

From policy to practice

Women come together to speak as one voice

In a dual celebration to mark pan-African Women's Day on 31 July and South Africa's Women's Month in August, IFAA invited women activists and thought leaders to speak out at a Roundtable Discussion, held on 24 August 2024, titled 'Policy to Practice: The Role of the new Parliament in Gender Equality'.

Jazz with Trudy Rushin (right) and Summer Dawn Geffen





The festive event incorporated powerful and poignant culture items from women cultural activists. Poets Diana Ferrus and IFAA board member Bernadette Muthien contributed readings of their own work, and Trudy Rushin and daughter Summer Dawn Geffen opened the proceedings with jazz and song. This event was also a collaboration with the Government Communication and Information Services and Parliament's Public Education Department who arrived in Parliament's colourful 'Democracy Bus'. Some of the key organisations present included the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth, and the South African Women's Law Association.

Ari Sitas, Acting Director of IFAA, former head of the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town, poet and long-time activist, opened the proceedings and welcomed the women with the reminder that this year marks 70 years since the launch of the Women's Charter at [the founding congress of the Federation of South African Women](#) in April 1954. "The struggle continues. Lead us," he said.

Women activists came together to raise their collective voice against persistent and structurally entrenched gender inequality, the alarming rise of gender-based violence and femicide, the devastating impact of political conflicts on African women and girls, the complexities of forced and voluntary migration which have dismantled homes and communities, and the pervasive issues of unemployment, poverty and inequality, which have a profound and direct impact on women.

The intersectionality of the gender struggle emerged as central to the discussion as presentations focused on the links between so-called 'women's issues' and the challenges posed by climate change, unemployment, poverty and the violence in our society.

Panelists laid out how women, specifically women in Africa, encounter climate change at the intersection of gender, race and class oppression, and the many ways in which this differs from the experience of men.

Discussants – including the men present – agreed that gender-based violence and discrimination against women emerged as a consequence of the persistent poverty, inequality and discrimination in South Africa and, broadly, across the continent, which was in turn the product of the enduring legacy of colonialism and apartheid.

It was also agreed that gender-based violence poses a real threat to our democracy and it was acknowledged that women, as they have done for decades, will face up to these challenges because they harm not only women, girls and non-binary peoples, but also families, communities and society at large.

The main focus of the discussion was about the climate crisis and how its impact on women and other marginalised genders was fundamentally different to that experienced by men. "Climate justice is overall social justice," said panelist Chulu Nkasela from the youth-led African Climate Alliance.

They said the conversation about the climate crisis has to start with an acknowledgement of the burden of the duty of care that is placed almost entirely on women across the board. As an example they referred to the Western Cape's 2018 water crisis, in which it fell to the women to collect water for their cooking, cleaning and other needs of their households, effectively adding an additional responsibility to their existing load.

"People are facing a cross-cutting struggle. Part of the solution is looking at different experiences with an intersectional and very gendered eye."

Any socio-economic crisis, such as climate change, exposes and accentuates other fault lines within society, they said. Moreover, "when there is a crisis there is usually a struggle over resources, and there is going to be violence. It is often women who are at the receiving end of that violence. Women are affected disproportionately."

At the same times, when it comes to communities responses to crisis it is often women who are most effective. "A lot of adaption efforts come out of our indigenous knowledge and that is stored in women ... To unlock that resilience and that adaptation to the climate crisis in an effort to change the system it is important that we converse with women."

A second panelist, climate finance specialist Razaan Bailey, cautioned against unthinkingly adopting guidance and 'solutions' from the Global North. She quoted Tunisian economist Fadhel Kaboub who warned of "false solutions and dangerous distractions" in his work on the climate crisis in Africa. Echoing Kaboub's thesis, Razaan said we cannot really talk about climate justice without first talking about decolonisation.

"So many climate solutions are driven by the West. In South Africa so much of the just energy transition is about pushing out the coal mines and moving towards renewables." The solutions put forward include up-skilling the people working in those mines – who are most often men – with little thought for the communities that have spread around those mines where women run households and drive the local informal sector through small but essential services. "The just part of the just transition doesn't take all that into account," Razaan said.



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Much of the talk about climate change – in conferences, boardrooms, governments – is predominantly led by men. Razaan said “men talk differently [about the climate crisis]. Often the just transition is seen only as an economic project.”

She said, “climate shocks impact women the most”. Droughts, floods, and soil erosion and depletion which destroy food sources all combine to drive forced migration. Entire populations lose their livelihoods, their homes and their land. The prices of basics such as food, water and electricity increase – “these are essentials, basic human rights” – and it is usually the women who struggle to meet the needs of their households, who have to ask, ‘do I buy electricity or do I buy food?’

Donor countries may insist that they are fulfilling their promises to provide aid to tackle the climate crisis in the Global South. But, says Razaan, all they are doing is moving development aid to climate activities, which means cuts in education, health and other social welfare projects. “This is great for climate; not great for education, health, youth development.”

“There is a lot of money now for climate but we have to ask ourselves *where is the money going and who is getting it?* How does it translate into the changes we need to see happen on the ground?” Clean cooking is a case in point. Local and international suppliers move in and provide impressive equipment, but “when the photo ops are over” and the equipment starts to break down, run out of gas or need repairs the women have no choice but to return to their old cooking methods.

“There are so many women working in the area of just transition, but their voices haven't really been heard ... The solutions are being determined far away from where the problems actually are. We don't have localised solutions and [disregard] innovative proposals that come from the communities.”

The aim of the Roundtable Discussion was to assert the reality experienced by women, and specifically working class black women, into the public domain, beyond the confines of the actual discussion of the day.

As the panel explored the increasing threats posed by climate catastrophes and multiple other global challenges, the aim was not only to highlight these critical issues but also to pave the way for actionable solutions.

One of the themes raised at the event was the potential role that Parliament has to play in addressing the range of challenges faced by women and girls. But to do so it needs the support and active participation of citizens and organs of civil society.

IFAA's media manager Moira Levy said, “the conversation that we are about to engage in is critical to the success of our democratic project”. She called on those present to speak out – “don't hold back, shout it out loud and clear, so that our voices are heard not only in this room but also out there – where decisions are being made and policy is being crafted.”

She made the point that “the timing is perfect. Right now there is a real opportunity to do things differently.” The 7th Parliament, with its the reconfiguration of political party forces, offers unique opportunities for collaboration and potential transformation. It “has created a window of opportunity that South Africa can't afford to miss.”

The Women's Day Roundtable Discussion is part of IFAA's Defend our Constitutional Democracy (Decode) project. Launched towards the end of 2019 with its focus on Parliament's failure to deliver the checks and balances that are the cornerstone of an effective multiparty, democratic legislature, Decode has evolved into a bigger project focusing on the role of Parliament as a central institution of our democracy and how it has failed to fulfil its constitutional obligations of exercising accountability.

The Zondo Commission and the recommendations it put forward for parliamentary reform gave real impetus to the project's work. Towards the end of 2023 Chief Justice Zondo addressed a public colloquium organised by IFAA with the intention of keeping the Commission's recommendations alive in



Former Minister of Minerals and Energy in the first democratic Parliament, member of the IFAA board of directors and co-organiser of the event, Buyelwa Sonjica, closed proceeding with an impassioned call on all present to make their voices heard.

the public domain. The focus of that colloquium was state capture, Parliament and what needed to be done to make sure it couldn't happen again. But the clear message that came out of that meeting, from the panel and the audience, was that citizens and civil society had a critical role to play to achieve this.

This is something Zondo has called for repeatedly. He had previously publicly expressed his faith in ordinary citizens' determination to turn things around. "I believe in active citizenry. I believe that the people of South Africa are the ones who must take their destiny into their own hands ... My belief is that when everything else fails, it is you, the people, who will make sure this country is turned around."

Levy expanded on the message that emerged at the Decode colloquium. "Parliament is not going to change all by itself. Parliament is only going to change when we demand that it changes."

It was that thinking that led IFAA to shift the focus of Decode after the 2024 election to working within civil society on the challenges and opportunities of engaging with Parliament. At the Roundtable Discussion, Levy spoke about the need to "revitalize" the 'People's Parliament' that was introduced with democracy in 1994. "We must find ways for people to assert themselves within Parliament.



"We must raise civil society's voices and make sure they are heard, not only in a gathering like this but also outside in the public domain and in Parliament itself where decisions are made and policies are formulated."

Decode's current target groups are women, climate activists and youth as these are the sectors that are taking up the big issues that face our democracy.

The women's event was a pilot, said Levy. It called women together to discuss critical matters – how to tackle gender-based violence, gender inequality, discrimination in earnings, the impact of the lack of jobs in the formal sector and how it's mostly women working in the informal sector who today are the family breadwinners, women-headed households, "which are often in reality young girl headed households" and the vulnerability of many working women, who are paid less and are often unsafe in the homes in which they work as domestic workers, or on the factory floors, or in the buses and taxis in which they travel to and from work.

Parliament must listen to the women, said Levy, and take seriously the issues that had been aired at the Roundtable Discussion.

The final speaker, Zimbabwean poet, educator and activist Isabella Matambanadzo, made the point that "many countries we come from don't have public spaces to have the kind of conversation we are having here today. These are dangerous conversations to have."

She reminded the audience of the significance of Parliament in such countries. "The Parliaments in our region did not come from the liberal tradition of modern law. I see Parliaments flowing out of revolutions for independence and freedom from colonisation and therefore they should follow the mandate they were given by our elders in the liberation struggle."

She bemoaned the fact that women continue to be so poorly represented in their country's legislatures – only 24.3% of all parliamentarians around the world are women, she said. "The biggest problem with the Parliaments of the worlds is that they are not constituted in a way that is in accordance with their constitutions. They are woefully inadequate as well as illegitimate."

They should be dealing with "the grave issues around women and girls," she said, protecting them from all forms of violence and addressing "the uneven load of care [women] bear in our communities". She called on the women present to "expand our imaginations of what Parliaments should be".

She went on to say: "Unless we find the courage to genuinely tackle the lasting effects of colonisation on our lives what we are doing in our societies is only tinkering ... causing lingering of the problems that we have."

"We need an agenda at the parliamentary level that is not only about gender equality but also about decolonising gender inequality."

Bernedette Muthien, roundtable moderator, gender and transformation specialist and IFAA board member closed the proceedings with the following message:

"The revolution and women's liberation go together. We do not talk of women's emancipation as an act of charity or out of a surge of human compassion. It is a basic necessity for the revolution to triumph."

"The inequalities of colonialisms remain entrenched in most African countries, with widespread poverty, unemployment and state repression. With persistent inequality, people will express their dissatisfactions and aspirations in various ways, beyond the inedible ballot. And the state will resist the will of the peoples it is meant to serve."

"Social and gender inequality is precisely political violence against the people, a legacy of colonialisms and enslavement. It will not end until we continue to unite Africa, across language and ethnicity borders, decolonise Africa, liberate our people and women, and our abundant resources."

She ended with a quote from an old Chinese proverb that was popularised by Burkina Faso president Thomas Sankara in 1987: "Women hold up half the sky".

"Africa will not be free until its women are free, equal and empowered," Muthien said.

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