



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 9

Nov-2004

# Has Affirmative Action Reached South African Women?

V. Naidoo

M. Kongolo

---

### Recommended Citation

Naidoo, V. and Kongolo, M. (2004). Has Affirmative Action Reached South African Women?. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(1), 124-136.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol6/iss1/9>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## **Has Affirmative Action Reached South African Women?**

By V. Naidoo<sup>1</sup> and M. Kongolo<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

South Africa has unfortunately inherited a work environment based on an economic system characterised by deprivation, political instability, adversarial labour relations, cheap migrant labour, and massive income and wealth disparities. The world of work is also characterised by an appalling systematic discrimination against Blacks<sup>3</sup>, women, and people with disabilities. Affirmative action has been the only policy instrument used by the Democratic South Africa to redress the past imbalances. In line with the Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998, the beneficiaries of this action are mainly African women (Blacks, Coloured, and Indians including disabled people). This has been justified by the fact that they were subjected to innumerable forms of discrimination and bias in the past. The policies of Affirmative Action are a system of political tools used to level the playing field. They focus on policies and strategies needed to redress past racial imbalances in the workplace, education, gender equality, and the like. This paper examines the strategy of Affirmative Action in South Africa harnessed to redress past wrongs and its effectiveness in so doing.

*Key Words:* Affirmative Action, South Africa, South African women

### **Statement of the Problem**

Affirmative action has been used in South Africa as a policy tool that can facilitate a meaningful transformation of the society. This policy measure has been used effectively to redress the past imbalances of the apartheid regime. The democratic government has insisted that the current competition for jobs is often unfair for Blacks, all women, and people with disabilities, particularly those who were not entitled to the same educational and career advancement opportunities as their white counterparts (Msimang, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to explore whether affirmative action has successfully challenged apartheid's sexist behaviour hindering the advancement of women.

The programme aims to level the playing field through equal access to education and job opportunities, including remuneration, career advancement, associated benefits, removal of intolerance, prejudice and inequality in the workplace (Zilla, 1995). Although South Africa has formulated and implemented affirmative action measures, the discourse surrounding these measures has been similar to that of the United State. The terms and many of the ideas that eventually found their way into South African affirmative action were borrowed from the U.S. experience (Charlton & van Niekerk, 1995). The only, but important, difference is that in the USA and Britain this policy has been associated essentially with minorities, whereas in South Africa the policy is aimed at the majority. High on the list of disadvantaged group that will benefit is South African women, who make up 51.2% of the population (Dubourdieu, 1999). Historically South African women have been in the forefront of the struggle against the apartheid regime. They have vigorously campaigned against pass laws, *Bantu* education, poor working conditions, child labour, and many other inequalities that existed in the past (Bozzoli & Nkotsoe,

1991). Their actions have also contributed to the creation of New South Africa, and women are proud to have been one of the driving forces of the transformation into a new democratic state. However, the struggle for emancipation of women is far from over (Sadie and van Aardt, 1995).

Many aspects of discriminatory policies against women in corporate South Africa still exist. Gender equality, an important aspect of affirmative action has slipped from a high priority to a low priority, while women advancement lags behind (Sadie, 1995). It became clear that the government's intention was to establish a proactive programme aimed at eradicating racism, gender inequality and other forms of discrimination of the past, and at the same time encourages the participation of African women in all sectors of the economy.

### **Research Questions**

This paper attempts to answer the following specific questions: (1) To what extent has affirmative action been able to transform the lives of Blacks? (2) How committed are those implementing affirmative action to respond to this challenge specifically with regard to women? (3) Why have South African women been singled out for this special treatment? An attempt to answer these questions can only be provided by examining how affirmative action has been initiated, formulated and implemented. The only path leading to its improvement and its effectiveness to respond to the needs of the majority of underprivileged people remains with the government, which can foster innovative ideas backed by appropriate intervention actions.

### **Research Methods**

---

This paper is based on affirmative action literature review from different sources. It is a description of this measure, which has become a law in South Africa and how it has impacted on the lives of the majority of people. The approach followed depicts affirmative action first from the USA point of view, where it was born and originated in the mid-1960s, and secondly in South Africa, where it has been translated to conform to the local conditions. The discussions on South African focus more on gender inequity, specifically its impact on Black women. Data used in this paper are secondary data obtained from various sources such as newspapers, magazines, and statistical reports.

### **Review of Key Affirmative Action Concepts**

Affirmative action was born in the United States of America in the mid- 1960s. The administration of the then President Johnson considered it as a policy that would redress racial imbalances that existed in the country, in spite of constitutional guarantee and laws banning discrimination. Under pressure from Civil Rights Groups, an Executive Order was issued to introduce affirmative action, which focused specifically on education and employment. The emphasis was to have active measures to ensure that Blacks and other minorities enjoyed the same opportunities for education and employment. Affirmative action was articulated from the outset as a temporary measure that was to be used mainly to level the playing field for Americans (Msimang, 2001).

At a time when affirmative action is increasingly criticised in the United States, where the policy has been in widespread use since the 1960s, it is interesting to note a diametrically opposed trend in South Africa, where the government has recently started putting this policy into practice (Dubourdieu, 1999). According to CNN (1998), South Africa's version of affirmative action, a plan as controversial here as it is in the United States, could soon become law in this Black majority country. The employment equity measure moving its way through parliament would give preferences to people on the basis of race and ultimately require racial quotas. Black, Indian and Coloured South Africans claimed tens of thousands of elite positions during the country's first five years of affirmative action, but White males did even better (Philip and van Rooyen, 2001).

The South African Parliament has passed a controversial employment bill, which the government says will redress inequalities in the workplace created by the previous apartheid regime (Cloete & Mokovo, 1995). The Employment Equity bill will compel companies employing more than fifty people to act to make their workforces more representative of the South African population, and to encourage the employment of black people, women and the disabled (Department of Labour, 1996). They will also be required to narrow the wage gap between management and workers, otherwise, heavy fines will be levied for the non-compliance says the government (BBC News, 1998).

A myth about affirmative action is that it is a reverse discrimination that gives preferential treatment to people of colour and women. It benefits only a selected few people, and is a primarily Black vs. White issue. A fact about affirmative action is that Racism is power plus discrimination. The parameters of discriminations based on race are distinguished by the power dynamics. Reverse racism is not, therefore, a reality is, if people of colour are in position of power they will be perpetrating discrimination. If we as a society value equality and fairness, which is what affirmative action seeks to ensure, then we all benefit. Despite some of the gains made by affirmative action, "discrimination still persists". We as a society have, as a result, not been able to fully benefit from affirmative action" (IUPUI, 2000).

Affirmative action is a broad policy that includes many under-represented and disadvantaged groups. It is not just based on race and ethnicity. It includes people with disabilities, women, poor people, low-income people, and it includes so many different groups of students who are traditionally shut out of higher education. The attacks though, have been exclusively on race and gender. No one has sued over geographic, alumni, or athletic affirmative action in admissions. I think getting white women to sue the University of Georgia over race-based affirmative action is strategic, to make it look like affirmative action for gender is no longer necessary (Geyer, 2000).

Discrimination and affirmative action measures are highly charged and emotional issues in South Africa's jobs market. The Constitution, the Employment Equity Act and the Promotion of Equality and Prohibition of Unfair Discrimination Act all contain anti-discrimination measures designed to create equality. Affirmative action measures do contain an element of reverse discrimination to ensure representation and further the aim of equality. However, left unchecked, these measures would undermine the concept of equality (Elmo Wilken, 2003).

Although all these different perceptions and interpretation of South Africa's affirmative action measures, a guide speech made by a leading South African Authority in 1991 prior to the implementation of such measures clearly explains why the country

had to follow such route. “We are not...asking for handouts for anyone, nor are we saying that just as a white skin was a passport to privileged past, so a black skin should be the basis for privilege in future. Nor...is it our aim to do away with qualifications.... The special measures that we envisage to overcome the legacy of past discrimination are not intended to ensure the advancement of unqualified persons, but to see to it that those who have been denied access to qualifications in the past can become qualified now, and those who have been qualified all along but overlooked because of past discrimination, are at last given their due.... The first point to be made is that affirmative action must be rooted in principle of justice and equality” (Elmo Wilken, 2003).

Our position on this issue is clear. Given that the majority of South Africans were oppressed, ill treated, denied their fundamental rights through racism and other kind of discrimination of past regimes, our position has been to support and nourish this measure. In fact, no democratically elected government can survive and flourish if the majority of its people remain in poverty, without land, unable to meet their basic needs, and without tangible prospects for a better life. From the authors’ viewpoint, the question about South African affirmative action simply would be *how* to find the best way of achieving this goal, not whether the goal itself is worthwhile.

### **The Contours of South African Affirmative Action**

The government noticed the transformation of the Public service as a priority. In this regard, the Department of Public Service and Administration published a White Paper on the Transformation of Public Service (1995), which reiterated the importance of representativeness, declaring it to be “one of the main foundations of a non-racist, non-sexist and democratic society” and that it was also “a necessary precondition for legitimising the public service”. The White Paper recommended that within four years all departmental establishments must endeavour to be at least 50% black at management level. It declared also that during the same period at least 30% of new recruits to the middle and senior management echelons should be women. In the same White Paper, affirmative action itself was described as laws, programmes or activities designed to redress past imbalances and to ameliorate the conditions of individuals and groups who have been disadvantaged on the grounds of race, colour, gender or disability. It also defined those groups who were to be the main beneficiaries of affirmative action, that is to say “black people, women and people with disabilities” (Dubourdiue, 1999).

Another White Paper in 1995 called for a change in the rather narrowly defined, culturally determined and exclusive view of qualifications, experience and achievement, rather than on a broader and more inclusive view of relevant competencies. As a result, it recommended a shift in recruitment policies, with the stress being put on potential, rather than on formal qualifications which many black candidates simply do not have and if the government were to continue to demand the same formal qualifications as in the past, this would simply have the effect of perpetuating discrimination. The same White Paper made a call to accelerate and intensify training of those affirmative action candidates that have the potential, but not the necessary qualifications or experience to be appointed, as well as advertising campaigns to promote the Public Service as a career amongst these under-represented groups (Dubourdiue, 1999).

## **Women and Old South Africa**

Prior to 1994, women were unprotected by law as the country legal codes categorised human beings as African, Coloured, Indian or White. All non white lived in a country that persecuted them for their colour of skin, denied them job and educational opportunities on the basis of their race, by ensuring that their access to housing, health services, transport and economic opportunities were limited. In addition to the infamous laws that governed the lives of Blacks, apartheid regime acted specifically to curb their participation in various aspects of life. Apartheid had profound effects on their “private” lives, that was possible both in home and in the “public” was limited for Black women by the conservatism of a patriarchy that was encouraged by the violence and rigidity of the system (Msimang, 2001). It would be a mistake to refer to South African women as if they represent one homogeneous group. There are tremendous differences within this one category, not only the obvious differences of colour or ethnic group, but also major differences, which stem from class and geographical location. There is a big rural/urban divide between women in South Africa. Women outnumber men predominantly in rural areas with poor economic prospects, and Black women are the most impoverished group in the society (Dubourdieu, 1999).

White women were excluded from most types of formal employment except clerical and secretarial work. While this exclusion was not legislated, many white women were denied access to employment by conservative ideas about women’s place in the society. For this reason, white women’s employment patterns mirrored their role in the family. In relation to white men, white women are still economically and politically disadvantaged (Adams, 1993). Compared to white women, black women occupied positions as cleaners and tea-ladies in office buildings. However, in rural areas unemployment was high, and most black women relied on the pay-cheques of their migrant-labourer husbands who worked in the mines, to sustain themselves and their families. While others were farm labourers, who worked alongside their husbands, but were paid less just because they were Blacks. Coloured women in particular worked in factories in the food and clothing industry. Women’s aspirations and opportunities were also limited by the policies of banks that would not let married women take out loans or open accounts without the permission of their husbands (Msimang, 2001).

Many gender activists in South Africa have pointed out that while all women suffered under apartheid system, they suffered in different ways depending on their race, class, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity (Fischer, 1995). Although apartheid was primarily a racial ideology; it intersected with conservative class and gender ideologies in ways that made life much difficult for black women than white women. Because race was so inter-twined with poverty, black women participated in the workforce in significantly higher numbers than white women (Vanzant, 1995). Their most common employment was in the domestic sphere. Black female domestic workers subsidised the life-styles of white women under extremely exploitative conditions. Clearly, patriarchy limited the opportunities for all South African women, but apartheid and poverty worsened mostly the conditions of black women (Madi, 1993), while elevating the status of white women. White women were not subjected to humiliation of all kinds, denied access to education and housing in the same ways that black women were (Msimang, 2001).

## **Women and Unemployment**

The 1993 statistics reveal that women were more unemployed than men in all population groups, and that Black women were by far the hardest hit, with an unemployment rate of 43,9% as against 31,6% for African men; 26,4% for Coloured women as against 21% for Coloured men; 23% for Indian women as against 12,5% for Indian men; and 12,9% for White women as against 5,3% for White men. In this case many women are not taken into account for these figures, since they are involved in unpaid workforce, especially in subsistence farming, home-making and child-rearing activities (Dubourdiou, 1999). Economists have shown that only 39,4% of the paid workforce are women, who tend to be concentrated in the lowest paid sectors. 68,4% of all service workers are women, of whom 73,3% are domestic workers with an average wage per month of R160 in urban areas and R 80 in rural in 1991. Although over-represented in the domestic sector, since 1995 black women are still under-represented in other areas where there is only 3,1% of Judges, 9, 6% of magistrates, 1,9% of the Directors of Johannesburg Stock Exchange's 657 companies are women. A further study in 1995 revealed that only 3,14% of all executives in the companies polled were women. Another study of the Public Service in 1995 has shown that 85% of senior managers were White men, 10% were African men, 2% were White women, African and Indian women accounted for 0,6%, while Coloured women were not represented at all (SAIRR, 1996).

Although they have undoubtedly suffered from gender discrimination, it should be noted that white women had access to better paid, higher status jobs and other advantages, whereas Indian, Coloured and Black women tended to concentrate more in the lower paid, menial jobs. For instance, 77,6% of all the women in managerial, executive and administrative positions are white, and only 5% of them work in the service sector (Dubourdiou, 1999). The study by SAIRR (1995) also indicated much lower levels of education and higher rates of illiteracy among women's groups: 14% of white women had certificates in Higher Education as opposed to 4% of Indian, 2% of Coloured, and 1% of Black women. Generally, it is the African women, and especially those living in rural areas who have the least education and are the most likely to be illiterate.

In spite of the theoretical sides taken by different political parties, the reality is that employment patterns in South Africa are raced and gendered in ways that demonstrate white men's privilege. In support of this reality Msimang (2001) states that a survey of 455 South African firms conducted in 1998 indicated that 89% of White males occupied senior management, with 6% of Black males senior managers, and the remaining 5% of senior managers were either Coloured or Indian. While the composition of the population of South Africa stood at 77% Africans, with women comprising 52 %, 11% of White, 9% of Coloured, and 3% of Indians/Asians. This alone reveals the necessity for remedial measures in favour of black women.

## **Affirmative Action's Ambitions for Black Women**

South Africa's ambitions for affirmative action with regard to black women obviously extended well beyond the confines of Public Service. The government has been encouraging and putting pressure on the private sector to adopt affirmative action programmes, which include education and training schemes as well as appointments in

the same way as those defined for the Public Service. It is also important to mention that the USA federal government and some British local authorities have used lucrative government contracts as a level to persuade firms to set up affirmative action programmes (Durburdieu, 1999). In terms of such ambition, however, the Employment and Occupational Equity Act which should come into effect was expected to put into motion obligations for employers to establish statistics and report on employment and training in terms of race and gender, in order to monitor the success of affirmative action measures in transforming employment sector.

### **The New Legislation for South Africa**

Following the history of the country, the new South African government decided to prioritise social spending in its first term into health, welfare, education and housing. In addition its attention was focused on changing the laws of the country to reflect the new constitution (White Paper on Affirmative Action, 1998). Many old laws were changed and rewritten in line with the new constitution and international human rights agreements. Proactive laws that encouraged the hiring of blacks, disabled and women, as well as guarantee their attendance at institutions of higher learning were provided (Da Avila-Coelho, 1994).

The framework within which employers and employees would operate under the new constitution was put in action by the Department of Labour. The main reason for the drafting legislation was to ensure that all South Africans would be able to compete for positions on an equal basis. As a result, the Department of Labour drafted numerous pieces of legislation. The Labour Relation Act of 1995 (LRA) and The Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 (BCEA) have been instrumental in setting out the parameters under which workers were to be employed and organised (Department of Labour, 1996). The existence of sexism was confirmed by the necessity of including a special reference to gender equality in the country's Constitutional Act of 1993 (Sec. 8, Act 200 of 1993) which states that: "...no person shall be unfairly discriminated against on one or more grounds...race, gender, sex..." Despite this many women are still underrepresented at many levels within the workplace (Moerdyk & Fone, 1987). This statement has been reinforced by Fitz Gerald, (1993) who states that despite legal tools that are in place to facilitate the upward mobility of black women in the workplace, the management cadres of the South African government services for example, are still quantitatively inclined towards men.

However, the introduction to the White Paper on the Reconstruction and Development Programmes (1995) reads as follows: " Our history has been a bitter one dominated by colonialism, racism, apartheid, sexism and repressive labour practices. Women are still subjected to innumerable forms of discrimination and bias. The intention of the government was to end any form of discrimination and bias of the past regime. For up until 1990s not only were there widespread legal limitations on black women, but also a notable lack of legislation to protect them, whether it was in the home or in the workplace, black women were legally discriminated against under different circumstances (White Paper on Reconstruction and Development, 1994). During the transitional period (1993-94), a marked attempt was made by both women coalition and the government to abolish all forms of discriminations against women and to promote equality, with the passing of the Abolition of Discrimination against Women Act, the



Promotion of Equal Opportunities and the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act (Cloete, 1996). The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the new Constitution, when it declares that South Africa is founded on “non-racialism and non-sexism”, and that the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom from discrimination on the grounds of sex and gender (Dubourdieu, 1999).

The New Constitution has created a Commission for Gender equality, whose role is to promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality (Qunta, 1995). Here the action by the government was to put an end to discrimination on the basis of gender, but then the question arises on the same issue: will equality before the law automatically put South Africa’s women on a par with men and rectify the disadvantage and discrimination they have suffered in the past? (Khelha, 1995) The government made it clear from the start that they did not intend to stop there, but had every intention of establishing a proactive programme, which serves to eradicate racism, gender inequality and other forms of inequality to put women on a par with fellow men.

The Bill of Rights of the new Constitution reads the following under the heading Equality: “Equality includes full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken. The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. Discrimination on one or more of the grounds listed above is unfair unless it is established that the discrimination is fair” (Dubourdieu, 1997).

### **The Employment Equity Act (EEA)**

The key affirmative action legislation in South Africa is the Employment Equity Act (EEA). Although it was passed in 1998, the act only came into effect at the end of 1999. The purpose of the Act has been to achieve equity in the workplace by:

- (i) Promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and
- (ii) Implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment, to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in workforce.

One of the main objectives of the EEA (1998) was to break the glass ceiling that has prevented black women from further accessing jobs that were once only meant for their male counterparts. The Act, which deals extensively on issues of affirmative action, aims at emancipating South African women. It regards gender discrimination and inequality within the workplace as an evil. It has been put in place to help black women in their empowerment and upliftment (Ratale, 1994). Many companies in South Africa are now forced by law to employ, develop and maintain women employees. Some companies also offer female employees or prospective female employees preferential treatment over male candidates when the two have similar qualifications (Cloete and Mokovo, 1995).

The Act promotes fair treatment by prohibiting and eliminating unfair treatment and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, marital status, HIV status, disability,

ethnic or social origin, age, religion, colour, sexual orientation, pregnancy, belief, family responsibility, conscience, political opinion, birth, language, and culture (Qunta, 1995). “Gender stereotyping has resulted in the majority of black women being employed in areas such as education and health in which they perform relatively lower level work, with very few in decision-making positions”. As a result, the occupational structure of the Public Service has become skewed on the basis of gender and a significant gap in wages between men and women has developed. “Even where women are well qualified and experienced, the predominance of males at management level has resulted in a culture in which male behaviour patterns are perceived to be norm, and in which women often find it difficult to be accepted as equals by their male colleagues” (White Paper on Affirmative Action, 1998).

The Act elaborates measures to be taken by employers to ensure that people from disadvantaged groups are adequately represented in the workforce and have equal opportunities to compete for and advance in jobs (EEA, 1998). Although being criticised by other population group (especially white) of being a reverse discrimination, the Act stipulates that employers aren't required to take steps that may constitute “an absolute barrier” to people from non-designated groups (blacks). This implies that other white people aren't totally excluded from being promoted. Any criticism made about the Act in this paper reflects the point of view of those who dislike affirmative action. In the same way, the EEA has requested the private sector to adopt transformation at the workplace and to present their equity plans to the Department of Labour. Given that most of them dislike transformation, many equity plans presented did not have enough emphasis in transforming companies in ways that recognise work/family life splits. Hence, companies were required to give maternity leave of at least four months and were also requested to implement policies on sexual harassment, promotion of African women, and the like (Msimang, 2001).

### **Does Affirmative Action Remedy Discrimination?**

Affirmative action has been an effective vehicle used to facilitate meaningful transformation within South African society from one of discrimination and dictatorship to democracy, freedom and progressive action. It has been used as a tool to redress past inequalities perpetuated by the apartheid era. The government sees the transformation of the Public Service as crucial. A White Paper on the Transformation of the Public Service by the Department of Public Service and Administration (1995) reiterated the importance of representation, declaring it to be one of the main foundations of a non-racist, non-sexist and democratic society. That is why it was a necessary precondition for legitimising the public service.

Affirmative action has been endorsed by the majority of African women because it offers them an opportunity of diminishing sex inequalities in the workplace. A complete understanding of the variation in women's attitudes towards affirmative action seems to lie at the juncture of relative deprivation theory, social identity theory, and procedural justice theory. More specifically, it was proposed that a woman would endorse affirmative action if she feels discontented with the position of women and also feels that affirmative action offers a fair remedy to discrimination. This line of thought clearly indicates the attitudes of many working women (Madi, 1993).

The most popular occupations in the Provincial Administration have the majority of employees of whom almost 84% of them are black women. These occupations are positioned at generally low levels within the hierarchy of occupations and are also the more lower paid of occupations. Within national departments and amongst the top six occupations, the largest number of black women are employed in low levels clerical work and cleaners. Affirmative action should help to eradicate the disadvantages caused by these discriminatory practices and enable black people, women and people with disabilities to benefit on a fair basis from the opportunities that an equitable Public Service offers them (White Paper on Affirmative Action, 1998).

### **Impact of Affirmative Action on Women**

A major contribution of affirmative action is that it has identified black women as people who deserved equal treatment in terms of opportunities that are opened to all. It has also provided them with the right and privilege to compete on equal basis in all spheres of social, economic, and political activities than before (Msimang, 2001). Other contributions are that, given the highest rate of illiteracy black among women, this policy has assisted to empower, develop, educate, and train them accordingly. It has also made a tremendous contribution to the lives of rural women, in the sense that many poor women are now the main earners of income to support their households. Also they have been given the responsibility to run programmes on HIV/AIDS and women abuse in various areas (Sadie & Aardt, 1995).

While the backlash against the EEA has been relatively subdued, the entry of relatively large numbers of black women in parliament in 1994 due to the one-third-women quota system of ANC was greeted with severe disapproval from some quarters, especially from the 'white' political parties' point of views. They consider black women to be inferior, inefficient and unable to perform important tasks. They still believe that black women cannot be given the same opportunities as men. This consideration given to black women has lifted South Africa to be ranked second after Seychelles in the number of women in parliament in Africa, and seventh in the world, although opposed by white political parties (Msimang, 2001).

Black, Indian and Coloured South Africans claimed tens of thousands of elite positions during the country's first five years of affirmative action, but White males did even better. Black women made huge inroads in the highest and lowest skills sectors, white men gained greater dominance in the profession, and qualified people of all races had access to a much bigger pool of plum jobs in a growing, diversifying economy. Black women made the fastest moves, increasing their number at executive level by 60% and seizing 20 000 new machine operator and assembly line jobs, where women of other races lost sharply. White women increased their share of the management pie, but by less than one percentage point. Dr Trevor Woodburn, a Johannesburg headhunter, said that young black men and women were being promoted at a remarkable rate (Philip and Van Rooyen, 2001).

Although it is still early to a clear overview of affirmative action results, statistics from different sources indicate good progress. For examples to give an idea of the move towards equity, of the filled posts in all government departments in 1998, over half are held by blacks, women being in the overall majority. Steadily, more black women are being appointed in management positions (Dubourdieu, 1999). An under-evaluation of

women's work has existed for so long as it was difficult to explain the origins and the problems facing them. This has continued to occur because it was part of the ideology in the country and also because it was in men's best interest. Women's work is a key factor that contributes to economic growth and development, however, the gap in wages has made it less valuable than men's work (Adams, 1993).

### **Problems with Affirmative Action**

Determined to pushing the transition into white-owned ranks and make up for the wrongs of the apartheid era, the new government backed a plan in which Black South Africans would need to constitute 69% of the workforce at all levels from the top down. It's a truth that the government is determined to change, because "the shop floor is black and the boardrooms are white, and this is the reality of South Africa", as expressed in parliament by some ANC members (CNN, 1998). The most crucial problem with affirmative action in South Africa is that it is seen as a reverse discrimination. It gives preferential treatment to people of colour and women, and brings high hopes among all Africans by filling white-collar jobs (Qunta, 1995). This has been why some South Africans (especially whites) are reluctant to share and support the same big dream.

The Women's National Coalition (WNC, 1999) argued that if equality is to be effective, then difference has to be taken into account, obviously "similar treatment of women and men will not result in true equality". The promotion of true equality will sometimes require distinction to be made. Following Sadie and Aardt (1995), becoming "honorary men" would prove to be unacceptable to the members of the Coalition, and from the outset it was stressed that although the abolition of discrimination was necessary, this would not be sufficient. The International Labour Organization explored the myth that gender equality is changing, pointing out that at the present rate it will take until the 25<sup>th</sup> century before men and women reach an equal status in the workplace, despite women being more qualified than their male colleagues in developing countries (Charlton and van Niekerk, 1994).

All sorts of arguments against affirmative action for women have been expressed in parliament by opposition parties, who argued that it is an unfair policy: For instance, The Democratic Party (main opposition party) blamed this policy for many of ills it considers to be afflicting South African society. Speaking in parliament the party said "It is believed that women have been the chief beneficiaries of this policy, however, whether or not they will benefit from it in the long term in a country which is steering for disaster is a question which you will have to work out for yourself". "By nature unfortunately, we believe, women will never fully be given the same opportunities as men in all aspects of society, but then, as you are well aware, they have so many wonderful qualities that make them unique (Msimang, 2001). Freedom Front said, "we are against the replacement of a white person by a black person, just because black person is regarded to be under privileged". Affirmative action must be based on merit, this also applies to the appointment of women". "Apartheid in the form of affirmative action is alive in the new South Africa" and it is severely retarding the economy" (Dubourdieu, 1999).

### **The Way Forward**

The government is well aware of the problems related to this policy and the possible conflict between affirmative action and other constitutionally or legally

guaranteed rights such as equality and non-discrimination. Care should be taken in explaining the purpose of these programmes for better understanding. They should be considered as being part of a holistic approach leading to empower people who have been marginalised by enabling them to succeed. An increased awareness of these problems is necessary and it should be contained into a training strategies specifically designed to promote a positive image of affirmative action and to discourage all contrary views on this policy. Importantly, all affirmative action programmes should be planned in a clear, feasible, sensitive yet unapologetic way (Dubourdieu, 1999).

From the viewpoint of this study, it is essential that the impact of such policies be determined through monitoring and evaluation, and statistics on transformation be collected for comparison purposes. It is evident that the policies on transformation have been implemented in most government departments and other large high profile corporations in the private sector (Cloete, 1996). However, the picture is still much less clear in small and medium-sized companies, which are not exposed to public scrutiny, and where it is difficult to ascertain what is going on. However, if one aspect of the policy is aimed at black women's conditions as indicated in this paper, this obviously begs the following question: what about the girls, rural and old women in all this? Will this be sufficient? Will there be something else to be done? As it has been envisaged in South Africa, will this policy not simply assist those who are already at least better off? Will it have an impact on the majority of South African black women as expected? In line with these questions, Khehla (1996) puts all of them into the American context saying: "Professor William Julius Wilson argued that affirmative action there in South Africa had only really benefited the black middle class; it had done nothing for what he called the "underclass", "the truly disadvantaged group in South Africa".

### **Bibliography**

- Adams, C. 1993. Affirmative action in democratic South Africa. Kenwyn: Juta Co. Ltd.
- BBC. News. 1998. South Africa passes affirmative action law. BBC Online Network.
- Bozzoli, B & Nkotsoe. M. 1991. Women of Phokeng. Johannesburg: Raven.
- Charlton, G. D & van Niekerk. N. 1994. Affirmative action- beyond 1994. Kenwyn : Juta & Co. Ltd.
- CNN.1998. South Africa tries affirmative action: Racial quota plan to become law; October 8.
- Cloete, F. & Mokovo, J. 1995. Policies for Public Service Transformation. Kenwyn: Juta & Co. Ltd.
- Cloete, JJN. 1996. Accountable government and administration for the Republic of South Africa. Pretoria, Schaik Publishers.
- Da Avila-Coelho, M. 1994. Equity with people with disabilities. People Dynamics, vol. 1, No 2.
- Department of Labour. 1996. Employment and occupational equity. Government Gazette, vol. 373, No 17303, July 1.
- Dubourdieu, E. 1997. Positive discrimination-A right? Cultures of the common-wealth. Cultures, Rights/Rites and Voices, No 2, 35-47.

- Dubourdieu, E. 1999. Accentuate the positive? Affirmative action for South African women. *Observatoire de recherches sur les anciennes colonies et leur liens avec l'Europe. Revue Alize*, No 14.
- Elmo Wilken, ST. 2003. Affirmative action seen through a court's eyes. Workplace Performance Technologies (Pty) Ltd, Melville, Gauteng, South Africa.
- Fischer, S. 1995. Placing women on the affirmative action agenda. *People Dynamics*, vol, 13, No 5.
- Geyer, G.E. 2000. There is no place where affirmative action is not necessary or could be improved: Interview with U.S. students association. *Motion Magazine*, October 11.
- IUPUI. 2000. Myths and facts about affirmative action. *The Trustees of Indiana University, Indiana*.
- Khelha, S. 1995. The wrong cure: Affirmative action and South Africa's search for racial equality. *Development Policy Series*, 23p.
- Madi, M.P. 1993. Affirmative action in corporate South Africa, *Surviving Jungle*. Kenwyn: Juta & Co, Ltd.
- Moerdyk, A. & Fone, J. 1987. Resistance to change, its origins and management. *The Journal of Public Management*, vol. 6, No 8.
- Msimang, S. 2001. Affirmative action in South Africa: The policies of representation, law and equity. *Women in Action*, No 2.
- Philip, R. & van Rooyen, K. 2000. White men still in top jobs, black women make inroads. *Sunday Times Online* (Unspecified).
- Qunta, C. 1995. Who's afraid of affirmative action? Cape Town, *Kwela Books*.
- Ratale, K.M. 1994. Focus on change. *Sowetan*, August 24.
- Sadie, Y. 1995. Affirmative action in South Africa: A gender development approach. *African Insight*, 25(3): 180-185.
- Sadie, Y. & van Aardt, M. 1995. Women's issues in South Africa: 1990-1994. *Africa Insight*, 25(2): 80-90.
- South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). 1996. Race relations survey: 1994/95. *Braamfontein*.
- Vanzant, I. 1995. A black women's healing process. *New York: River Press*.
- White Paper on Affirmative Action. 1998. *Government Gazette*, vol 394, No 18 800, April 23.
- White Paper on Transformation of Public Service and Administration. 1995. *Government Gazette*, No 16 838, November 24.
- White Paper on Reconstruction and Development. 1995. *Government Gazette*, No 16 085, November 23.
- Women National Coalition (WNC). 1999. Women marching towards the African century. *Programme of Action*, 2000/2001.
- Zilla, E. 1995. White women come third in equality's race. *Sunday Times*, Business Times, October 29, p. 15.

---

<sup>1</sup> School of Business Management, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Westville Campus, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> School of Economics, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Westville Campus, South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Black" describes people of colour, Africans, Coloured and Indians.