

# *“We Have Nothing to Celebrate!”: At the interplay of de-politicising and re-politicising processes in the feminist civil society space in the fight against gender-based violence in Cape Town, South Africa.*

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## **Abstract:**

*This article illustrates the social experiences of de-politicising and re-politicising processes in the fight against gender-based violence and femicide in the feminist civil society space in Cape Town, South Africa. I aim to add to the well-known critique of the de-politicisation of the gendered international development agenda, by illustrating that alongside de-politicising processes, also forces of re-politicisation are at play. The fight against gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa is not picked up by developmental organisations alone; South Africa has a rich culture of feminist activism. I argue that with the emerge of an new autonomous feminist movement in 2018, The Total Shutdown, the de-politicisation and re-politicisation of gender-based violence happened simultaneously. Individuals move between different spaces of resistance to renegotiate their feminist ideological standpoints to challenge and disrupt post-Apartheid (non-)actions in tackling the high rates of rape and femicide in the country. This research shows that the boundary between NGO benefactors and activists is a blurry one: both groups move between spaces to create the counter-narratives and the counter-identifications they can identify with, to achieve their feminist goals to end femicide in South Africa and to reclaim personal feelings of (womxn) empowerment.*

**Keywords:** gender-based violence, femicide, de-politicisation, medicalisation, feminist activism, re-politicisation, empowerment

## **Introduction**

In international development discourses on gender equality, womxn<sup>1</sup> and girls in the Global South have emerged as the perfect subjects of humanitarian images (Koffman, Orgad & Gill, 2015). Southern womxn’s NGOs have been encouraged to adjust their feminist agenda towards these international discourses, using buzzwords such as ‘*women empowerment*’ (Bawa, 2016). A growing body of literature is examining how the current trend of ‘*the turn to the girl*’ in the international developmental discourses has de-politicised radical feminist agendas in the Global South (Koffman, Orgad & Gill, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Al-Karib, 2018). Critics have argued that the NGOisation of feminist civil society space in African countries ignores the actual needs and interest of African womxn in their everyday lives, and reinforces the colonial stereotype of womxn and girls in the Global South as culturally constrained (Ticktin, 2011; Shain, 2013). This article will illustrate how the dependency of South African womxn’s NGOs on international donor organisation creates an environment of competition between NGOs and enables funders to control the agenda of womxn’s NGOs in Cape Town. The current relationship between

international funding organisations and Cape Townian womxn's NGOs, is experienced as *de-politicising* and *disempowering*, which is in stark contrast to what international donor organisations might aim to achieve.

Furthermore, I aim to add to the well-known critique of the de-politicisation of the gendered international development agenda, by illustrating that alongside de-politicising processes, also forces of re-politicisation are at play. The fight against gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa is not picked up by womxn's NGOs alone; South Africa also has a rich culture of feminist activism. In recent years, South African scholars (Gouws, 2016, Gqola, 2015,2017; Beall, Hassim & Todes, 2011) have been advocating for a new autonomous feminist movement in order to achieve transformative feminist action and to disrupt the current status quo around organising against gender-based violence. On the first of August 2018, such a radical feminist movement arose in South Africa: *the Total Shutdown*. This movement inspired mass mobilisation, bringing thousands of womxn to the streets all over the country. I will illustrate how this movement has spawn processes of re-politicisation on multiple levels within the feminist civil society space in South Africa.

This article puts forward the stories and experiences of the brave womxn who are committed to the fight against gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa either through working in NGOs or being an activist, or both. In light of the new radical feminist movement the Total Shutdown (TTS), I will analyse *how narratives and experiences around the fight against gender-based violence in the feminist civil society of Cape Town are constructed, negotiated and recreated when a new autonomous womxn's movement enters that feminist civil society space*. This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Cape Town, over a period of six months, from September 2018 till January 2019. The ethnography is carried out through participant observation at three local womxn's NGOs dealing with gender-based violence survivors and through semi-structured interviews with 10 NGO-benefactors and 7 Thuthuzela Care Centre counsellors. This research also includes participant observations of TTS meetings and workshops and semi-structured interviews with 10 TTS activists.

### **1. Gendered humanitarianism and the de-politicisation of gender-based violence**

Southern NGOs often experience little financial support from national or local institutions and are therefore, in their quest for social change, dependent on the financial support of Northern donor organisations for survival. This financial donor dependency often results in power asymmetries (Pearce, 2014; Elbers & Arts, 2011; Bornstein, 2003; Efuk, 2000). Despite a discourse of partnership, development agendas are dominated by Northern donors and are created with very limited participation of their Southern partners. Donor organisations can use their financial power to decide which interventions are being implemented on the ground. What is considered effective and successful is *“often based on developmental assumptions and fads and fashions of Northern NGOs”* (Pearce 2014: 626). This creates a developmental rhetoric with certain ‘buzzwords’ (such as *‘women empowerment’*), which often have origins and real resonance for activists, but lose their content and meaning in the

bureaucratised implementation of these concept in Southern NGOs' projects. The qualities that Southern NGOs could bring to the table, "*such as local knowledge, grassroots linkages, implementation capacity and cultural understanding*" (Elbers & Arts, 2011) do not stand strong in relation to the financial power and positionality of Northern donors.

Furthermore, Northern donor organisations are driven by concerns to demonstrate the economic value of funding and are therefore focused on demonstrating tangible and quantifiable outcomes (Elbers & Arts, 2011). Throughout the 1990s, this has resulted in an increase of tighter top-down practices of control, accountability measures and 'managerism' towards the Southern NGOs. Southern NGOs are pressured to professionalise their work and adopt logical frameworks, monitoring and evaluation systems and more tightly defined programmatic policies in order to report back to their donors in a systemised matter (Bornstein, 2003). Donor demands have a large impact on the functioning of Southern NGOs. The newly imposed focus on measurement and quantifiable outcomes creates a disconnection from the local context. Many critics (Bornstein, 2003; Elbers and Arts, 2011; Pearce, 2014) argue that the increasing emphasis on buzzwords and demonstrating tangible, measurable results, '*depoliticises*' NGOs and turn them into mere 'implementers' of donor policy: the "*project-based, externally engineered and technically expert-oriented approaches*" to Southern NGOs have little eye for the complexity of development challenges, nullify local knowledge needs and politics and result in minimal positive social transformations for beneficiaries (Elbers & Arts, 2011, p. 715).

Gender-based violence is an example of those Northern '*fads and fashions*': it has become the poster-child of the developmental sector (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). Within the developmental framework, gender-based violence is often targeted with a medical approach (Ticktin, 2011). The medicalisation of gender-based violence de-politicise this violence: the emphasis on sexual violence as a medical health issue, takes away the power relations and deeply rooted violent and patriarchal structures that are at play. Portraying gender-based violence as an '*illness*', or as an '*epidemic*' derives the focus towards the immediate needs for the '*suffering victims*' and does not ask the one who '*recognises the suffering*' to look back: where is the suffering truly coming from? It also does not ask the question of how to look forward: how can we change things, to prevent this type of violence to happen in the future? (Ticktin, 2011: 255). The language of medicalising gender-based violence thus renders it from its deeply rooted political structures, removes it from the gendered layers of gender-based and sexual violence, and transforms it into something 'treatable', something that should be 'set apart' and dealt with, with special care (Ticktin, 2011; 256). The focus on care and rescue serves to reproduce a (violent) social order, and does not challenge it. The survivor of gender-based violence becomes a suffering body, a patient, seen in isolation from other forms of social injustice and gendered unequal power structures.

## 2. 'Ticking boxes' in the fight against gender-based violence in Cape Town

During my ethnographic research at womxn's NGOs in Cape Town, similar findings were brought to light. Because the post-Apartheid government had shown little willpower to combat the high rates of gender-based violence and femicide in the country (Makhunga, 2014; Gouws, 2016; Fester, 2014; Britton, 2006; Gqola, 2017), womxn's NGOs in South Africa, came to play a central role in accommodating gender-based violence survivors. The scarcity of financial support from the South African government jeopardises the goals of NGOs to support gender-based violence survivors and to enable socio-psychological recovery. Consequently, in agreement with Pearce (2014), Elbers & Arts (2011) and Bornstein, (2003) womxn's NGOs in Cape Town are dependent on (Northern) international donors organisations.

The relationship with Northern donor organisations influences that structures of these NGOs. Firstly, the pressure and stress to find funding puts womxn's NGOs in vulnerable positions. International donors do not provide funding for different NGOs equally, and therefore *"force NGOs to fight and compete"* (T, NGO & TTS, November 2018). Although all striving for similar feminist goals, NGOs find themselves in a competitive environment, which give international donors the power to *"push NGOs in certain directions"*. As J sees it, it is a game of *"sink or swim and the large funders will call the shots"* (J, NGO, September 2018). Secondly, to participate in the international donor industry, local NGOs also need to participate in the same professionalised and bureaucratised structures as Northern donors. *"Monitoring and Evaluation Teams"* (M&E) and data-capturing skills are seen as *"major selling points"* and an advantage within the competition over funding (J, NGO, September, 2018). Therefore, most NGOs recently added a M&E department to their organisation and continued to professionalise. Alongside this push for professionalisation, the womxn's NGOs are expected to implement a biomedical agenda in their organisations. This agenda has an emphasis on the intersection between gender-based violence and HIV or Aids. The international funder sees leeway in NGOs dealing with gender-based violence, as they could get every *'organisation to test many communal diseases, and counsel a little on the side'* (J, NGO, September, 2018). Even though counselling and socio-psychological support is considered as the core goal of the NGOs, NGO employees also understand that framing rape and gender-based violence as a health issue, would put them in an easier position to receive funding as they know that *'that is where the money is'* (S, TTS and NGO, October, 2018).

The biomedical agenda comes together with a quantitative approach to supporting gender-based violence survivors. The NGOs are expected to deliver monthly reports on the HIV/Aids information from the survivors coming to the organisations for socio-psychological support. NGO benefactors explained that they felt to be part of *'this game of ticking boxes'*, where traumatic experiences of gender-based violence and rape needed to be translated into database sets with measurable biomedical outcomes. NGO-benefactors question how this quantitative approach is beneficial to the needs of gender-based violence survivors. What happens to the lives behind those numbers? The hyper-focus on

data-capturing and biomedical information puts a spotlight on numbers and success-stories, but puts the actual stories and experiences of gender-based violence survivors in the dark.

In agreement with developmental critiques described above, the NGOs in this case study experience the current funding model as top-down, disempowering and de-politicising. The conversations with NGO-benefactors show the frustrations towards top-down decisions of Northern biomedical donors and the lack of cooperation with the NGOs in Cape Town. Top-down organised donor demands are constantly changing, time-consuming and distorts focus from the core feminist values and ideologies the NGOs initially stood for. The current funding model shows little interest and understanding in the local expertise on gender-based violence support of South African womxn's NGOs. In contrast to what international donor organisations seemly strive for, the relationship between Northern funders and Southern NGOs is ultimately experienced as *disempowering*. Furthermore, in line with Ticktin (2011) the biomedical approach to gender-based violence and in the hyper-focus on HIV and Aids in South African NGOs leads to a *de-politicisation* of the issue of gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa. The push for biomedical information, data-capturing and the reaching of monthly targets, distorts the focus from the core values of local NGOs and from the actual needs and interests of gender-based violence survivors. The health approach towards gender-based violence, alters the vision of womxn's NGOs to support gender-based violence survivors in their emotional recovery or in their access to the criminal justice system. When framing gender-based violence as a health issue, the importance of social justice and socio-psychological support are put aside, which does not provide sustainable solutions to tackle the high rates of gender-based violence in South Africa.

### **3. At the interplay of de-politicisation and re-politicisation**

The social realities of the 'everyday' within and outside NGOs are much messier and complex than developmental critiques on de-politicisation put forward. Aradhana Sharma (2008) argues that processes of de-politicisation and re-politicisation within the humanitarian agenda for womxn's rights can exist simultaneously. We should not see NGOs solely in a binary light of oppressive vs. resistance or de-politicisation vs. re-politicisation. While bureaucratic womxn's projects and humanitarian agendas might cause de-politicisation and reproduce power hierarchies, one must also look at how those working in the NGO move within the space of the NGO, how they make choices and how they deal with top-down oppressive forces on the ground: "*poor 'third world' women have been largely depicted within development literature as victims who have 'needs' and 'problems'*" (Sharma, 2008: p. xxiv), but they are much more than just 'passive receivers' of developmental agenda. We must look at how benefactors strategically make choices to push for their ideologies and feminist standpoints, and how they create possibilities for alternatives forms of social transformations (Sharma, 2008: xix). Hence, NGOs always produce unintended consequences, where new networks occur and identifications or counter-identities and spaces of resistance are created (Townsend, Porter & Mawdsley, 2004). We must search 'between

the lines' of feminist humanitarian projects and look at "*the interplay between de-politicisation and politicisation, surveillance and subversion, and regulation and unruliness*" in the struggle against gender-based violence on the ground (Sharma, 2008).

Furthermore, Miriam Ticktin (2011), argues that the struggle against gender-based violence in the Global South could also open-up (feminist) spaces for confrontation. While humanitarianism may medicalise and depoliticise gender-based violence, the politics of gender brings back the political to the fore (Ticktin, 2011: 257). This can create new spaces for alternative feminist voices and political actions. The environment of the NGO can function as a space where NGO benefactors can get inspired to connect to new networks, identities or activism, inside and outside the NGO. New identities could possibly break with the agenda of the NGO, but they could also influence 'movements of the every-day' within the NGO. These unexpected spaces and new identities can generate links of resistance with the grassroots social movements, that in their turn are able to bring sustained pressure on institutions and states. NGOs can in this way, contribute to the social transformations inspired by the grassroots (Pearce, 2010: 633). In the next paragraphs I will show how NGO benefactors in Cape Town connect with new networks, activism and identities with the rise of the autonomous womxn-only movement.

#### **4. We have nothing to celebrate: a new autonomous feminist movement in South Africa**

In response to the de-politicising approach to Southern feminist agendas, feminist scholars reject the occupation of the feminist agenda by humanitarianism. Instead, South African scholars call for new radical feminist movements to reclaim their feminist agency and to address the extremely high rates of femicide (Gqola, 2015, 2017; Gouws, 2017; Beall, et al., 2011). On the first of August 2018, this became a reality: a new player introduced itself in the fight against gender-based violence in South Africa, *The Total Shutdown* (TTS). TTS activists organised an intersectional feminist womxn-only movement. In all cities in South Africa, womxn, dressed in red and black, gathered to march against the high rates of rape and femicide in the country and to hold the government accountable for their lacking actions to tackle this violence. With "*Our Bodies, Not Your Crime Scene*" as their slogan, TTS activists show that it is time to disrupt the idea that womxn's bodies were to be owned and mistreated by society.

TTS activists choose to march specifically on August first, as it was the start of South Africa's womxn's month. Since 1994, this is the month where the position of womxn in the promised rainbow nation is celebrated. However, in 2018 the feminist activists had a clear message; "*we have nothing to celebrate*". They expressed anger over the hypocrisy that womxn are celebrated for one month a year, while the other 11 months womxn and children are being beaten, sexually assaulted, raped and murdered: "*What happens to the rest of the days? What will I do with my body then and the threat to my life?*" (T, NGO & TTS, November, 2018). Lindiwe Makhunga (2014) describes the ribbon-cutting events during Womxn's Month in August as the "*palliative-care approach*": the ANC performs a kind of 'band aid'-care, which brings awareness, but does not address the root causes of unequal patriarchal

gender relations and rape culture, which leads to empty politics. South Africa has the contradictory situation where womxn are legislatively empowered, and yet we do not feel safe in the streets and at home. TTS activists are done with the un-transformative measures to tackle the structures that allow gender-based violence and femicide to exist in South Africa: “*we cannot be getting flowers at work to celebrate womxn’s day. We need social change!*” (T, TTS, January 2019).

TTS activists aim to disrupt this *‘palliative care approach’* and demand to be heard and recognised in the current South African political framework. They expressed feeling “*angry with the democracy we fought for*”, realising that the transition to democracy only seemed to have liberated a certain group of people, and that it had not guaranteed the liberation and freedom of the marginalised in South Africa: “*24 years of democracy, womxn are still very vulnerable, the LGBTQI are still very vulnerable...*” (N, NGO & TTS, November, 2018). What their grandparents, parents or themselves fought for in the 80’s and 90’s had not liberated every citizen in the country, especially not womxn. The main goal of the movement is, therefore, to hold the government accountable for the 1994 constitution that guarantees the rights to safety for all citizens of South Africa. These rights were put on paper during the transition towards a post-Apartheid democracy, but have not been put into practice in the last 24 years for South African womxn and girls. For each year that the ANC had failed to address womxn’s right to safety, the movement had created a demand. The list of 24<sup>ii</sup> demands was handed over to the president on the first of August.

The rise of an autonomous womxn-only movement led to the re-politicisation of the issue of gender-based violence in South Africa. Whereas de-politicisation stands for the obscuring the political nature of things, re-politicisation means “*revealing and reviving the political character of politics*” (Cuttritta, 2018). In light of the elections of May 2019, The Total Shutdown had been successful in bringing back the fight against gender-based violence and femicide to the political agenda. This firstly had to do with the ending of Jacob Zuma’s presidency at the beginning of 2018. Many activists described that if he would still have been in power, the march or the summit would not have been organised: “*I don’t think that if he was there that we would have had a summit. Because to expect of someone, who has been accused of rape, and I strongly believe that he was guilty, to then have a summit against gender-based violence..., it would have been a joke*” (C, TTS, December, 2018). Another *‘window of opportunity’* (Jasper, 2010) was the new elections coming up in May 2019. As the movement became larger over a fast period of time, political parties came to understand that in order to have a successful political campaign, an action plan for womxn’s rights needed to be included in their agenda. The summit, for example, was according to N, partly organised as a “*a voting manifesto*” (N, NGO & TTS, November, 2018). The new president was present during the summit and listened to the stories of gender-based violence survivors. Cyril Ramaphosa showing interest in the movement resulted in other political figures also redirecting their attention to the issue of gender-based violence. Even though the Total Shutdown remained autonomous and a-political, they did gain the *‘ears and the eyes of top people’* and *‘the undivided attention’* of political parties. As a result, gender-based violence was put on the

political agenda: *“if you hear any political person, they will drop it in there speech. It never used to be like that.... since the first of August, it is the buzzword! It is on the agenda!”*(T, TTS, January 2019). Activists enjoyed seeing political figures ‘all of the sudden’ talking about womxn’s rights and femicide. Although they remained critical and cautious of empty promises, the attention from political parties gave the movement certain levels of power. Womxn are after all, make up more than 50 percent of the voters in South Africa:

*“we have the attention of the government, there is a declaration, the president has pledged publicly...that gives us power. How we use it as womxn is very important. If the president is not delivering, you have the power now with the Total Shutdown to really stir things up. Because womxn voters, population-wise we are in the majority. Imagine! If womxn as a protest do not vote for the president. If you manage to threat...you release all those coffins [demands] before election day!”* (T, TTS, January, 2019).

## 5. Shifting dynamics

The Total Shutdown *‘changed the game’*. The movement made sure to show their agitation towards the political status quo. The autonomous feminist movement forced other players in the fight against gender-based violence to reconsider their strategies and narratives. Long speeches and empty promises were no longer enough; the movement forced to action. The state of affairs considering tackling gender-based violence could not be handled in the same way as in the last 24 years anymore. The Total Shutdown, did not only challenge the South African government to reconsider its standpoint in the fight against gender-based violence, also the womxn’s NGOs in Cape Town had to reconsider their position, role and narratives in the feminist civil society space during the rise of the movement.

Although the demands of the movement are very similar to the ideologies of the NGOs, most respondents spoke of a tensioned relationship. NGOs were fearful of the consequences of the rise of TTS for their own position in the feminist civil society space in Cape Town. Ambivalence towards each other created a *“clash between the new ones and the old ones”* in the field. A reason for ambivalence was fear of tighter competition over resources and funding. With *‘a new player in the field’*, NGOs are afraid of increased competition between NGOs as the TTS’s popularity might attract funding *‘from the North’*. NGO-benefactors, feared that longer established NGOs will lose funding and die out because of the (internationally recognised) popularity of TTS. However, TTS activists criticised the disempowering relationship between Northern donors and NGOs. They advocated for challenging the current funding model to get to *“an equal systemic relationship with the funding agencies”* (O, TTS, January, 2019). TTS activists saw it as a part of their feminist activism to reconsider funding opportunities for womxn’s organisations. Similar to wanting to maintain autonomous and unconnected to political parties, The Total Shutdown also wanted to remain *“unbought by Northern donors”*. The limitations of the conditions of funding agendas was seen as *“part of the problem”* when it comes to the oppression of womxn. The relationship between Northern funding organisations and womxn’s NGOs in



Cape Town showed “*another form of abuse*”: the economic abuse of womxn in South Africa.

Although fear of losing jobs or funding created tensions between the movement and the NGOs, both parties also recognised the benefits of simultaneously existing within the same space. TTS is not aiming “*to disrupt what the NGO’s already did*”, if anything, the movement hopes to create an enabling environment for NGOs to enhance their goals and visions, since NGOs are “*the ones filling the gaps for the things the government isn’t doing*”(O, TTS, January, 2019). NGOs provide knowledge, expertise and services, which the movement needed to refer activists and gender-based survivors to. Similarly, NGO benefactors emphasised that what the rise of the movement did, initially, was to remind NGOs of their feminist ideologies and goals in the fight against gender-based violence. NGO benefactors also recognise the benefits of the rise of the movement for their sector. The movement was doing advocacy work and putting pressure on the government, which helped NGOs pushing an agenda, they had not yet been able to push by themselves:

*“the power is in the voices of people, it is in action and they managed to do certain things that we haven’t done [NGOs], we have been writing to president, we have an NSP, [National Strategic Plan] ...,that has been sitting, government does nothing, no one is listening, promises, promises, promises. One March! One March! And it just changed the game, just like that”* (T, NGO & TTS, November 2018).

Both spaces are thus considered as important in the fight against gender-based violence. Eventually, the relationship between NGOs and activists is a supportive and mutually depending one. Needless to say, both were fighting for the same goal; to eradicate all forms of gender-based violence in South Africa. Moreover, the shifting dynamics spurred by the movement also opened up opportunities for both parties to connect their feminist organising in new ways. The line between NGO benefactors and TTS activists became not fixed, but rather a blurry one. TTS activists who were heavily involved in the movement, also worked at NGOs, and many NGO benefactors, supported TTS. On a more personal level, the rise of the movement provided a space for NGO benefactors to express their feminist ideologies on a different level: the NGO was a space of privacy, healing and support, while the movement functioned as a public space for outrage and demanding womxn’s rights to safety. K, describes this beautifully in the next quote:

*“[this NGO] is almost like a secret world, you come through the red door and what goes on here, it is quite secretive and that is part of how we keep it save. Because sex, even when it is violent or abusive, is such an intensely private thing..., So you have to sort of create that space for that, ... that that can then be healed and dealt with. But it is extremely strong upholding of the confidentiality of that space and the safety of it... And then, you have outrage and judgement towards men, ... if we had to really scratch beneath the service of how angry womxn at [the NGO] are towards men, it would be a volcano. So we contain that .... So Total Shutdown... it enables us to let loose a part of ourselves that we can’t let loose inside our organisation, and to sing and to chant and to shoot and to demand and to express our anger, or to having that expressed for us and to be in their company”* (K, NGO and TTS, December 2018).

Hence, the divide between NGO benefactors and TTS activists is a blurry one. The movement provided a space where NGO benefactors could interact with their feminist ideologies on different levels: whereas NGOs dealing with gender-based violence survivors aimed to create spaces of safety, secrecy and homeliness, TTS became a space for rupture, demands, outrage and reclaiming womxn's rights. Most NGO benefactors saw a leeway in the movement for expressing the frustrations and outrage they had towards patriarchy and oppressive funding models, something there was little room for in the private, healing space of the NGO. Hence, in agreement with Townsend et al. (2004) and Sharma (2008) we must also look at what happens at the interplay of de-politicisation and re-politicisation. Whereas NGO benefactors experience de-politicisation in their relationship with Northern funding organisations, they found ways to connect with re-politicising forces such as TTS movement. The movement became a space where activists as well as NGO benefactor could resist oppressive structures such as the current funding model and the patriarchal politics. NGO benefactors and grassroots activists, therefore agreed that both NGO spaces, as well as activists spaces were needed in the movement, and people move within these spaces simultaneously. In the next paragraph I will show how the movement created free spaces which enable possibilities for expressing, connecting, sharing, supporting and new identities for both TTS activists and NGO benefactors on a personal level.

## **6. From re-politicisation to feelings of empowerment**

The Total Shutdown has not only led to the re-politicisation of the feminist agenda on a political and institutional level, but also on personal levels. I argue that the interplay of de-politicisation and re-politicisation of gender-based violence, provides opportunities to reclaim personal feelings of empowerment.

The Total Shutdown created womxn-only *free spaces*, where womxn can act with dignity, independence and vision and without dominant patriarchal narratives. Free spaces are "*small-scale settings within a movement that are removed from the direct control from dominant groups...and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilisation*" (Polletta & Kretschmer, 2013, p.1). Free spaces supply the activist network, with skills and solidarity. They also provide the conceptual space which enable dominated groups to escape from injustice and to enact the norms and values they would like to live by in their ideal society. They are therefore, crucial to the very formation of the identities and interests that precede mobilisation (Polletta & Kretschmer, 2013; p.2). TTS created these free spaces to isolate and protect activists and gender-based violence survivors from patriarchal values, narratives and attitudes, but also to challenge each other to live with the new values that the movement puts forward. These free spaces came to existence virtually, on a closed womxn-only Facebook page and WhatsApp group, and real-life, during the march and other (informal) TTS meetings. These free spaces were considered as safe spaces for an intersectional womxn-only community, where healing, connecting and support were central.

On a daily basis, womxn would share their personal stories of gender-based violence and femicide on the closed online groups. Womxn could freely express themselves and ask for support, without being further victimised. Every day, story after story appeared in the groups about womxn being beaten up, raped, missing or murdered, often by their family, boyfriend or husband. The multiplicity and the accessibility of these stories made the urgency and the severity of the gender-based violence crisis very tangible. Stories that otherwise would happen in secrecy, behind closed doors, were now given a platform. Social media became a space where TTS activists and gender-based violence survivors found *sense of belonging*. The free space created a sense that womxn are not alone in their experiences and emotions, and that there are many (distant) others in the country that experienced similar forms of abuse: “*I am not alone, because you can safely share your experiences and you realises then, oh there is someone in Limpopo who shares exactly the same experiences...*” (A, NGO & TTS, December, 2018). Hence, distant others with similar experiences, became members, friend and sisters of the same Total Shutdown community.

The online platforms also became spaces where womxn could call for direct action or support. For example, when a court case against a perpetrator would come up, TTS activists were mobilised to show up in their black and red t-shirts, to give emotional support to the survivor and to put pressure for a just verdict. Sometimes, more urgent situations of violence were shared and activists were forced to take immediate action. For example, there were cases where womxn shared their suicide thoughts, or shared that they were held hostage, or that they were threatened to be murdered by their partner. This required direct action by the moderators of the page, to reach out to the person and connect them to therapists or womxn’s NGOs: “*it was just incredible to witness complete strangers, who do not know you..., get out of their PJ’s in the middle of the night... you are hearing all these stories that people are helping and getting the help that they need, and even the smallest, little people, who say, we are here for you*” (L, TTS, December 2018).

The social media free space thus not only functions as a space where womxn could release frustrations and emotions, but also calls upon activists themselves to act in the feminist ways they advocate for: “*It is not just the big goals that we have demanded from government. It is the small, little every day, helping hand, even if it is just one person*” (C, TTS, December, 2018). The TTS Facebook page functioned as a free space where activists embodied the political ends of the movement through their means, namely the accessibility to gender-based violence support-services for all womxn. This is what Yates (2015) calls *prefigurative politics*. As the movement could not count on the government to support gender-based violence survivors, the free spaces of the movement had enabled activists to carry out the support themselves.

Moreover, gatherings of TTS in real-life also functioned as womxn-only free spaces. During TTS meetings, workshops or demonstrations activists could share their personal experiences and give each other support. Although enduring stories of femicide and gender-based violence took an emotional toll on the mental state of the activists, the free space enabled an environment where they could openly

express emotions, frustrations and experiences of trauma. For example, during the march womxn were sharing, crying, screaming, hugging, loving and supporting each other. Activists explained that the protests on the streets were places where they *'got their emotions out'*: *"wherever you went, wherever you looked around, womxn were crying, you could see that they were fed up. People were sharing their stories on the day as well. I was not managing. I was shaking, I was crying.... You let them out!! it was that space that allowed you to be that, because everybody was feeling the same!"* (T, TTS, January, 2019). Sarah Ahmed describes that emotions are crucial in the way bodies relate to other bodies (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions create the very effect of collectives and collective feelings. The free space of the movement enabled womxn dressed in red and black, who formerly only knew each other as (online) distant strangers, to now publicly form a strong collective. TTS activists expressed feeling inspired by the fighting spirit of the movement and the *'energy of connectedness'*, this made them feel courageous, proud, hopeful and empowered.

The word *'empowerment'* re-appeared in conversations with all respondents. Whereas many activists and NGO benefactors were critical of the Northern developmental project for *'women empowerment'* in the Global South, many expressed feeling *'truly'* empowered when connecting with other activists or survivors online, or during the march. The online stories of pain of distant others, moved readers to compassion and direct action. Being part of the same online community, feelings of pain of others are projected as *'our feelings'*. The overcoming of the pain than also moves the reader to feelings of empowerment (Ahmed, 2004). The feeling of writing history, and the fighting spirits of the womxn reclaiming the streets in Cape Town also spawned the reclaiming of the feeling of empowerment by activists on the streets. L, described the feeling of knowing that all over the country womxn were marching for the same goals as empowering. The march convinced O that *"it is going to take womxn to change this country, the courage, the fearlessness of the womxn, their determination. I was really encouraged, by just that power"*(O, TTS, January 2019).

To conclude, the movement spawned transformations in the personal lives of activists and TTS supporters through the creation of womxn-only free spaces on social media and on the streets (Polletta & Kretschmer, 2013). These free spaces, allowed room for emotions, trauma, support and healing, which encouraged a sense of belonging and connectedness. Furthermore, free spaces enabled TTS activists to enact the goals of the movements, through there means (Yates, 2015), for example by providing support services. Through the sharing of emotions and the identification with each other's stories, distant strangers became a feminist collective (Ahmed, 2004). Within this free spaces, the overcoming of one's pain, was experienced as the empowerment of the collective as a whole. Hence, at the interplay of de-politicizing and re-politicizing forces, the free spaces of the movement led to the reclaiming of personal feelings of empowerment.

## Conclusion

This research has shown what happens at the interplay of de-politicising and re-politicising processes of the feminist agenda to combat gender-based violence in Cape Town. I argue that with the emerge of an autonomous feminist movement in South Africa, the de-politicisation and re-politicisation of gender-based violence happens simultaneously. Individuals move between different spaces of resistance to renegotiate their feminist ideological standpoints while the feminist civil society space is changing. This research has also shown that the boundary between NGO benefactors and activists is a blurry one; both groups move between spaces to create the counter-narratives and counter-identifications they can identify with and that they want to support. Hence, the social realities of the 'everyday lives' of feminist civil society space are much messier and complex than many developmental critiques on de-politicisation put forward. While bureaucratic womxn's projects and humanitarian agendas might cause de-politicisation and reproduce power hierarchies, one must also look at the many ways feminists strategically make choices, renegotiate their standpoints and create possibilities for re-politicisation in multiple levels of society to reach their feminist ideologies and transformations.

## Author Biography

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<sup>i</sup> This article will use ‘womxn’ instead of ‘women’ in line with the rhetoric used in the Total Shutdown unless using cited terms or quotes with ‘women’. Womxn is used in intersectional feminism, to avoid the suggestion of sexism perceived in the sequences m-a-n and m-e-n, and to be inclusive of trans and nonbinary women. See: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/womxn>

<sup>ii</sup> The first demand was to organise a Summit on Gender-Based Violence, this was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. President Cyril Ramaphosa was present.