A ‘Political War of Words and Bullets’: Defining and Defying Sides of Struggle for Housing in Crossroads, South Africa

Koni Benson

University of Cape Town

Published online: 16 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Koni Benson (2015) A ‘Political War of Words and Bullets’: Defining and Defying Sides of Struggle for Housing in Crossroads, South Africa, Journal of Southern African Studies, 41:2, 367-387, DOI: 10.1080/03057070.2015.1013358

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2015.1013358

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
A ‘Political War of Words and Bullets’:
Defining and Defying Sides of Struggle for Housing in Crossroads, South Africa*

KONI BENSON
(University of Cape Town)

This article looks at contemporary activism in Crossroads, South Africa – a famous symbol of women’s defiance as one of the longest-surviving squatter camps under apartheid. In 1998 the Women’s Power Group staged a four-month sit-in at City Council offices, demanding accountability for undelivered housing and public services. This was one of the first and most prolonged of what have become known as the post-apartheid or neoliberal period ‘new social movements’. The occupation unravelled into a year of violent conflict in the township and a subsequent Commission of Enquiry into the events. Official documents – even those that revolve around actions taken by women – focus on men acting violently. However, life histories of Women’s Power Group (WPG) members tell a very different story about what women were thinking and doing. I first piece together the unfolding events through archival and oral history research. I then turn from looking at the history of struggle to looking at the struggle over history, where women’s struggles were reframed in an official discourse of naive pawns of shacklords at best, and undeserving, impatient troublemakers at worst. Women’s leadership was demobilised, depoliticised, and dislocated from the issues they stood up for and from the celebrated history of women’s mobilising in Crossroads. The case of the Women’s Power Group history points to how silences around complex processes of the demobilisation of women’s movements – the reconfiguration of power that is not named or acknowledged – plays out in subsequent attempts to mobilise. The article aims to document and extend an important piece of post-apartheid history, and to spark discussion on processes of demobilisation, the significance of the gaps between multiple versions of women’s protest over time, and the implications for ongoing struggles today.

Introduction

Crossroads was the only African squatter camp in Cape Town successfully to resist the apartheid bulldozers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is an iconic piece of anti-apartheid struggle history in South Africa. Women’s organised resistance was central to the far-reaching Stand Up for Crossroads campaign, which captured local, national, and international attention at the peak of the apartheid regime.1 Yet, two decades later, when African women

---

*I would like to thank Allen Isaacman, Anne Mager, Sophie Oldfield, Diana Jeater, and Guy Thompson for their crucial and kind support, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, National Research Foundation of South Africa, and Africa Humanities Program of the American Council of Learned Societies for making this research possible. Dynamic feedback from co-presenters and audience at a South–South panel on Histories of the Present at the Berkshire Women’s History Conference (25 May 2014) gratefully inspired a re-drafting of this paper.


© 2015 The Editorial Board of the Journal of Southern African Studies
organised in the same place, again publicly and politically against some of the same male figures in authority, they were vilified. No connections were made between this mobilisation for basic urban survival needs and women’s mobilisation during the apartheid era.

This disconnection between the roles that women have played in African nationalist/anti-colonial movements and the lack of space given to their priorities in the independence era is not uncommon. Many activists and scholars are debating the disappointments of democracy and attempting to understand what went wrong. There is excellent activist and scholarly work on the failure to realise liberation struggle dreams, how inequalities are growing and disproportionately affect people who are black, female, and poor, and how survival is criminalised. But the story is seldom told of how this order of hierarchy and exclusion was re-entrenched, how this required the demobilisation of movements calling for the fulfilment of basic human needs for all, and how that demobilisation played out (especially across resistant communities and across women’s lives). The history of the Women’s Power Group (WPG) points out silences around the processes of the demobilisation of women’s movements, and shows how the reconfiguration of power, which is not named or acknowledged, plays out in attempts to mobilise today.

The Crossroads WPG sit-in in 1998 was one of the first and most prolonged of the post-apartheid or neoliberal period ‘new social movements’, which have instigated more than 10,000 service delivery protests a year in South Africa. These protests are attempts to amplify the voices of people who are claiming rights promised with democracy in 1994. They are symbolised by, but not limited to, the right to shelter, water, education, and healthcare. The attempts by the WPG to confront authority and to voice their dismay at the process and products of housing development unravelled into widespread political violence. As they unravelled, women’s struggles were reframed within a discourse of undeserving, impatient troublemakers. Women’s leadership was demobilised, depoliticised, and dislocated from the celebrated history of women’s mobilising in Crossroads.

This paper gives three versions of the WPG sit-in story. It reconstructs their year of protest in 1998, based on in-depth life narratives and a collective biography of the women involved. It then shows how the protest was framed by the official Commission of Enquiry. The gap between these two representations of the motives and meanings of the protest is discussed in a third, overarching, telling of the story – a presentation of a chronology of audibility and protest, and demobilisation and silence. This third narrative asks how it was

---


that these moments of protest in the 1970s and 1990s became disconnected physically and discursively. It finds the answer in the gender violence and economic restructuring of the 1980s. A wide range of problems facing the apartheid state in the aftermath of the 1970s protests precipitated the disempowerment of very powerful women and led to unresolved tensions. These tensions reappeared in 1998, the protest year. Therefore, in an attempt to answer why this protest is rarely, if ever, spoken of in relation to the earlier, famous Crossroads women’s struggle, I look at how the 1970s movement was demobilised. This process of demobilisation normalised a sense that the days of Crossroads anti-apartheid struggle were over. Such assertions played out not only locally, in the midst of the WPG sit-in, but also in the ways that their grievances were easily undermined in the official narrative of the protest.

I first learned about the 1998 WPG sit-in in the archives, through the commission that by and large discredited their actions and undermined their perspectives. This would not have been surprising had I not spent almost every day of the previous year in Crossroads interviewing people about the famous Women of Crossroads and what had happened to them, both during and after their initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s. Given that no-one active in the 1970s had spoken to me about it, and, when I did interview people about the 1990 sit-in, no links were drawn with earlier women’s mobilising, this 1998 women-only, collective, public, political grassroots protest was, for the most part, not seen by local residents as part of an ongoing history of women mobilising in Crossroads. What started as a rhetorical question about the connections between the 1970s and 1990s protests became a more complicated question about how these two moments of mobilised resistance became so thoroughly de-linked. It was not simply a story of official versus grassroots versions of the unfolding events, but about gaps, some by default and some by design, between the trajectories of what happened to the women involved (their experiences and life narratives); the issues they stood up for (broadly defined as access to the city and social services represented but not limited to housing); and their histories (which are highly contentious, because struggle credentials are keys in the conflict for shares of the post-1994 pie).

In constructing chronologies of these three strands and the relationships between them, I draw on social movement, feminist, and social history literatures on framing the past and re-presenting conflicting and complicated accounts of struggles for social justice, on exploring processes of demobilising, and on conflicts that span the transition from colonisation to independence. Scholarly work on the politics of memory have been

---


important, especially Jean Allman’s arguments and methodological innovations for tracing processes of ‘sanctioned forgetting’ and Allen Isaacman’s approach to narratives of ‘dislocated people’ and ‘dislocated histories’. The article aims to document and extend an important piece of post-apartheid history, and to spark discussion on the gaps between multiple versions of women’s protest over time, the processes of demobilisation, and the implications for ongoing struggles today.


Under apartheid, African women’s entry to the city of Cape Town was limited by a migrant labour system which imagined most of them living in the ‘home’ lands (bantustans) ‘traditionally’ reproducing a reserve of labour for white farms, mines, and towns. The state intentionally maintained a permanent shortage of ‘family’ accommodation as a way of controlling black people’s access to the city. The migrant labour system set the stage for the gendered and housing issues that faced the women in Crossroads. Urban shelter for African women was predominantly limited to clandestine living in male ‘bachelor’ hostels, or to the premises of white employers, which excluded their children. When women came to the cities, they had little choice but to set up shacks on empty pieces of land. The National Party came to power in 1948 in part as an answer to the hysteria of ‘cities out of control’, symbolised by the proliferation of shack settlements in the post-war manufacturing boom. In 1952, new Section 10 qualifications were introduced which consolidated and extended the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1945. The 1960s in particular were brutal for African women in Cape Town. From 1967 no ‘work-seeking’ permits were to be granted to African women wanting to enter the city. The system was not just racist but sexist in a very material way.

Women brought their experiences of these conditions with them to Crossroads. By the early 1960s the apartheid state had successfully demolished the squatter camps that mushroomed around Cape Town in the 1940s and 1950s and had enclosed African people in the limited spaces available in three officially zoned townships (Langa, Nyanga, and Gugulethu). But subsequent economic expansion of Cape Town between 1968 and 1974...
saw the African population more than doubled again. During this boom, the state turned a blind eye to what it termed the ‘influx’ of black people into the city, because their labour was needed. By the middle of the 1970s, squatter camps dotted the peninsula. When recession hit in the late 1970s, waves of apartheid restructuring policies categorised over 100,000 African people in the Western Cape as ‘illegals’, and forced removals skyrocketed. Without passes or formal employment, African women were the primary targets of these operations. People classified as African were weeded out of newly demarcated ‘coloured’ areas and took refuge in the growing self-made camps, all of which were bulldozed by mid 1977. Many were forced into, or fled to, Crossroads, a piece of land at the crossroads of two main thoroughfares, which was established in 1975 by the state as a transit camp intended to be a temporary stop en route to the appropriate labour reserve.

Women who were pushed and pulled to Crossroads decided to make it their last stand, and organised collectively and publicly to form broad alliances that developed into an international campaign against the demolition of the camp they built at this crossroads. A history of women’s organising in Crossroads at that time is captured in the seminal work by Josette Cole, Crossroads: The Politics of Reform and Repression, 1976–1986. Her work brought attention to the central role of women leaders in the 1970s and their strategies for resisting eviction and deportation, which included building schools and alliances, carrying out public campaigns, protests and direction actions, outreach, and the creation of a theatrical production about their struggle to remain in Cape Town, which they called Imfuduso (Exodus). The ways that women had been systematically denied accommodation and passes, and were directly targeted for displacement to the bantustans, motivated them to make Crossroads home. Forming the Crossroads Women’s Committee, these women worked both together with and separately from two men’s committees that were established in the camp, and reached out to a range of ‘white liberal’ progressive organisations. Returning illegally after multiple violent removals, the women are credited with turning the building of shacks on the edges of the city into a highly visible political campaign. Crossroads became a magnet for the displaced – an alternative to deportation to the bantustans.

The settlement grew from about 100 people in February 1975 to 7,000 in April that year. By 1978, there were 20,000 people, 9,000 of whom were ‘illegal’ children in Crossroads, attending the two informal schools organised by women leaders. By 1981 there were 60,000,

18 In addition to Cole, there is a rich archive of studies of Crossroads during apartheid by SALDRU, the Black Sash, the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), the Anglican Diocese, and the Institute for Race Relations. Works that have been especially useful here include: W. Frater, ‘Crossroads 1975 to 1983: A Turning Point for Influx Control’ (BA honours dissertation, University of Cape Town, November 1990); P. Zweig, ‘The Lagunya Lacuna: Contestations of Legitimacy and Agency in Housing Allocation in a Black Local Authority, 1983–1994’ (MA dissertation, University of Cape Town, 2005).
and by 1986 it was estimated that 100,000 people were living within two square miles.\textsuperscript{19} This demographic expansion was inseparable from the political growth of Crossroads and the confidence of the Women’s Committee’s organising. Staging women-only protests became a regular occurrence as the state began to attack the camp, from mid 1978. Crossroads became symbolic of the social injustice and violent oppression at the heart of the apartheid city. The fight against removing this informal settlement captured the imagination of the full spectrum of activists and feminists nationally and internationally.

Crossroads became a bone of contention among top apartheid government officials, divided between ‘reformers’ (\textit{verligtes}) and ‘hardliners’ (\textit{verkramptes}), facing a growing economic and social crisis. Spearheading the reforms was the Minister of Co-operation and Development, Piet Koornhof. He was determined to change the international image of South Africa bulldozing innocent women’s shanties, but without actually ending the practice of forced removals. After four months of unprecedented negotiation with African people, who refused to move, Koornhof agreed to an upgrade scheme in April 1979, but with no guarantee that all Crossroads residents would be included. The New Deal was backed by the Urban Foundation, a conglomeration of more than 150 businesses frustrated with apartheid laws standing in the way of economic growth. The agreement gave urban rights, including houses, to some, but justified the exclusion of the majority. It stood in stark contradiction to the women’s vision of ‘a place for people without a place’, meeting basic human needs for social reproduction.

Crossroads thereby became the experimenting ground for a new alliance between sections of the National Party and big business. It aimed for reforms that could replace the pass system with heightened control over access to accommodation, to achieve the urban stability needed for economic recovery.\textsuperscript{20} Unbeknown to the Crossroads Women’s Committee, some key local male leaders had been meeting in secret with corporate representatives.\textsuperscript{21} As soon as the negotiated settlement was concluded, women were thanked by these leaders for their efforts, and dismissed. Nomangezi Mbobosi, who had been a young teacher and an active organising member of the Women’s Committee, described this shift: ‘now when the pot was nearly ready, the men started to fight. Everything was handled by the men’.\textsuperscript{22} A series of assaults on women’s leadership followed, both by local state officials and by the new all-male Executive Committee in Crossroads, which was ‘hired’ as local authority by the government.

A township called ‘New Crossroads’, with 1,662 rental houses, was built across the road from the original camp, which then became officially known as Old Crossroads. This initiative was publicly framed by the apartheid state as a victory for Crossroads shack-dwellers. These were the first houses built for African people in Cape Town for almost 20 years.\textsuperscript{23} Crucially, however, they were not only earmarked for the 50–70,000 people in Crossroads at the time; allocation of these houses (planned as the first of five development phases in the area) was fraught with tensions. What followed was an ugly process of incorporation and divide-and-rule, from which the women of the disbanded Women’s

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Cole, \textit{Crossroads}, p. 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Mama Nomangezi Mbobosi, interviewed by Koni Benson (translator Nomakhwezi Dlaba), Khayelitsha, 11 May 2005.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} D. Smith (ed.), \textit{The Apartheid City and Beyond} (London, Routledge, 1992); M. Swilling, R. Humphries and K. Shubane (eds), \textit{The Apartheid City in Transition} (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1992).
\end{itemize}
Committee were not immune. After a year of resisting the move, all but one (Mama Luke) of the women from the Crossroads Women’s Committee ended up over the road in New Crossroads. Subsequent attempts to form an organisation that they called Nomzamo (isiXhosa for ‘she who struggles’) to bridge Old and New Crossroads failed. Following that, this group of women (albeit less coherent) was central to the initiation and escalation of rent boycotts in the mid 1980s, which spread from New Crossroads to the rest of the city. As unrest mounted and a series of states of emergency declared, protests became opportunistic spaces in which to settle old scores. In the midst of one of the rent protests in New Crossroads, key veteran activists from the old Women’s Committee were individually targeted and chased out of their homes in New Crossroads for good.24

Despite the demobilisation of this group of women, their initial message, of Crossroads as a place for the displaced, rang on. More people fled to Old Crossroads in the hope of inclusion in the new concessions. At the same time, in the early 1980s, this sole remaining African informal settlement, Old Crossroads, became known as a hotbed of militant African National Congress (ANC) underground anti-apartheid organising. In response to the continued growth of the camp, the state declared Crossroads ‘a symbol of provocation’, and cancelled all further phases of housing development, eventually proposing instead a new township on a sand dune 35 kilometres out of town: Khayelitsha.25

Resistance continued to rally around Crossroads. In response, the security forces adopted a more militarised approach to imposing reforms. This move was informed by counter-insurgency guerrilla warfare tactics developed in Algeria and modified in Vietnam and Colombia. The aim was to instigate ‘low-intensity conflict’ and ‘rip apart the social fabric’ of communities to curb ongoing dissent.26 It was based on the logic that ‘the creation of a political solution requires not a commitment to political bargaining, not even top-down reform, but a bottom-up reconstruction of political forces’.27 The goal was to re-establish a new order by co-opting ‘populists in squatter camps’ with privately funded ‘infrastructural upgrading’.28

Thus in May 1986 the apartheid state sponsored vigilantes (witdoeke) to displace 70,000 people in a burn-out of Crossroads.29 Security forces tear-gassed the area to disperse the

24 This included the first and second chairs of the Committee, Jane Yanta and Regina Ntongana, as well as key Committee activists, Nomangezi Mbobosi, Adelaide Mene, and Elsie Mkhumbudzi. Some fled to Old Crossroads, or to Khayelitsha; few ever returned to their homes in New Crossroads. Mama Yanta’s eviction remains an uncomfortably unresolved issue in community attempts to memorialise her contributions to New Crossroads today. See Benson, ‘Crossroads Continues’. Similar outcomes of anti-apartheid protest are evident in emerging new histories of the 1980s. See Bozzoli, Theatres of Struggle; H. Pohlandt-McCormick, ‘I Saw a Nightmare …’: Doing Violence to Memory, The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976 (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005).


inhabitants while the witdoeke enlisted recruits to set shacks alight. Government representatives were on site, waiting to take people to Khayelitsha. Government denied any responsibility for the ‘tragedy’, explaining the mayhem as ‘black on black violence’. In this forced removal, the apartheid state aimed to ‘restore’ the rule of a layer of patriarchs whom they referred to as the ‘Fathers’. The witdoeke, led by Johnson Ngxobongwana, were the handful of ‘elders’ poised in opposition to militant ‘youth’. The witdoeke cabal were promised control over future upgrades. Thereafter Ngxobongwana was pronounced mayor, a layer of state-armed local police were appointed, and political dissent was met with violence.

Under this dramatic surface lay the gendered effects of militarised reforms that marked the next decade, spanning into post-apartheid Crossroads. The militarisation of the politics of resource distribution in Crossroads closed down spaces that the women had carved out for democratic and mass-based participation in politics. This system of patriarchy and patronage relied on breaking alliances and containing frustrations within Crossroads, which would set the tone for challenges faced by women in Crossroads’ future.

Of most importance to subsequent organising efforts was how the witdoeke rolled back the gains that women had made in gaining widespread acknowledgement of the need for shelter. Government hardliners had gloated: ‘You’ve lost the war. We’ve got you off the land and we are not letting you back. Unless you go to Khayelitsha, we will do nothing to help you in your awful plight’. This ‘war’ aimed to re-institutionalise control of the city, and specifically set out to counter the survival issues that women had politicised. This offensive was part of a larger effort to impose reform. The witdoeke burn-out enabled the state to replace the Group Areas Act, criticised for its use of racial determinants, with a class-based justification system for housing exclusion. This strategy had been envisaged in studies on reform adopted by the apartheid state at this time: ‘When people are housed – more especially when they are homeowners – they are not only less likely to be troublesome. They are also likely to feel they have a stake in the society and an interest in its stability’. This political economy was in direct contradiction to the human-needs approach argued by women activists in Crossroads. These women had challenged the ‘old’ migrant labour–bantustan system; the new urban plan had a built-in response to their challenge that the city is a place for everyone. In line with the neoliberal reforms seen in structural adjustment programmes imposed widely in the 1980s, the cost of social reproduction was pushed back out of the public sphere, and into individual households, with detrimental effects for women.

Between 1981 and 1997, only 800 affordable houses were built in Old Crossroads. A series of violent conflicts over forced relocation for new building, and over access to the new houses,
led to more deaths in 1993 than had been caused by the *witdoeke* in 1986. The Trauma Centre reported on the ‘social scars of low intensity civil war’ where ‘killings, shack burnings, and armed attacks were occurring in the area unabated and with virtual impunity’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Crossroads. During these ‘allocation wars’, Crossroads was governed by an undemocratic, headmen and home-guard style of political control. This was mirrored in the newly unbanned ANC in Old Crossroads in the 1990s. In this setting, no one was exempt from political patronage and territorial conflicts. In these years, veteran activists living in New Crossroads got involved in supporting women’s mobilising at a canning factory in the nearby farming town of Malmesbury, but could not cross the street to support women in Old Crossroads. When women in Old Crossroads attempted to call meetings to discuss possible ways forward, they were met with threats that left them feeling ‘kept in a tin’.

In many ways, the hopes of democracy signified by 1994 had been dashed in Crossroads before they even began. Cole describes how the women’s leadership was traumatised by *witdoeke*, remaining voiceless well into the late 1990s:

> [In 1999] I had a sense of community that was highly traumatised and was kind of caught in this moment out of it which had never really moved and that in that sense 1994 had come but its impact was not felt … it really numbed some people to the point they had no voice or if they had a voice they didn’t really want to raise it, lots of fears, lots of mistrusts. … The women of Crossroad were not exempt from all these terrible things that were going on.

In contrast, there was an outpouring of recognition of the role that the Crossroads struggle had played in challenging apartheid, heard in a typical speech by government ministers in the Crossroads hall in 1994:

> When the government talked of the Reconstruction and Development Programme it meant there should be houses, jobs, clean water, viable health services, decent education and other social services for the people who had rendered the great service towards the eradication of apartheid.

In this context, women in Old Crossroads attempted to participate in the new political process of community development forums that opened up in 1994. One woman, Mama Shugu, was elected to represent squatters in parliament the 1995–6 interim national council. Women engaged the new Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) forums meant to ensure community participation in low-cost housing schemes. Housing has arguably been one of the most concrete symbols of liberation from apartheid, and Crossroads was to be home to the largest project in the flagship RDP, with R1.2 billion allocated for 32,000 houses in the area. But women’s experiences of engaging with new local forums were not positive:

---

35 By July 1993, Sections 2 and 3 had been destroyed and over 800 people had been directly affected by acts of political violence. The Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence and Torture, ‘The Consequences of Political Violence in Crossroads’, submission to the Goldstone Commission of Enquiry, 30 July 1993. See A. Greenwell, ‘Criminal Strategies of Competing Protagonists in the “Development” of Crossroads 1990–9’ (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2001) for an account of the peace work being done in Crossroads at this time.


38 Greenwell, ‘Criminal Strategies’, p. 47.


41 Queen Hanoria Tynto Shugu, interviewed by Koni Benson (translator Nomakhwezi Dlaba), Vuisizwe Crèche, Old Crossroads, 10 October 2005.

The RDP Forum is not accountable. It simply informs people about the decisions. In cases where they have asked what people think, they have ignored them. Views of people who questioned and rejected the size of the RDP houses were ignored or treated as people that are against development.43

Frustrations with the RDP Forum were part of a larger shift taking place that undermined housing development nationally. By the time the first post-apartheid houses were being built in Old Crossroads in 1997, the state had scrapped the RDP and replaced it with a macroeconomic restructuring strategy known as the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). This brought massive cuts to local municipalities, and a turn towards commercialisation and privatisation of basic services as a means of generating revenue no longer provided by the national state. For housing in the new South Africa, the shift meant smaller and fewer subsidised houses built each year, despite rising costs, growing families, and farm evictions that led to urban migration. As new service fees were announced and the new (incredibly small) one-roomed houses earmarked for Crossroads went to tender, it was clear that new local development forums would not play a mediation role. As tensions began to rise, women in Crossroads decided that it was time to intervene.

Post-Apartheid Service Delivery Protest: The Crossroads Women’s Power Group

Service delivery protests, reflecting frustrations with local government leaders representing and defending a system that makes it impossible to deliver on promises of post-apartheid houses and services, began in South Africa at the end of the 1990s.45 The Women’s Power Group was slightly ahead of the times: confronting the authority of the liberating government in 1997 was new. Women living in Old Crossroads, exhausted by their attempts to resolve issues of substandard building and missing development funds, formed the group. According to them, women’s power was the power to unite and the power to push for change without violence. This unique initiative attracted over 300 women from across deep personal, historic, geographic, and political divides.

This section prioritises the collective narrative of the WPG, seeking to understand what happened from their perspective and how they understood the unfolding issues. Despite the subsequent enquiry, there has never been an account of their organisation, or their four month sit-in and its aftermaths, from the perspective of the women involved.46 Preliminary and always partial, the WPG’s social biography and collective


46 Their history is recollected through individual and group interviews with 24 women involved (Mamas Beme, Dasi, Kwinana, Kwana, Kontyolo, Xhapha, Mzikulu, Ngxiya, Mdyeshana, Mwanda-Tika, Mbeka, Totose, Nqimtza, Mkhumuzi, Ngozi, Tomsana, Sogo-Hamse, Shugu, Mangqamba, Mgेदż, Tom, Jobela, Luke,
narrative of their sit-in is sketched out here in an attempt to track women’s experiences of mobilising in Crossroads across time.

Three key features stand out in the social biography of the membership of the WPG. First, as a collective, there was long-standing experience of life and conflict in Crossroads. Arriving in Crossroads as early as 1975, some members had participated in earlier women’s mobilising. For the most part, they had not been in the leadership, with two key exceptions: Mama Luke, a veteran activist and lead character and instigator of Imfuduso, who had been the only committee member who remained in Old Crossroads by choice in the 1980s; and committee member Elsie Mkhumubuzi, who had been chased back to Old Crossroads from New Crossroads during rent boycott unrest.47 For the most part, WPG members were middle-aged and older women who had been in Crossroads since the early 1980s, and had been excluded from the New Crossroads option. All WPG members had lived under Ngxobongwana and low-intensity conflict, and came from all sides of the post-witdoekewa housing allocation wars. The WPG membership also included a handful of young women who were born and raised in Crossroads. They said that they had been inspired or drawn into organising by their mothers’ struggles.48 Second, women in shacks joined women in houses to form the WPG, despite having lived on opposite sides of such previous violent rivalries. Third, many women who joined the WPG had attempted to participate in political parties and civic organisations in the early years of the democratic dispensation, and their frustration across rival parties led them to choose to organise strategically along gender lines in 1997. The way the group managed to bridge deeply entrenched geographic and political divides was a point of pride that defined the WPG.

According to the women involved, the WPG was initiated in September 1997, when new service fees were announced and the show houses of the first post-apartheid units were complete. On display were tiny one-room houses that fell short of the kinds of spaces women needed to create home. Their initial list of united issues included: housing, revamped service charges, missing housing funds, filth of schools and clinics, lack of crèches, and a disastrous state of security in Crossroads.49 They referred to the proposed houses as ‘veza’ (veza inyawo, isiXhosa for ‘showing your feet’, because when you lay down to sleep, your feet stuck out. Women had been struggling for urban security for decades, and the subsidy houses would be their first and only hope of decent shelter, a space from which to create ‘home’.50 Not only were these one-roomed houses tiny, but they were found to be ‘not square’ and of ‘inferior workmanship’.51

WPG members had been keeping track of budgets of previous development phases. They approached councillors with suggestions of where to source funds to build bigger houses. In their view, these houses were the fruit of development promises made during the
negotiations with Koornhof in the late 1970s. They had lived through the first phases of this housing project (delivered in New Crossroads in 1980–81 and in Unathi section of Old Crossroads in 1987), and in both cases the houses were at least 45 square metres, as compared to the 18–32-square-metre houses on show in 1997. Larger homes had been built in neighbouring Philippi, and Crossroads councillors had put out a press release stating that R44 million were allocated to Crossroads by the municipality to build houses. Mama Shugu, who became a leading figure in the WPG, explained:

We told them . . . there is R1 million allocated for houses in Crossroads . . . we can take that money and extend the small houses because that money belong to the Crossroad people . . . These houses have no rooms. It’s only a hall and a toilet. You can just put the kitchen equipments in a corner.52

Women knew that despite government attempts to standardise subsidy housing, the funding and size options were not set in stone – and this was the time to intervene.

Between October 1997 and January 1998 the WPG met with a range of officials concerning issues from housing size, to missing funds, to the cleanup of Crossroads schools. They went in groups small enough not to provoke anger and large enough not to be ignored. These many meeting attempts were not successful. Councillors either didn’t follow through or refused to attend meetings: one went as far as locking women out of the community hall. Frustrated, the WPG decided to go and sit at the council offices until they received some satisfactory response.53

Figure 1. One of three show houses on display in Crossroads, September 1997. (Photograph by Anne Greenwell)

52 Queen Hanoria Tynto Shugu, interviewed by Koni Benson (translator Nomakhwezi Dlaba), Old Crossroads, 10 October 2005.
Thus the sit-in began on 21 January 1998. On a rotating basis, 50 women at a time occupied the City Council offices, demanding that their grievances be addressed. This method meant that officials had a hard time narrowing down the leadership. Their initial demands included safe schools, spaces for day cares, a 24-hour clinic, regular refuse and night-soil removal, representation beyond the ruling party on RDP forums, expulsion of local councillors, answers about missing housing and bursary funds, larger houses, and resolutions on the waiting list and on salary disputes for housing construction work. They were supported by Crossroads security officials, who were in the midst of their own dispute with state restructuring policies. These guards let the women into the premises and gave them space to cook and sleep.

The sit-in caught the attention of the ANC, leading to a series of meetings with the women and with top party officials. The ANC treated the issue as one of objecting to the party and misunderstanding systems of governance, rather than inadequacy of services. Councillor Depoutch declared the women’s allegations invalid. Provincial and Women’s League ANC representatives went to the sit-in and demanded that the ANC women participating step down, but to no avail. There was a constant and wearying round of meetings at which the technicalities of how the new service charges would work were reiterated, but the underlying needs were ignored.

The WPG responded with concrete demands: 48-square-metre houses; the whereabouts of development funding; answers as to why rates had increased for sites that were not serviced; to speak to the Mayor. And so top-level feminist activists Mayor Teresa Solomon and Chair of the City Council, Nomaindia Mfeketo, fresh out of the struggle and now in local government, ‘addressed’ the women and explained the roles of the council and the councillors. In this exhausting round of negotiation, the government agencies continually failed to address the substantive rather than the administrative issues being raised, despite the new rights and laws that were supposed to bring concrete changes.

Frustrated with this response, the WPG continued to look for answers to the substantive issues. They approached previous (i.e. apartheid-era) Crossroads administrators and political players whom they thought were in the know, including sending delegates to ask former Crossroads mayor and ex-witdoeke leader Johnson Ngxobongwana about housing funds left over from his time in office. This opened the door for a range of long-standing historical conflicts and groupings to get involved, each with their own agendas. Re-defined as ‘a brainchild of the warlords specifically masterminded by Nongwe in opposition to development’, the WPG protest inside the City Council buildings triggered a series of attacks and counter-attacks outside. As in previous decades, the protest environment became a contested terrain where old scores were settled. Calling on the advice of Ngxobongwana, women later admitted with hindsight, was a mistake, as it ‘invited violence’, which was what they had set out to avoid.

Meanwhile, the City Council categorised the women’s concerns into ‘political issues’ (which were said to be beyond its jurisdiction), on the one hand, and issues of finance,

54 ‘Women’s Power Group Grievances’, as recorded and categorised by the City of Cape Town, 3 February 1998, in CTCCC.
55 Councillor Depoutch Elese, in CTCCC, pp. 56–63.
56 Mcebisi Skwatsha, Provincial Secretary of the ANC (Western Cape), CTCCC, pp. 72–5.
57 Mrs Mbeka, CTCCC, pp. 46–7.
58 For example, they met with Mrs Schelhase, who had been a provincial administrator in Crossroads until 1997, and questioned her about the R5 million left over from the Crossroads building development fund. Mrs Ngozi, CTCCC, p. 81; Women’s Power Group Interview, by Koni Benson (translator Nomakhwezi Dlaba), Boys Town, Crossroads, 17 October 2005; Johnson Mkhandgel Ngxobongwana, CTCCC, pp. 100–104.
59 Testimony of Mpembe, Director of South African Police Services, in CTCCC, p. 39. See also the testimony of Marsden, pp. 69–71, and of William Sidinana, p. 56.
community, and engineering service, on the other. Within a week, the City declared that ‘each and every one’ of the issues for which they were responsible ‘had been resolved’ and requested that the women vacate the offices.  

After many meetings with officials who felt that they had addressed concerns within their jurisdiction, the protest intensified, because women would not move. Four months of court orders, meetings, and investigations produced little satisfaction and increased tensions in the rest of Crossroads, where the conflict played out. The sit-in came to an official end on 16 April, when women were arrested and evicted from the council office.

By then all ‘sides’ had given up trying to prove legitimacy through rallying mass public support. By May, 10 people had died, and at least 40 families (200–400 people) had lost their homes. The police said they were scared to step in. Unidentified arson attacks ensued, as did armed conflict between youth and the state. A core of women then took refuge at the local Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) office building, and, when that was bombed out, some had to go into hiding.

When murders began, old scores of male-dominated political violence rooted in the previous decade emerged. The state agreed to supply Crossroads councillors with firearms and bodyguards. Attempts were made on Councillor Depoutch’s life, and the RDP Chairman, Mr Stulo, was murdered. WPG members were unsure about whether their supporters might have been responsible: ‘no one knows who killed him because our children and brothers helped us when we were attacked’. In addition to losing their homes and their political standing in the community, WPG members lost sisters, sons, partners, and mothers in the ensuing conflicts. A tragic example was when Mama Ngozi lost her son in this conflict and, at his funeral, her mother was shot to death.

While much of the violence had little to directly do with the WPG, the sister of leading activist Mama Shugu was killed at this time and she herself had to flee, leaving her children behind while she went into hiding until November. Mama Mkhefa told the commission that, when she was threatened, the Police Director Mpembe advised her to go if she did not have the same shooting power as those threatening her. After she eventually left, all her belongings were stolen. Mama Luke, the last leading member of the 1970s Crossroads Women’s Committee to remain in Old Crossroads, relocated when her home was burnt to the ground along with that of Councillor Gwayi and the creche of WPG activist Mama Hamse.

While WPG members had been chased away from the development site, and all residents of Section 2 ‘relocated’ for Phase 3 development, WPG members refused to disassemble their shacks obstructing the building. As a group, the WPG made their last stand in the refusal to vacate the last 13 remaining shacks that impeded housing development in Phase 3. No court order was ever obtained: the commission reprimanded Councillor Depoutch for illegally and personally demolishing the remaining shacks with the use of his own security personnel in September. It was only towards the end of the year that it was safe for the last members of the WPG to come out of hiding.

60 Mr Patrick Makhura, Executive Committee Support Officer, CTCCC, pp. 90–96; Nomaindia Mfeketo, CTCCC, pp. 26, 112–15.
62 Agrinette Kwana, interviewed by Koni Benson (translator Nomakhwezi Dlaba), Observatory, Cape Town, 17 April 2006.
64 For example, Nongwe, Nxobongwana’s rival successor, who was later displaced in an intra-ANC branch rivalry, was chased out of Crossroads during this time.
In the end, the Housing Department terminated the disputed contract, agreeing with the women that these houses were inadequate. This was communicated in a letter that put matters straight back into the hands of local councillors: ‘the existing housing contract has been terminated. Your council is invited to consider an appropriate means of continuing the project’.66 After a ‘successful’ meeting of all exhausted parties, the project was soon re-started, with little changes made to the original plans. By August, people were moving into the new one-roomed houses. The press captured the gendered dynamics of the underlying ongoing tensions:

Dusty streets are bustling with activity – builders are constructing new houses … carpenters add finishing touches. A few women are doing their washing in front of their freshly painted homes while chickens scratch in the dirt in the backyards. But everything is not as idyllic as it seems. A closer look reveals that several mothers don’t take their eyes off their children, while the streets are full of watchful men. There is tension in the air. … Accusations and counter-accusations fly.67 Beneath and before this image of containment are women’s own accounts of their struggle. Their own testimony, recorded here for the first time, shows how they managed, against many odds and for a relatively brief but important time, to unite across deep political divides. They had challenged long-standing dichotomies and ‘sides’ of struggle in Crossroads.

‘A War of Words and Bullets’: Re-Instituting Official Dichotomies

Following the sit-in, the WPG’s actions were immediately re-scripted into an official account of political divisions and tensions: an alternative narrative which misrepresented their campaign and worked to undermine them further. Suggested in March, the Commission of Enquiry was initially intended to focus on the WPG,68 but by the time the enquiry took place in July, attention was re-centred on male leadership battles. After hearing 39 testimonies (seven of which were from the WPG) the Commission’s analysis focused on five sources of what it deemed to be ‘genuine violent rivalry’ that highlighted male-dominated leadership tensions. WPG women were ascribed to political camps, regardless of how their actions and the evidence they gave to the Commission blatantly contradicted these ascriptions.69 There was little room for women to raise their motives and concerns: ‘testimonies’ were run as question and answer sessions mostly around details of patronage and violent attacks and counter-attacks, with questions being deleted from the summarised selected answers presented in the final report.70 Local councillors were reprimanded for poor communication, but for the most part vindicated by the Commission. Housing and development tensions were written off as ‘confusion’.

Party politics were prioritised by the Commission, which insisted on defining the WPG as an interest group allied with the PAC against the councillors/ANC, despite ample evidence to the contrary.71 Prior to the sit-in, the WPG had approached and been refused help by all organisations listed by the Commission, from the ANC, to the PAC, to the Western Cape

---

69 The Commission used the following verbal and written submissions as evidence for its analysis: 22 government officials (4 of whom were councillors and 8 were police/security officials); 7 WPG; 4 NGO workers; 2 ANC representatives; 2 traditional leaders; 1 PAC representative; 1 woman who supported the councillor.
70 The recommendation sections of the report were classified as confidential ‘green papers’ by the Cape Town City Council on 20 November 2000. These papers, and the original transcripts of testimonies, should by law be accessible to the public. However, they could not be located. Thanks are due to the Records Manager of the City of Cape Town, Arlene Van Beulen, who tried, without success, to locate them so that I could apply to see them.
71 For the theory of a PAC ploy, see CTCCC, pp. 66, 91–2.
United Squatters Association (WECUSA). Despite women’s experiences of there being little difference between these organisations, the construction of such polarisations give important insight into what women were up against and how their views were sidelined and cemented as illegitimate in the history of their protest.

The Commission proposed that violence emanated from traditional warlords, who are afraid of the potential loss of their patronage with the upgrade of informal settlements to houses.\(^72\) It claimed that ex-witdoeke leader N\(g\)xobongwana was said to be campaigning for National Party seats in the upcoming 1999 election, and was planning his return to Crossroads, and therefore allied himself with the PAC against the ANC in an ‘unholy’ alliance.\(^73\) The PAC remained the crucial dissenting voice for the area, and had refused to be represented in the area’s RDP forum. However, it had also refused to support the WPG. Other than his testimony of meeting and giving advice, there is little evidence of ‘support’ from N\(g\)xobongwana to the WPG, who had been asking the municipality to call former leaders to account for moneys donated to Crossroads in the 1980s. Regardless, the Commission represented N\(g\)xobongwana as central to the WPG, asserting that ‘the WPG are traditionalists by culture and therefore believe that the Johnson N\(g\)xobongwana leadership style is more appropriate for them’.\(^74\) Described as ‘predominantly older women’, they were assumed to be therefore ‘traditionally aligned’.\(^75\) This was framed in opposition to the pro-development, democratic organising of the ANC and its civil alliances such as the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), and fed into councillors’ arguments that the housing issues of the women and their ‘suffering’ were being used to ‘whip up’ anti-ANC support in the run up to the elections. The WPG were seen as anti-ANC and traditional, and therefore essentially anti-development and anti-progress. In Crossroads, rejecting one-roomed houses resulted in being labelled as ‘backward’ people intent on ‘sabotaging development’.\(^76\) The WPG were depicted as naïve pawns, at best, or undeserving troublemakers, at worst. Such labels were ripe with racist undertones of ‘backwardness’, ‘irrationality’ and criminality. They are increasingly being used to dismiss and undermine protesters’ concerns.\(^77\)

This process of re-inscribing ‘discursive frames’ is, according to Nancy Naples, common to social movement struggles, and carries serious material repercussions.\(^78\) In the case of the Crossroads sit-in, no attention was paid to what ‘traditional’ versus ‘progressive’ leadership style meant in practice at the time. This focus, in the official narrative of the sit-in, circumvented enquiry into whether leaders had provided vital services such as housing. Women’s experiences with state bureaucracy and policy, the RDP Forum, housing allocation, and representation in general help to explain why they allied with ‘traditional’ leaders during the year of protest. It also helps to explain why this did not mean that they were ‘traditionalists’ as per the Commission’s definition, or ‘N\(g\)xobongwana supporters’. But there was no space for these experiences in the Commission hearings’ framework.

‘Traditionalists’ and ‘developers’ were potentially equally autocratic. The women described their strategic navigation of what were far from binary choices:

---

\(^72\) Mpmbe, CTCCC, p. 39.
\(^73\) CTCCC, pp. 2–5, 37.
\(^74\) Ibid., p. 62.
\(^75\) Mike Marsden, Executive Director of Engineering Services for Cape Town, CTCCC, pp.69–71; William Sidinana, CTCCC, p. 56.
\(^76\) Crossroads Community Policing Forum, CTCCC, p. 37.
\(^77\) Thompson and Tapscott, *Citizenship and Social Movements*, p. 262.
In 1994 nothing changed because the councillors were leading with an iron rod. . . . Ever since we have voted they had replaced the chiefs with councillors. They [councillors] repeated exactly what the chiefs had done because there were rifts between them and the people. They excluded us when making decisions.79

Voicing dissent under either ‘system’, argued the WPG, was dangerous. But, according to them, it was the way they were let down by official channels, established to hear their concerns, that eventually led them to turn to direct action and alliances with the very ‘traditionalist’ forces they set out to avoid.80 WPG members admitted that ‘asking him to finish the houses is why we are being killed’,81 and ‘when you call Ngxobongwana you invite violence’, but added that they had assessed their options and took the risk.82 Coming from an entirely different perspective to the dominant political debate, their narratives highlight the false dichotomy between ‘traditional’ and party political patriarchies. Nevertheless, a well-reputed academic urban planner subsequently took the Commission at face value, to argue for an appreciation of ‘competing rationalities’ between modern development and traditional culture that should inform future planning in Cape Town.83

Peppered throughout the Commission is evidence to support the grievances of the WPG. These were representative of a widespread and growing sense of what the Director of Housing at the time admitted was administrative injustice. He noted that the city ‘does not provide administrative justice to its citizens, but rather dispenses a series of decisions that are, variously ad hoc, immoral, inconsistent and very likely illegal’.84 The government entity controlling housing during the WPG’s protests was extremely convoluted. Throughout the country there was utter confusion about who was responsible for implementing the promises of the subsidy programme. The revolving door of contractors failing to deliver in Crossroads was indicative of an older and much wider national problem.85 In 1998, 20 of Cape Town’s 24 housing projects were facing delay. Moreover, Crossroads’ local government had just been shifted from provincial to city/municipal jurisdiction. Administration of housing in Crossroads was divided between the city, the local government (councillors), and the province. City officials were critical that Crossroads councillors had overstepped their roles in their direct involvement in the allocation of tenders. Thus the Commission often put the word ‘council’ in quotations in their final report at points when WPG leaders were explaining their frustration with the houses that the ‘council’ was building. Housing administration officials argued that the maths used by the WPG to justify their protest was based on a misunderstanding of funds available, being based on a press release in 1996 that councillors refused to recall. The Director of Housing reported allegations of political interference by councillors promising people unrealistic options, helping to introduce and choose developers,
and going as far as encouraging beneficiaries within existing phases of the scheme not to occupy their sites.\(^{86}\) So even when women were vindicated by the Commission on issues of tracking development money, it did not matter. In a convoluted system that was not working, the buck was easily passed between the city, the housing department, and the local councillors, each refusing to take responsibility.

State officials blamed the market for the growing national housing backlog. They argued that the WPG were ‘ganging up against councillors’ when ‘really it’s the private sector tenders that can only produce this size for this cost’.\(^{87}\) The more sympathetic officials argued that the WPG were confused and needed to be educated as to how local government works; that is, why they should be patient and wait, probably for the rest of their lives.\(^{88}\) As a self imposed structural adjustment programme, GEAR took on World Bank protocols that argued for cost-recovery and market-rate charges for social services, and set up the urban poor for what Legassick calls new struggles over old issues.\(^{89}\) Gaining houses would be just one battle in an ongoing war of survival, as there were plans to increase service charges further and to install individual water meters throughout Crossroads. Councillor Depoutch knew that this would ‘not be popular initially’.\(^{90}\) Scholarship on local government accountability under neoliberal policies gives insight into service delivery frustrations.\(^{91}\) Typically, in Crossroads, debate about a crisis in basic social services was reframed as a purely technical discussion: a response not unique to South Africa.\(^{92}\)

In Crossroads, however, the tensions this caused were played out within the ‘cauldron’ of informal settlements/townships, with women hardest hit, and residents pitted against their local representatives harshly defending a system of limited emancipation. Once there would have been a host of support to uncover the divide-and-rule tactics of the apartheid state, and defend against critiques of ‘black-on-black violence’. However, at the end of the first term of the new democracy, women’s protest was reconstructed not as a potential blow to an ongoing system of inequality, but as a localised ungrateful slap in the face of the liberation party. Nine years after the sit-in, Depoutch still blamed ‘the women’ for lack of development in the area.\(^{93}\)

\(^{86}\) CTCCC: Malibongwe Sopangisa’s testimony, pp. 67–9; written submission of the Acting Director of Housing, p. 44; general findings, p. 133.

\(^{87}\) Marsden, CTCCC, pp. 69–71.


\(^{90}\) Elese Depoutch, 7 May 1998, conversation reported in Greenwell, ‘Criminal Strategies’.

\(^{91}\) Kristian Stokke, for example, is building on critical democracy scholars who define democracy not as the institutionalisation of elections, but rather as popular control over public affairs; see O. Törnquist, N. Webster and K. Stokke (eds), *Rethinking Popular Representation* (Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).


\(^{93}\) Councillor Elese Depoutch, interviewed by Koni Benson, 26 January 2007, Council Offices, Old Crossroads.
Forms of Demobilisation: Continuities that Create Disconnects

The WPG sit-in can be seen as a window into what women’s activism was up against in post-apartheid Crossroads. The response to their attempts to politicise their housing struggles expose how the negotiated transition from ‘low-intensity conflict’ to ‘low-intensity democracy’ played out across their lives. The sit-in became part of a struggle to maintain and ‘normalise’ divide-and-rule aspects of the politics of allocating scarce resources. The WPG was not made up of innocent victims or helpless squatters. Like many social movements in Cape Town today, it was based on genuine grievances and a keen sense of injustice faced by the most marginalised people. And like many of these protest movements, it had a strong reason for being, but was itself weak as an organization, with little material or social support beyond its constituents. This was markedly different from, and importantly related to, earlier women’s organising in Crossroads.

Scholars compare the similarities between apartheid and post-apartheid states’ harsh responses to protesting shack dwellers, and a Cape Town judge recently referred to a violent mass eviction of shack dwellers by the state as déjá vu of the Crossroads days. Yet very few people in Old or New Crossroads in the 2000s connected the WPG protest with women’s organising in the 1970s. The lived realities of multiple dislocations explain the lack of association between these two moments of protest. Disassociation was not by chance, but rather the outcome of processes of power reconfiguration inherent in the demobilisation and depoliticisation of the issues women raised.

Women who organised during the peak of the apartheid regime were pushed out of all positions of leadership, and many were chased out of Crossroads altogether. Mostly they ended up in New Crossroads through a process that made crossing the road, to connect with women who remained in Old Crossroads, impossible. Their struggle history moved with them. But it remained in the past. Frozen in time and reduced to a one-dimensional story incorporated into the anti-apartheid narrative, this snapshot became disconnected from their ongoing lives, which became redundant to the state after their moment in the spotlight. They spearheaded a struggle that continued, for the most part, without them. Subsequently they organised around unaffordable rents and other issues in New Crossroads, and when they did manage to share the lessons of the backlash they experienced, it would be with women far from Old Crossroads.

As the successes of the famous struggle story were rolled back, women in Old Crossroads found themselves on the wrong side of a line that very few ordinary people played a role in drawing. For the two decades that followed the New Deal that allowed Crossroads to remain standing in 1979, all attempts made by women to politicise their struggles would be shot down. Low-intensity conflict successfully reinstated a new social order, and women had to navigate life in what has been called the ‘post-Crossroads era’, where the 30,000 people let back in after the 1986 burnout were assumed to be witdoeke-approved supporters, and by extension in alliance with the apartheid government in a fight against ‘the comrades’.

While Ngxobongwana attempted to use his position for the benefit of a few, people who remained in Crossroads in the 1980s could hardly be considered supporters of the apartheid

state. They certainly did not benefit from the housing upgrades he promised. Instead they faced further removals and increased insecurity in a decade of internal displacement. None the less, as a result of living under Ngxobongwana, who represented the *witdoeke* attacks on the comrades, women in Old Crossroads inhabited the ‘bad guys’ side of the famous struggle history. This in part explains why they have never felt entitled to claim the struggle as theirs, or link it to their post-apartheid mobilising.

As important as the lack of continuity of individuals involved is the fact that issues raised by earlier women’s mobilising had been erased and replaced by the time of the WPG actions. Crossroads women had been positioned differently from their male counterparts and had organised along gender lines to secure what they needed for urban survival. Their struggle focused on, and politicised, the things they were deemed responsible for as women in order to secure social reproduction, such as shelter, water, and education. However, it was framed by the nationalists as a move against the detested Group Areas Acts, not as a focus for women’s struggles for access to public social services to meet basic human needs. From 1986 onwards, each official enquiry into conflict in Crossroads would build upon a history focused on a militarised male leadership that excluded any mention of the issues women in the 1970s had managed to get into the international spotlight and on to the table for policy reconciliation. The gains they made in ending influx control, which had kept them out of the city and been used to deny them accommodation, were absorbed into the reformed plans of access. These plans hinged not on race but on what the market could afford. Not only had the *witdoeke* wiped out the women’s leadership, it had also normalised competition for scarce resources and countered the women’s call for access to basic human needs, which the state had subsidised as social services for white people under apartheid. These issues were pushed off the table in the 1980s, had a brief chance with the introduction of the RDP in 1994, and then were placed beyond possible reach again with the introduction of GEAR in 1996.

The insistence that 1994 was a milestone, which signified a break from past suffering, also served to challenge the legitimacy of the WPG’s concerns. Like the apartheid state, the postcolonial state has defended itself against the imperative of providing basic social services by pushing this responsibility back into the private household sphere, and on to the shoulders of African women. In different ways, both regimes have ignored the substance of women’s demands that the state provide for basic human needs such as housing. Similarly, Isaacman, in comparing the very different explanations that justified ongoing forced removals for dam construction in colonial and postcolonial Mozambique, reveals how each regime ‘constructed a wall of silence’ around their development policies, ‘and the only story that was given credence was theirs.’

In post-apartheid South Africa, studies have pointed to how the poor survive predominantly through the labour of individual middle-aged African women. What is less understood are the historical processes that have normalised this set-up, and have contained within communities the frustrations caused by competition for such limited social services and development. These displaced or relocated tensions often erupt in the midst of mobilising efforts and in protests that are then deemed fragile or unstrategic,

---

101 Although not directly about post-apartheid struggles, Mamdani’s analysis of the civil war elements of African liberation wars, and Bozzoli’s complication of anti-apartheid organising in Alexandra, are important starting points for this work. Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle*; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*. 
at best, illogical and self-destructive, at worst. Women left in Old Crossroads had the violent insecurity of these historical realities to contend with, with no outside support. The apartheid-era attack on mobilising had severed the alliances that had provided material, political, and documentary/historical support. The assumption that democracy would provide justice left women in Crossroads alone in fending for themselves in an extremely fragile environment, before the era of widespread protest by social movements for service delivery.

For good reason, the WPG were initially extremely careful of approaching the councillors. Claiming association with previous women’s challenges to the state would imply parallels between the apartheid and post-apartheid state, and would probably have worked against them when initiating their protest. Their sit-in ended with confusion, trauma, and disorganisation. Depleted and disbanded, they were even less likely to draw parallels with women’s earlier experiences of being demobilised. That they had called on Ngxobongwana by this time did not help them to fend off the assumption that this was an ongoing conflict between fathers/witdoeke and comrades, or traditionalists and the ANC. Anything outside or across these divides could not be heard.

Uniting across political divisions and demanding services for all, the WPG momentarily challenged all available sides and dominant players. Most in positions of power initially responded by ignoring the women and their call for support, until it became the women versus the ANC councillors. Only then did other parties and organisations join in, not to support the women’s grievances, but to further their own agendas and rivalries. WPG perspectives were written off, before they were even written. The history of the WPG shows not a silenced past, but an appropriated explanation of the unfolding events, used for political ends, with serious material repercussions for shack dwellers and their organising.

Nombonisa Gasa pointedly argues that women in South African resistance history have been characterised as either heroes or victims, either radical militants, or conservative defenders of the patriarchy. Applying her questions of how women’s protest actions are heard, read, and then written into, or out of, political debates shifts the focus from oversimplifying binaries, and instead looks at the process by which the women, and then the basic human needs they stood up for, were pushed out at the time and in history. These counter-attacks have not been straightforward, least of all because of the silences that surround their sidelining. For South Africa, women have asserted agency in the politics of informal settlements and, for the most part, these experiences have been incorporated into or written out of official histories. The Women’s Power Group’s history is not a glamorous reification of women’s uprising; rather, it is a narrative of shifting sides and sites of struggle, of conflict and contestation that aims to understand better how the transition to the democratic period was experienced in Crossroads, and how that plays out in debates on continuities and disjunctures in histories of women’s mobilisations.

KONI BENSON
Department of Historical Studies and African Centre for Cities, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa. E-mail: konibenson@gmail.com

103 Allman comes to similar conclusions in constructing the history of the disjuncture between women’s high-profile roles as nation builders and their limited role in the consolidation of the postcolonial state in Ghana: Allman, ‘The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe’, p. 31.