Nxamalala Bible study group has similarly shown that resistance discourse is ever present in the daily struggle for survival. Faith and strategic practice merge in a discourse of survival as women choose to *live*. It is argued that resistance does not necessarily only occur in overt organised action, and the liberationist paradigm that frames gender studies, including women's theology, needs to account for a more nuanced understanding of resistance to oppression. Survival, expressed in the working theologies of women such as those of Vulindlela, as a form of resistance to material oppression, thus becomes the point of intersection between faith, feminisms, and development. This crucial intersection is elaborated upon later in this concluding chapter.

While the feminist project has strategic political objectives that effect social transformation, there is a further dimension to its work: that of affirming "women's experience" as a valid epistemological tool in theoretical reflection. Perhaps the greatest contribution that *postmodern* feminism has made to this theoretical reflection has been its emphasis on the necessity for a recognition and a recovering of new knowledges which enable our discourse to reflect the voices of women at the margins, rather than those at the centre of dominant institutions such as the church and the academy. The theoretical engagement between postmodernism and feminism epistemologically destabilises notions of subjectivity and agency, and stresses the historicity of particular locations, all of which enable the discourses of poor and marginalised women to be recognised and heard more clearly in academic debates. Recognition is given to their subjugated knowledges and this profoundly impacts and re-interprets dominant feminist and theological discourse. This study has argued for the recognition and recovery of new knowledges in the form of "survival theologies". Postmodern feminism has epistemologically enabled "survival" to be theorised and theologised as a key category in the women's project in South Africa.

A further contribution to the women's project of postmodern feminism is the call to acknowledge that in the recognition of new knowledges of poor and marginalised women, the question of representation is raised. In South Africa, where race and class have defined

access to education in the past, representation is crucially important to all gender debates. By giving subjectivity and agency to marginalised women in the construction of knowledge and practice, privileged women can no longer speak on their behalf. In speaking on behalf of others, the activist-intellectual masks the role she plays in constructing the subjectivity of those she represents. I have argued that the activist-intellectual should rather engage in a process of speaking “with”, a process in which communication is constituted between two strongly present subjects. In speaking with poor and marginalised women, the activist-intellectual remains alert to and interrogative of her own position and of that of the women she represents. Issues of representation highlighted within postmodern feminism are crucially important to the field of gender and development, which for too long has been characterised by first world women speaking on behalf of those from the third world. Within the women’s theological project in South Africa, representation has not been sufficiently addressed in spite of its relevance to our context of survival where the majority of women of faith are poor and marginalised. This study contributes to the debate on collaborative work of women across race and class divides in South Africa, where survival defines the vast majority of women’s lives. It is to this contribution that I now turn.

9.2.3 Survival and faith

Gogo Thokozile Cele asserted at the beginning of this study that *God* has helped her throughout her life as she struggled to survive. God has given her resources to persevere when there seemed to be no way in the desolation of poverty and suffering. God has enabled her literal survival in the face of near death.

It is the contention of this study that for *Gogo Cele*, and many South African women like her, God plays a central role in the struggle for literal survival. Poor and marginalised women understand that the resources they have are given by God to survive against seeming insurmountable odds. So *Gogo Cele* prays, joins together with other women, and chooses to live. This is a profound choice in which she acknowledges her human limitations in the fight against unjust social systems and simultaneously employs human resources, other women, to tackle the struggle that is her daily life. For *Gogo Cele*, her spiritual and material realities are intertwined. Prayer and practical strategies go hand in hand and express her lived reality

of faith.

Because many poor and marginalised South African women are members of the *manyano* movement, the faith practices of this network of women demonstrate the intertwining of spiritual and material realities. Here, in social sites that women create for themselves (such as their Thursday meetings), they live out their survival faith. There are primarily three ways in which they do this: extensive use of extempore prayer and preaching, fundraising, and the wearing of a church uniform. In each of these practices, there is an interconnectedness between the spiritual and material realms as the following discussion will show.

Extempore prayer characterises the meetings of *manyano* women. As much time is used as is necessary to allow for all women to participate, individually and often simultaneously. Prayer to God becomes a means through which women voice their burdens away from sites of struggle in their own safe space. It becomes an immediate link with the spiritual realm which enables them to see their lives from a different perspective as they unburden to God and to one another that which weighs heavily on their hearts. As they do this, women reach out with mutual care to one another and so “become” the incarnate response to this pain. That which is expressed within the spiritual realm is manifested and dealt with in their human relationships with one another.

In their extempore preaching practices, women experience a direct link with God through expounding the Biblical text, which is always directly related to and connections made with their material reality. Personal stories abound in the extempore preaching of *manyano* women, as they take turns to relate the Biblical text directly to their lived reality of survival. As this occurs, women hear *women’s* perspectives on faith which results in a mutual exploration of the practice of faith within the particular constraints of their lives. This process results in a different theological discourse from that articulated in places of power such as the male hierarchical church structures and the academy. It is a discourse that does not distinguish between a life in the church and a life in the world. It is a discourse that embraces poor and marginalised women’s struggle to physically survive each day.

Perhaps the aspect of their faith discourse that deals most directly with this physical reality involves the practice of raising funds within meetings and services. Fundraising is a common

practice in the *manyano* movement and is embarked upon by *manyano* women with the same zest and fervour that is evident in their praying and preaching. Fundraising within the *manyano* movement appropriates public forms of fundraising, one of which is the practice of *mjikelezo*. In this practice, women in turn move to a central point in the room, with their own individualised style of singing and dancing, and place money on a table. Money, the material resource of survival, takes on a spiritual quality at this point. It is understood as given by God, but even more importantly, as they practice *mjikelezo*, women personally appropriate the power of money. In this act of moving forward and placing money on the table, they take control of this material resource and offer its power as a communal resource for the group. As they do this, they are also reclaiming the value of self, affirming their dignity and autonomy and thus asserting a spiritual power in their struggle to survive. In this process of self-affirmation and the assertion of spiritual power, communal bonding takes place as resources of power are offered to one another. Individual spiritual power is thus pooled and it becomes a communal resource in the survival struggle. Sharing their meagre finances in this way does not deplete their resources, but in effect enhances their ability to corporately survive their daily struggles. *Mjikelezo* as a practice, as well as less ritualised financial contributions to ill and bereaved families, is a response by oppressed women that reflects an aspect of their survival faith which enables them to resist economic domination against the odds. Fundraising practices of *manyano* women are practices of survival faith that integrate their understanding of the power of God and the need to remain physically alive through the sharing of material resources.

The intertwining of the power of God as a spiritual reality with the material reality of survival is demonstrated through the wearing of a church uniform by *manyano* women. The putting on of the church uniform is on one level simply a sign of Christian commitment. But this study argues that the wearing of the uniform is more than this; it takes on a sacramental value. The uniform is not only a symbol, but has a substantial quality, inherent in itself, which is conferred on the wearer. In this sense, the uniform embodies supernatural powers that infuse the material world and become a resource for dealing with this reality. In wearing the uniform women attest to it “making them feel alive”. This overall sense of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being enables women to choose to live in the face of death. They choose to do this not to numb the senses in the face of material pain. Rather, demonstrating

the power of God through the ritualised wearing of the uniform they experience dignity and autonomy, crucial resources in dealing with and overcoming oppression. Infused with God's power, the church uniform brings hope and comfort and healing in the face of illness. As church women are provided with strength, they are able to carry out the physical demands made upon them every day of their lives.

Faith for poor and marginalised women expresses a belief in the power of God in their lives which enables them to *live* within a context of extreme material deprivation and oppression. Their associated faith practices demonstrate their lived reality, where these two realms of the spiritual and material merge. In seeking to understand the practical, moral and intellectual implications of this survival faith of poor and marginalised women for theological reflection, I have argued in this study that it is the lived, working, subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised women that pose the greatest challenge to the church and academy. These survival theologies are an expression of *African* faith that reflect the conditions that women face each day. Survival theologies are *women's* theologies that have been shaped by the gendered face of poverty and patriarchal oppression. They are theologies forged within the context of the church in spaces and places that poor and marginalised women have created for themselves. This study argues that it is the "disqualified" knowledges of these women that perform a necessary critical function for all theological reflection. It is these knowledges, born out of "hard-won experience", that offer a community wisdom which question the prevailing assumptions of the dominant discourse. Survival theologies as subjugated knowledges force us activist-intellectuals to question our assumptions, our "experience" as women, and most of all the relevance of our reflections for the life and death issues faced daily by most South African women.

As the study draws to a close, it needs to be restated that this study does not attempt a systematic recovery of survival theologies. That is the challenge of further work. Rather, it shows and theorises their presence, identifies potential sites for their recognition and recovery, indicates how poor and marginalised women integrate their life in the world with their life of faith, and demonstrates how women activist-intellectuals might collaborate with them in their determination to survive and work for transformation. This study also serves an advocacy role in alerting the church and the academy to the voices of faith of poor and

marginalised women as resistance discourse, thus alerting feminist intellectuals to the inadequacy of their notions of liberation for subordinated women. But before examining the study's advocacy further, I suggest in the next section a few hermeneutical implications of survival theologies for our theological reflection.

9.3 Hermeneutical implications of survival theologies

Scholars, such as James Cochrane (1999), who attempt to take seriously the disqualified knowledges of poor and marginalised communities argue that the interpretative activity of assessing this relevant knowledge is fraught with complexity. As Cochrane (1999:24) asserts in his work, poor and marginalised groups do not draw together their disparate insights and experiences into a defensible, coherent whole. In our collaborative work in the Nxamalala Bible study group, this was apparent. The survival theologies of the Vulindlela women are not fully articulated and systematically reflected theology. Rather our discussions on Biblical texts as they intersect with our lives as women reflect disparate insights into the meaning of faith in light of gendered structural oppression. These insights were often articulated publically in the group for the first time, which meant that the group process in itself was a stage towards the recovery of their theologies. Much of the work of this study has been to theorise this group process as an important step in understanding collaborative work amongst women across race and class. Despite this emphasis, my work with the women of Vulindlela, both in the Mothers' Union (MU) and in the Nxamalala Bible study group, does indicate a theological framework that offers perspectives, amongst others, on God, the incarnation, salvation, power, and culture. This theological framework is crucial for the theological enterprise and it is this systematic theological reflective work that is still to be undertaken in future work. In arguing for the necessity of this further interpretative work, I am also suggesting, with Cochrane (1999:38), that there are at least four overlapping hermeneutical implications for a systematic recovery of the survival theologies of poor and marginalised women.

For the women of Vulindlela, there is a priority of praxis over theory (see Cochrane 1999:38) in their theological formulations, particularly concerning God. Their notions of God have less to do with tradition than with their daily *experience* of God in their survival struggle.

Sterile theological formulations have little place in their lives of faith which is a practiced, lived reality that merges the realms of the spiritual and material. In giving priority to praxis over theory, the Vulindlela women both implicitly and explicitly offer a critique of the relevance of the dogma of the church to their lives. Recovering their survival theologies is therefore crucial if we are to influence the theological education of the leadership of the institutional church. Furthermore, because praxis is shaped by experience, the women's theological project must be alert to the futility of "formulating" women's experience within the corridors of the academy alone. For if we do, as we have, we run the risk of formulating yet another, albeit alternative, tradition that has little relevance to the experience of poor and marginalised women.

Survival theologies do not only prioritise praxis, they are communal theologies (see Cochrane 1999:38). Theological formulations that began to emerge in the Bible study group discussions, and those expressed in the survival faith practices of the MU, are produced in and for the community, particularly women. Vulindlela women seldom articulate their theological understandings as if they only have meaning for an individual existence. Their survival theologies operate in the communal sphere, with implications for the survival of women, their children, and indeed the whole community. This suggests the process of their recovery must take place within situations of communal reflection. It is also an explicit critique of western theology with its strong emphasis on personal salvation, and an implicit critique of patriarchal theology which is exclusive of large sectors of the community. This emphasis on communal reflection as it pertains to the majority of women is also an indictment to women in the academy and challenges us to specifically locate ourselves in poor and marginalised communities, sharing our critical resources within this context.

A third hermeneutical implication of the theological framework of the Vulindlela women is that the tradition itself is weighed against communal understandings of faith and interpreted accordingly (see Cochrane 1999:38). Poor and marginalised women will practice and appropriate their faith in ways that explicitly serve their material ends. The Bible was interpreted in our discussions and in the preaching of MU women as it connected directly with their experience within a particular social and cultural context. How they demonstrate their faith through practices such as the church uniform and unique forms of fundraising is an

appropriation of a communal understanding relevant to their particular set of circumstances. The practice of the institutional church will continue to play a far less significant role in the lives of women and perhaps ultimately become irrelevant should their communal interpretations not be recognised. Not only does the survival theological framework critique social institutions such as culture and patriarchy, it critiques the institutional church itself. Survival theologies embody the marginalised position that their creators occupy in the world of the dominant, and they challenge the academy and the church to re-think the epistemological foundations of their reflection and practice.

Finally, hermeneutically, recovering the subjugated survival theologies of poor and marginalised women requires a commitment to understanding these theologies as *truth* (see Cochrane 1999:38). This commitment has enormous implications for the theological enterprise as a whole. It requires, amongst others, a reassessment of what constitutes “theology”, “faith”, and the nature of God. But above all it is a challenge to eradicate patriarchy which lies at the heart of all traditional theology, a task overwhelming in its magnitude. But then so are the odds against survival for the women of Vulindlela. But they do survive because they know a different God; a God who makes a way out of no way. Recovering the subjugated survival theologies of these women requires that we come to know this God who provides the resources to change the world.

9.4 Changing the world

Liberative social transformation lies at the heart of the South African women’s project. In the past its liberation agenda was defined by the fractured nature of “women’s experience” and it thus lacked a solidarity that was inclusive of *all* women. Where divisions of race and class exist between women within one country, as is the case in South Africa, theorising difference and solidarity is crucial to our work. We are afforded a unique opportunity to engage these issues from within a particular context, and because this is true, the women’s theological project is strategically positioned within the African continent to explore difference and solidarity through the lens of religion. This study, accounting for the significant role of religion and the Bible in the lives of African women, attempts to do this. It also makes a contribution to the ongoing dialogue in feminist theorising about the “other”, to

gender and development debates within Africa, and to African women's theology more generally. The survival theologies of the women of Vulindlela indicate that religion cannot be ignored and must be included as a factor in our efforts to bring about liberative social transformation. It is their voices, and the millions of women of faith they represent, that need to be accounted for in the women's project.

For women's theology in South Africa to be relevant to the lives of *all* women, the *epistemologica ruptura* (Frostin 1988:4) of survival theologies must become a major challenge to our theological reflection. This is particularly true in our context where women doing theology are needing to choose where to locate themselves epistemologically. In as much as women's theology in South Africa is dominated by white women, it too becomes a dominant discourse in the academy, even though it is situated within a framework of liberation. Survival theologies do not merely reform the feminist liberation paradigm, but they call attention to the need for a radical rethink of both our epistemology and the way we understand liberation.

A key aspect of our liberative work is *collaboration* between activist-intellectuals and poor and marginalised women. In giving voice and agency to poor and marginalised women in our collaborative work we activist-intellectuals need to rethink our place in the work that we do. Traditional liberation notions which circumscribe the role of the activist-intellectual as the "conscientiser" are inadequate if we are to take seriously the agency of *all* women. This study argues for a more modest role of the activist-intellectual than the liberation paradigm suggests. It is my contention that collaborative work requires that the activist-intellectual assist in securing safe social sites for women under heavy surveillance, such as those in Vulindlela. Once secured, this site becomes a place in which the critical Biblical and theological resources of the activist-intellectual may be shared and appropriated by poor and marginalised women who in turn offer their resources of lived faith experience. A further role that the activist-intellectual plays, and equally important, is that of a boundary-crosser between the worlds of the dominant and the dominated. As she moves between these two worlds she can assist in strengthening networks of women across race and class, thus potentially enabling overt, organised forms of resistance and transformation to occur. She also ensures that the voices of the dominated are not forgotten in places of power in the academy and the church.

Intersecting faith, feminisms, and development in this study suggests that any theoretical work that is truly liberative must be grounded in an activism that is also *personally* transformative. What we do with who we are is important, but so is what we choose to become through actual practice. Active collaboration with poor and marginalised women requires that the activist-intellectual relocate her work to these communities and actively chooses to be personally transformed and re-constituted by their discourse and practice.

My work with the Vulindlela women of faith, who struggle daily to survive, has indelibly shaped my life. They have taught me to speak less, listen more intently, believe more fully, and act more deliberately. Their lived reality and their theologies have partially made me. I continue to believe that I can make life different, but with less authority than before. My voice is not the final word. Because now I know more clearly that it is only in collaboration with one another that we can change the world.

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- E. Guidelines for Mothers= Union workers overseas (Revised edition, n.d.)
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- G. Letter to Archbishop Joost de Blank from the secretary of the MU London office, Mrs Lllewellyn-Davies (11 December 1961)
- H. Letter to Archbishop Bill Burnett from the chairman of the Overseas committee, Mrs Frances Streetfield (December 1973)

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- J. Notes of talk by Mrs Jenkins, wife of Archdeacon of Pretoria, given to a MU group in London on her return to England (Diocese of Pretoria: n.d., inferred date 1956)
- K. Memorandum on *Amadlélane* in the Mothers= Union in St John=s Diocese (1957)

- L. The Diocese of St John=s Kaffaria: Mother=s Union Constitution (1933)
- M. Notes from the Bishop to all priests concerning the Mothers= Union, St John=s Diocese (October 1957)
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- O. Notes on the open meeting collected by the MU worker, St John=s Diocese (March - June 1965)
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- J. Resolution from the executive committee meeting of the MU Provincial Council held on 10 August 1962
- K. Year end report of the MU to the Provincial Standing Committee, 30 September 1973
- L. Constitution of the Mothers= Union of the Church of the Province of South Africa (March 1975)
- M. Notes prepared for Bishop Mark Nye, episcopal MU chaplain, for submission to Episcopal Synod, 8-11 April 1975
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- O. Archbishop=s Commission on integration of women=s work into the structures of the CPSA (February 1973)
- P. Letter from the secretary of the MU Provincial Council to the Archbishop (20 January 1960)
- Q. Resolution passed by the MU Provincial Council (March 1971)
- R. Letter to Anglican clergy from Mrs Sheila Burnett, President of the MU (26 May 1971)

2.3 Diocese of Natal

- A. Notes on Kirby-Hilton Parish - Native Mission (n.d.)

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