Chapter 8: Critical Sensemaking: Negotiations, Contradictions and Compromises of a Feminist Activist Scholar

Asanda-Jonas Benya

Introduction

This chapter focuses on my experiences as a feminist activist scholar in Marikana over the last twelve years. While I focus on my work with a women's organisation in Marikana, *Sikhala Sonke*, I also briefly describe how that work connects with what I teach at the university. My reflections here attempt to grapple with some of my experiences and challenges in my academic and activist work and how being a feminist activist scholar is generally viewed within the academy. These messy reflections demonstrate my negotiations, tensions, contradictions and compromises. I enter this conversation on feminist activist scholars and scholarship as a feminist with a socialist orientation whose work is at the intersection of labour, gender and race. Conceptually, I draw from black feminist thought and social movement studies hoping to add to this growing body of work on scholar-activism (Benya and Yeni 2022; Bezuidenhout et al. 2022a; Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Choudry and Vally 2017; Dawson and Sinwell 2012; Fakier and Cock 2018; Hlatshwayo 2018; Motala 2017; Vally and Motala 2022; Vally et al.).[1]

1 I see the history of Fatima Meer's Institute of Black Research, SWOP, and the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as Bernard Magubane, Mamphela Ramphele, Fatima Meer, Neville Alexander, and Archie Mafeje's work, as falling within this tradition.

Rootedness or the oscillation of activist scholars

Activist scholars are often seen as equally "rooted" within the academy and communities or movements where they work. This "double-rooted" identity does not always hold.[2] Some are more rooted in the academy than communities and vice versa, however, others "oscillate" and are intermediaries in both spaces. I use the label "activist scholar" to mark not my rootedness, but my oscillation, which should not be equated to voyeurism—as I hope to make clear in this chapter.

I oscillate between both spaces and cannot, with great confidence, claim roots or rootedness in either of the two spaces. I move between these spaces often with unease, with an awareness of their connections and distinctness from each other. One space is the University of Cape Town (UCT), where I have been teaching since 2015, and the other is Marikana, where I have been involved with a women's organisation as an activist since 2012.

These two spaces are connected, though not equally; they are geographically separate, but socially entangled with financial circuits of capital linking both spaces, resulting in uneven yet combined development. Monies flow between mines in Marikana and UCT. For example, in 2015, the UCT Retirement Fund held shares worth R9 582 722.00 in Lonmin, the mine at the centre of the Marikana massacre (Lucas 2015). Before 2012, Lonmin also donated money towards the building costs of the university's New Engineering Building located on the Upper Campus (Omar 2015). Some UCT students are children of miners or come from the same labour-sending areas as miners. What happens in Marikana features on the pages of books that occupy UCT libraries. The distinctions between the two spaces are primarily economic, UCT has many resources, while Marikana scrambles for resources taken out of it for historical, contemporary, social and political reasons. The connections and disconnections are salient, but so are inequities. I move between these spaces as a feminist who is an activist scholar.

From an activist scholar to a feminist activist scholar

I came into activism from a labour background. Workers' experiences were at the forefront of my earlier academic and activist work. Later, I realised that workers have different experiences. Gender plays a significant role in how people make sense of their work, and their day-to-day experiences are mediated

2 The idea of "double-rootedness" borrows from Leslie Bank's work on migrant identities in the Eastern Cape. In a book recently published on critical engagement with public sociology, edited by Bezuidenhout et al. (2022) and in Webster in the same book, they use the concept of a "balancing act" between an immersive scholarly engagement and a detached engagement.

by gender, sexuality and race, amongst other things. To appreciate this gender lens, feminism became a vehicle through which to make sense of workers and in particular, women—especially in underground mining, the bastion of masculinity. Through an analysis of the workplace that takes gender seriously, my orientation and identity shifted, and I began to see myself as not only an activist scholar, but also a feminist activist scholar. While activist scholars are concerned with social/political and economic, feminist activist scholars are cognisant of the fact that injustices are gendered and disproportionately affect women, sexual and other minorities. In our struggle for liberation, justice and equity, gender analysis and a feminist orientation have become crucial and are driving forces. While there is a distinction between activist scholars and feminist activist scholars, it is also important to note that some activists, while deeply committed to feminist ideas and praxis, do not emphasise or use "feminist", they instead use activist scholar as a shorthand for the feminist activist scholars. In this paper, I use both to mark the distinction above and foreground the orientation of my work in Marikana.

What is a feminist activist scholar?

There are contestations on what constitutes an activist scholar and feminist activist scholar and what marks their research and scholarship (Choudry 2020). While activist scholars and feminist activist scholars can be on the right or left of the political spectrum (Piven 2010), my focus below is on those who are on the left and are pursuing anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-sexist and equitable futures. The standard definition of an "activist scholar" or feminist activist scholar seems to be that it is an identity attributed to those who are "double-rooted" within academic institutions and social movements; it is those who research and participate in radical political work instead of purporting a neutral positioning, it is the engaged scholars who get "dirty" and are driven by a social justice imperative instead of a distant and disengaged posture and a positivist-oriented refusal to work towards social change. It is those who, through research, challenge dominant power relations, including patriarchy, instead of wittingly reproducing it. They work towards changing inequities and not only critique (Bevington and Dixon 2005; Bobel 2007; Burawoy 2005; Choudry 2020; Peterson 2009; Said 1996;). In other words, their work is linked to social change structures such as movements and unions and does not purport to be 'neutral' or 'value-free' (Isaacman 2003). To emphasise, activist and feminist activist scholars are 'open and transparent about their ideological and political proclivities' (Badat chapter 2 in this volume). They are engaged and want to change the world around them. They strive to remain critical and 'faithful to

evidence' in their scholarship (Bezuidenhout et al. 2022b).[3] Feminist and other activist scholars are united by their shared commitment to "rigorous critique" of power and injustices (including at a personal level), contextually grounded theorising inspired and informed by "close observation" and involvement in action, in the hopes of inspiring practices and actions for social change.

Feminists and other cultural workers expand the above notion of activist scholars by adding those who theorise from "the personal" and those who theorise creatively and infused emancipatory creative practices within radical politics. Within these traditions there is also a reframing of what constitutes the "political" to include the personal, big and small acts that are directed at and disrupt power in public and private spaces. The personal, therefore, is a critical and legitimate starting point in their activism and theorising, it is a political 'point zero' (see work by Desirée Lewis', Sylvia Tamale, Charmaine Pereira, Amina Mama, Pumla Gqola, Elaine Salo, Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, Patricia McFadden and Patricia Hill-Collins). Equally, creative and biographical work is seen as a site for theorising their and people's conditions (Collins 1990; Hames 2012, 2016; Hooks 2003). They are also involved in undoing and disrupting oppressive structures and building people's power. This personal point-zero is essential to keep in mind as some conceptions of activist scholar tend to value only impersonal, public, grand and distant political "actions" or practices and not personal, intimate, private actions, thus, excluding some scholar-activists who are not necessarily on the "front lines" of struggle but "other" frontlines such as the household, the church, small women's groups etcetera.

While some feminist/activist scholars are indeed located within universities, there are attempts to expand this definition to include those who may be located outside universities; in spaces such as movements, in unions and those involved in knowledge production, analysing, theorising, producing tools and the language for profound critique (Choudry 2020; Mdlalose 2014). To make sense of those outside the academy, I find Gramsci's notion of 'organic intellectual' or Said's 'amateur intellectual' instructive (Said 1996). While these intellectuals can also be activist scholars, it is essential to note that that is not always the case. For example, some union "organic" intellectuals do not necessarily consider themselves activist scholars. The concept of (feminist) activist scholar, therefore, remains contested in all spaces. Some of these contestations come from activists who critique activist scholars (Mdlalose 2014) and others from academics who advocate for modest claims (Kesselman 2022; Bezuidenhout et al. 2022a). Some of these critiques foreground power relations between activist scholars and activists and

3 See Badat (Chapter 2 in this volume) and Isaacman (2003) for more on the differences between critical and activist research. See O'Laughlin (2014) for more of Ruth First's critically engaged research work and Badat (Chapter 2 and 3 in this volume) for an interrogation of what that work looked like during First's time in Mozambique. For more on recent scholarship on critical engagement from the global South, see Bezuidenhout et al. (2022a).

thus, labour daily in movements instead of "theorising" daily or "making sense" of struggles with some distance. I do not engage with these critiques, but only want to note that the definition, scope and goals of activist scholars I am working with here remain contested from above and below.

Drawing from others before me, my conception of feminist activist scholars' weaves together the above complementary conceptions of feminist activist scholars. This conceptual patchwork is productive, since it allows me to move between different scales and spaces (community and university, private and public, etcetera) when analysing my political and intellectual involvement in Marikana. Even though this chapter focuses on work I have done in the academy as a student and as a faculty member, I also connect and infer on political work I have done in other activist and solidarity spaces not necessarily "for research". In my reflections, I hope to tease tensions in my work as an activist scholar. This is my way of making critical sense of my political work and role, and opening up space to attend to my and our collective failures (for more on tensions that come with being an activist scholar, see also Tarlau 2014; Bevington and Dixon 2005). I aim to add to this scholarship and to ongoing debates about navigating power and positionality for activist scholars.

Entering Marikana

I had driven past Marikana for years, often without giving it a thought, between 2008 and 2012 while travelling between Johannesburg and Rustenburg for my research. I first went to Marikana shortly after the Marikana massacre, which happened while I was doing an ethnographic study of women miners in one of the big platinum mines in the Rustenburg region. When I went, however, it was not for research. After the massacre, I entered Marikana as an activist who had gone to be "in community with" workers, women and the broader community.

When the massacre happened, my team and I had just finished preparing our stope for blasting, and some were already making their way back from underground to the surface. While we knew of the intensity of the tensions and the workers' strike at Lonmin, we did not anticipate that workers would be shot and killed in what has become known as the Marikana massacre. Only upon reaching my shaft did I learn about the cold-blooded massacre that took place in the mine less than forty kilometres away from where we were working. It was later, upon my arrival at the mine hostel/residence, that the news of the brutal killing of mineworkers sunk in. We watched the evening news, shocked at the scenes that had unfolded during the day. The following morning at the shaft, the milieu was different; workers were shocked, and some were mourning their friends, comrades, "homeboys" and relatives. Workers did not want to go underground; they stood in groups recounting the television scenes and calls received and

made to relatives in Marikana. They were consumed by the events we had all witnessed. Drilling and working, considering the massacre, was the last thing on their minds. It was this massacre, these scenes and conversations at the shaft that led to my frequenting Marikana to commiserate with those who were directly affected by the massacre. Elsewhere, I detail how I entered the community and the process of connecting with community members, especially women (Benya 2015a). Therefore, my engagement as an activist birthed my scholarly engagement.

My work with the women, however, started days after the massacre, first, during the memorial service of the slain workers when I had gone to show solidarity with workers, wives and relatives of the deceased and the community at large. On that day, I joined women who were cooking and teams setting up the tent for the memorial service. When we arrived, there was still shock in the community, anger at the arrests and death of workers at the hands of the police. There was a sense of disbelief and an urgency to organise and re-strategise to continue with the demands for a salary increase to R12 500 per month. While cooking and dishing up, women talked about abuse by the police who were terrorising them and their families and the hardships in Marikana. Some hoped that the spotlight thrust on them would bring about positive changes. These conversations and subsequent visits led to my long-term political relationship with women in Marikana. As outlined elsewhere (Benya 2015a), I also temporarily and from a distance worked alongside the broader Marikana Support Campaign (initially Marikana solidarity campaign) that activists in Johannesburg formed.

Marikana women's long history of organising

My main activist work in Marikana over the years has been with *Sikhala Sonke*, a women's organisation which was formed shortly after the Marikana massacre. While the recognition and adulation of "women in Marikana" are recent and came into public discourse after the Marikana massacre of 2012 due to the political work of women in the community, it is essential to note that these women have a more extended history which precedes the massacre and the formation of *Sikhala Sonke* which has come to represent women in Marikana. As Benya (2015a, 2015b), Bruchhausen and Naicker (2018), Madi (2018) Naicker (2016, 2018) and Ndibongo's (2015) work shows, women in Marikana had been organising under different formations long before the Marikana massacre. Prior to 2012, women were formally and informally organising around their exclusion from mine jobs, housing, water and sanitation, all of which were urgent needs in the Marikana area. Most also organised under the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) and local church structures (Benya and Yeni, 2022).

Sikhala Sonke, therefore, while formally formed in 2012, emerged from a more extended history of

women organising in the community. It was also the leading organisation I worked closely with in the community since 2012. Shortly after the massacre, my involvement included visiting the community weekly to be "in community with" women. This involved the day-to-day activities of activists, organising and attending meetings, gatherings, marches and workshops with women, and meetings with local government officials, especially when women were organising marches (Benya 2015a). It was at these women's weekly meetings that *Sikhala Sonke* was formed. My relationship with women in the community has since deepened from an activist scholar who was in solidarity with women, workers and the community, co-organising marches demanding justice for Marikana, attending sessions at the Marikana Commission of Enquiry, to one where I became actively involved, alongside others, in documenting and analysing the meanings of Marikana with and from the perspective of women, but always in community with *Sikhala Sonke* (Alexander et al. 2013; Benya 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Naicker 2016; Ndibongo 2015; Paremoer 2012; Saragas 2015, 2017).

While I initially engaged as an activist mobilising with women in the community, later I also began engaging as a scholar, trying to make critical sense of what had happened in Marikana and grappling with questions that people were holding and posing. The questions people were asking, at moments of deep frustration and emotion, were sometimes directed at me. At other times, they were posed rhetorically to make sense of the massacre that had happened in the community, a place people called home, by a government that they had voted for and brought into power, a government led by a former liberation movement, a political party that they still believed in and had canvassed for. The questions were not only about the massacre that had taken place before their eyes in Marikana, but also about notions of citizenship, belonging, and political identity in post-apartheid South Africa. For Marikana residents and those who lived around Marikana, everything was upended by the massacre.

Contributing to "sensemaking"

As I argue elsewhere (Benya 2016), the Marikana massacre was a moment of rupture for me as a feminist activist and a scholar. Having studied about and witnessed the constantly jolting crises in South Africa's industrial relations, I never imagined we would see a massacre, one that was geographically (about 30-40 km from where I lived at that time) and politically so close to my activist and scholarly work. Because of the proximity of the massacre and because what had happened was unconscionable in a post-apartheid workplace, I wanted to be involved. As an activist-scholar, it was crucial to be present and contribute to the "sensemaking" community members, families and the public were engaged in.

From the start of the strikes in 2012 until the "last wave" in 2014, Marikana strongly featured in the

public's social imagination, albeit in different ways. First, there was a demonising of workers and anti-poor and anti-striking mineworker rhetoric. Later, as more data emerged about the strike, the negotiations, the position and direction some were facing as bullets were fired as well as the close range at which some were shot, the more in-depth analysis began. What emerged from that analysis was that what had happened was indeed a premeditated mass murder—a massacre. As the narrative changed, so did attitudes nationally, with people beyond Marikana showing great empathy and solidarity—though this was not generalised. The shift from anti-Marikana public sentiments to solidarity was primarily because of deliberate narrative change work by people in Marikana and those who were their allies as well as unbiased reporting by some journalists. The narrative change work included community members, workers, and women in Marikana, who constantly corrected the biased language used by some of those who were in their midst, from journalists to academics and activists. For example, instead of people in conversations saying, "workers died here", community members and worker leaders in Marikana insisted that there be clarity on who killed workers and how. For example, instead of the above short statement, people were encouraged to be specific and recognise that 1) mineworkers were killed, 2) for demanding a living wage, 3) some were shot on their backs while running and 4) they were killed (or massacred) by the police. Indeed, the narrative shifted locally. Nationally, it was after a few days that we began to see a shift in how the massacre was reported. The shift was decisive after a report in the Daily Maverick (DM), which ultimately became a book, emerged (Marinovich 2012, 2016). The DM report, documentary on the massacre and subsequent books outlined 1) how workers were killed, 2) that they were not violently charging at police as earlier reports had suggested and 3) that some workers were hiding (Alexander et al. 2013). The police hunted them down under and between rocks, cold-bloodedly killing them while joking about it (Desai 2014). The Marikana killings came to be known as a massacre, not a tragedy (Alexander 2013).

For years after the Marikana massacre, workers in surrounding mines and activists at local, national and international levels have continued to organise and demand justice for Marikana. These actions have kept the spirit of Marikana alive. Marikana has, thus, come to symbolise and to be seen as an active site of resistance against the then-normalised low wages and normalised exploitation by South Africa's mining capital. Chinguno (2013a, 2015), Grossman (2016) and Sinwell and Mbatha (2016) unpack the lengths of this spirit of Marikana. Naicker (2016) shows us how the "Spirit of Marikana" influenced and strengthened the resolve to fight in communities struggling for justice in different parts of the country. Some came to call themselves "Marikana". Grossman (2016) shows how that same spirit of Marikana inspired other Marikanas and what some have called the "NUMSA moment" and student protests in 2015-2017. Across South Africa, workers and students revolting against oppressive systems said, "We are

Marikana". The connections, therefore, between Marikana and other struggles were constantly evoked as people tried to make sense of Marikana and its meanings in the post-apartheid context.

The context: Engaging in and with Marikana

Here, I want to focus on what being a feminist activist scholar has meant in the work I have been doing with women in Marikana. My work in Marikana traverses several spaces; the first space is the university where, through my research and teaching, I have been trying to make critical sense of the Marikana massacre and to engage with the broader scholarship on it, getting students to critically reflect on the different meanings of Marikana (Alexander 2013; Alexander et al. 2013; Alexander 2016; Bond 2013; Chinguno 2013a, 2013b; Chinguno 2015; Magaziner and Jacobs 2013; Naicker 2016; Naicker and Bruchhausen 2016; Pillay 2013). With students, some of whom were in primary school when the massacre happened, my course introduces them to debates on the meanings of Marikana. In addition, as a teaching team, we have developed teaching exercises and tutorial activities to deepen students' critical understanding of Marikana. These include, but are not limited to writing critical reflection pieces that focus on asking questions about the massacre, labour theory, political economy, mining industrial complex, the history of mining, the different players both historically and in contemporary times, watching short critical videos and connecting them to concepts, popular "facts" and myths and getting them to sift through facts and myths and make up their mind drawing from research papers and other peer-reviewed data, watching documentaries and writing op-eds etcetera. By using and drawing from creative modes of expression (for example, poems, song lyrics, artwork or biographies), we invite students to inhabit a different identity and ask questions about the massacre, the political economy, mining capital and life in Marikana from multiple perspectives.

In class, we have also drawn connections between Marikana and the experiences of other working-class communities in South Africa. For example, several informal settlements have sprouted up in recent years across many provinces, notably in the Western Cape. Residents of these informal communities deliberately chose to call their settlements Marikana to draw attention to the similarities in their living conditions and those of mineworkers in Marikana and to show solidarity with the people of Marikana. Drawing connections between Marikanas in different provinces and the original Marikana in the North-West province is especially important for students who struggle to connect social issues across space and time; issues that concern working class communities in Cape Town and Marikana, which is seen as a far-away mining town that has no connections to them or their lives. They also have difficulties imagining the massacre and connecting the struggles as they were barely ten years old when the Marikana massacre took place.

In addition to teaching accredited courses about Marikana in classrooms, the UCT Marikana solidarity forum hosts public discussions, seminars, exhibitions, documentary screenings and dialogues annually in August. We host these events to keep Marikana's memory alive beyond our classrooms and generate discussions across campus about social justice issues that concern others outside the ivory tower or the university on the hill, as some refer to UCT.

The second space where I have been trying to make critical sense of the Marikana massacre has been with the Marikana community, especially women. Here, I have been involved as an activist for women in the *Sikhala Sonke* women's organisation for the past twelve years. While I attempt to connect the two, my main focus in this paper is on the second space—the community and the women's organisation and my role between 2012 and now. I reflect on how I negotiate my activism in Marikana as someone who is also tied to and has a teaching position in the university, and thus, has some power and enjoys a certain distance from Marikana that no level of deep engagement and commitment can erase.

Revisiting Marikana

It has been twelve years since the 2012 Marikana massacre. While some things have changed in Marikana, more remains the same (Benya and Chinguno 2022). Workers' demands in 2012 still haunt their workplaces and labour relations broadly. This ghostly haunting is seen in the experiences of community members and women who have been central in making ends meet considering retrenchments, the rise in subcontracting that came with the take-over of Lonmin by Sibanye, and an inactive, sometimes absent and uncaring state. Indeed, conditions in Marikana have worsened (Benya and Chinguno 2022). However, twelve years after the massacre, the nation and activists seem to have forgotten or moved on from Marikana. I want to focus on this forgetting or moving on in the section that follows and the complexities of resolving it for activist scholars.

The challenges of keeping struggles alive in public discourse

What does it take to keep struggles alive in the public imagination when many other struggles come, shock and sometimes seem to "overtake"? While things have not necessarily improved in Marikana, the spotlight has shifted from the massacre. We have struggled to keep the political momentum and spotlight on righting the injustices in Marikana. By "we", I include activists and especially activist scholars who were active in Marikana and those who were actively in solidarity with the affected families and the community.

Beyond theorising and documenting about Marikana by activist scholars over the past twelve years, there must be more sustained political work to keep the momentum and focus on Marikana.[4] At most, we activist scholars have been involved in periodic visits to Marikana, commemoration events in August and a few concrete activities in between that put pressure on those in power to address the plight of people and community of Marikana, the injured and families of slain workers. On the main, only some campaigns have kept the struggles of Marikana in public discourse. The silences and forgetting Marikana raise questions about our inability to sustain struggles and our long-term commitment as activist scholars to political work that does not affect us materially. Our inability to sustain and improve our involvement was raised and admitted at several ten-year commemorative events hosted in 2022. At these events, there were calls to reinvigorate activism around Marikana, to be more present in Marikana and to show continuous solidarity, because conditions have not changed, and people feel forgotten even though lives were lost. At these events, families, Marikana women and the injured felt that matters were urgent and dire in Marikana. They felt that the spotlight had shifted elsewhere, and people had forgotten about the massacre. However, the struggles continue for families, for the injured and the larger Marikana community, including women.

The shift of focus from, and silence about Marikana has become more pronounced in recent years. Between 2012 and 2015, a critical mass of scholars and community activists still worked closely with different workers, community and women structures in Marikana (Ndibongo 2015; Padi 2018; Sinwell and Mbatha 2016). Marikana massacre commemoration events were hosted across different parts of the country. Until 2015, there was still a hive of activities organised to get people outside Marikana to connect and support those in Marikana. Activities organised to connect struggles or "conscientise" communities outside Marikana included the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) sponsored Feminist Tables targeting feminists across the country, worker and community workshops, regular solidarity visits and media campaigns directed at keeping the spirit of Marikana alive beyond the platinum belt (Benya 2015b; Fakier and Cock 2018). Since 2016, however, fewer activists have been involved in Marikana. Part of the withdrawal of some scholars and activists can be explained by the "take over" and monopolisation of the Marikana massacre and struggles by political parties and its mobilisation by some unions for their ends to the point of barring people from entering the community, policing the mountain where the massacre took place and surveilling outside visitors to Marikana.

Even with these challenges, the withdrawal and silence about Marikana remains a concern that activist scholars must contend with. It has been twelve years since the massacre, and even fewer activist

4 SERI has been an exception in this regard.

scholars are organising around the Marikana struggles and taking the time to go back to or are active in political work in Marikana beyond scholarly interests. We have collectively turned Marikana into an August "event", with fewer and fewer activities in between, even as we strive to keep the memory of the massacre alive. Our attention and commitment to the daily struggles of workers have been compromised. In my recent "visits" to Marikana, women have lamented how they feel alone, forgotten and discarded by the broader collective of activists and activist scholars who were constantly present between 2012 and 2015 and now return closer to August. Widows and families have expressed feeling alone and let down by the public and the government. In conversations with some widows and family members in 2022 at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda and at a reflective workshop organised by SERI in 2022—one of the few consistent organisations that have been supporting families in Marikana—family members remarked that when they talk to people about court cases that they are still attending or Marikana related activities they are involved in, some lament "is that *thing* still ongoing?" Others indicated that they have been alone, with only a few still fighting, not just walking beside them. This indicates a broader public and national disremembering of the struggles in Marikana.

These challenges raise critical questions for activist scholars who move on to other struggles and make minimal effort to connect struggles on the ground beyond theorising about the connections. As activist scholars, we must confront the challenge of sustaining our political efforts and deepening our involvement, even when we have moved on to other struggles. Because of our inability to confront this challenge, activist scholars have been deemed opportunists and involved in a struggle to advance their careers and political credentials. What is to be done remains a challenge we need to confront.

External influences, power and accountability in movements

While above, I pointed out our inability to keep the momentum and struggle alive in the broader public imagination, here I focus on what led to this challenge in the case of *Sikhala Sonke*, and ultimately, the group's demobilisation.

Some challenges confronted the *Sikhala Sonke* women's organisation from the get-go. These challenges were partly due to internal dynamics typical in political structures and movements and external influence. From my reading of the situation and conversations with women in Marikana, some challenges emerged from how we, as "outside" activists and activist scholars, engaged with the community and the women of *Sikhala Sonke*. These included our avoidance of dealing with small fissures that were present from the get-go, our disregard for and inability to read power dynamics between the different groups of women in Marikana (because of nationality, social capital, language, political affiliation), how and who

we engaged with as "outside" activists and who we unintentionally side-lined and emboldened in the process and our solidarity work.

How did our involvement as activists and activist scholars influence the organisation? We came to Marikana from different places and under various names, and the women in *Sikhala Sonke* had also organised under different formations before joining *Sikhala Sonke*. Most of us who were not from Marikana had access to resources and forms of capital (financial/legal and media) that we could mobilise when needed. While women and *Sikhala Sonke* were often consulted, at times, we consulted individuals, not the group, and the rest of the women were expected to follow. Because of the way we worked at the beginning, we ended up bolstering some individuals instead of the collective, either because of language difficulties on our part or because of who was vocal at meetings or had access to a cell phone and was in an area with a reliable network and connections to outsiders.

A small thing, such as having a cell phone and reliable network, was the difference between getting calls, being invited, being consulted first on issues and being informed first about external decisions or activities versus others. Our invitations to women from *Sikhala Sonke* to either the university or other movements in the big cities and other places to be "conscientized" and share their experiences, to participate in training and schools, thus, created what some social movement scholars call "stars" and "elites" or "activist elites" within *Sikhala Sonke* (Choudry and Kapoor 2010; Freeman 1972). While some of the "stars" remained rooted in the organisation, others began operating as individuals to the demobilisation of the collective. As women in Marikana noted, some individuals became more important than the collective and were emboldened by outside material support, contacts and social capital that they were accumulating over through their involvement and for being one of Marikana's faces.

At this moment, we failed to reflect critically, hold each other accountable and ask each other critical questions at these multiple junctures of organising around Marikana. There were always more urgent matters to address. This contributed to unhealthy and anti-democratic dynamics within the women's structure. As these issues played out in the background, some women activists left, a few remained, and the organisation slowly crumbled. We did not take any responsibility or honestly reflect on our role in what was happening internally and locally. Some activists did not even know that the support rendered was also causing internal divisions because we operated and showed solidarity from afar and periodically post-2015.

Because we (outside activists) were distant from the day-to-day actions, we were blind to the power dynamics and constant shifts within the women's movement. As such, we failed to understand the nuances of what Marikana women activists were saying (in the euphemisms) as they navigated political involvement, the need for support, material struggles, and access to external networks.

There were also open conflicts within the group that outside activists and activist scholars evaded and avoided partly because we did not want to "interfere" in what seemed like personal battles. On the one hand we wanted to be involved in the broader struggles, but did not want to be involved in the organisation's struggles, which was an unsustainable contradiction on our side. With hindsight, these were political and material struggles. While we did not want to be seen as being aligned with any "faction", problems festered, and our "non-alignment" resulted in our paralysis in the face of challenges.

It was only seven years later, at feminist and organising schools and at workshops, that questions began to emerge. However, by then, many women activists had left *Sikhala Sonke*; some were disgruntled and unhappy with the organisation, being side-lined by activist scholars who made little effort to learn local languages to ease communication and deepen relations.

Organising activities and disorganising movements: Confronting power within

What I allude to above did not start after 2015; even in the early days, we were not deliberate about how power operated within and outside the women's structures and how power was configured before and after the massacre. We did not consider the challenges an organisation formed out of trauma, by people from different formations and political orientations might face. We mainly paid attention to what was before us, organising activities and events, what was said and not what was unsaid; we focused on what we considered to reflect the growth of the women's movement, the changes in political language that some activists were using, we focused on visibility and presence of women at various activities where the Marikana banner was flown high to empathetic audiences. We paid attention to rotating leadership positions and not to who had power and how that power was mobilised and used to discipline or sideline others quietly. We were fixated on "action" and visibility on the outside; we did not ask pertinent questions about organisational health and the strength of relationships. The movement dwindled, and we looked for easy answers that fitted our "double-rooted" and highly mobile scholar-activist lives.

As a result of a combination of factors, including our failures to ask difficult questions of those we were "close to", even organising and mobilising women, we gave way to the demobilisation we now sit uncomfortably with. We went with the flow. The women who were not vocal or who did not speak English disappeared into the background as we struggled to communicate with some due to language differences. Twelve years on, it seems we have collectively reduced our involvement to politically empty solidarity visits that sometimes look like charity work instead of politically charged work that is about changing oppressive and exploitative structures and practices.

Activist research and the academy

Above, I have reflected on the work I have been involved in in Marikana and the challenges the women's movement has faced. I reflect as someone who has been actively involved and, at times, accompanying and in solidarity with the women. In this section, I will briefly reflect on how that work is viewed within the academy. While teaching about the Marikana massacre, a turning point in the history of South Africa, is given space, there is very little reckoning and appreciation in institutions of higher learning on what activist scholarship entails, including the investments that go beyond spending time with people only to do interviews or collect data.

Besides the rhetoric of engaged scholarship, what activist scholarship involves, the demands on scholars (resources and time) and why it is crucial, are outside of broader academic conversations. The emphasis at our institutions and at times, in our departments, as many before me have argued, is on quantifiable research outputs that (in South Africa) are recognised by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and can fetch subsidies. It is not a research output if it is not in a DHET academic journal (Dawson and Sinwell 2012). Research is, therefore, equated and reduced to articles. As Choudry (2020) notes, this view disregards the critical work of building relationships, nurturing and sustaining them that is often involved in 'socially and politically engaged research'. Indeed, this relationship building is not work valued in the academy, nor can it be made visible when quantifying research 'outputs, or partnerships or future collaborations', yet it is critical.

When the university wants to "recognise" activist scholarship, it seems that the primary goal is often to appropriate that work for its ends and not to value it for the contribution it makes in communities/movements and thus, see how best to allow activist scholars to do justice to it along-side other expectations the university has on them. It, therefore, seems like a double bind; if it is recognised, there is a danger of 'institutional capture' (Cox 2015). If not recognised, it continues to be on the margins, and those academics who engage in it are not seen as serious scholars unless they can publish in academic journals (Dawson and Sinwell 2012). While Said (1996) presents marginality as productive and a site where one can sharpen one's critical insights, it also comes at a cost within the academy (and sometimes benefits outside the academy).

The work required of activist scholars necessarily means that they must balance meeting targets (for grants, for peer-reviewed publications) with teaching and research and deep involvement in communities. Because maintaining this balance is challenging, they are often seen as uncommitted or in-productivity and lacking intellectual rigour. As Choudry (2020: 42) argues, 'intellectual rigour and capacity for reflection, abstraction and theorising are not the monopoly of those who claim neutral,

scientific distance from the subject of their inquiry or the content of what they teach'. It is the purview of all of us.

Conclusion

Women's organisations in Marikana face many challenges. However, my focus in this chapter is on the challenges we must contend with as feminist activist scholars to sustain our work and attain the broader political goals that inform it. If we want to be involved in research and political action that inspires social change, then critical sensemaking and openness to our collective failures are imperative.

Considering all the challenges I highlighted above, I have come to be modest about my claims about my work as a feminist activist scholar. I acknowledge that there is a distance that, even as a committed activist scholar, I cannot bridge. The class dynamics between activist scholars and community activists cannot be erased or wished away through silence and evocations of non-alignment. They must be creatively and productively engaged to tackle what Tarlau (2014: 63) calls 'unresolvable contradictions' of activist scholars.

If indeed we write, research and get involved to contribute to the "toolkit" that supports struggles (Piven 2010), we must commit to confronting power within movements as we search for a different world and aspire to contribute towards its realisation and to new relevant (sociological) theories. Thus, we must grapple seriously with our power from our initial involvement, remain self-critical, and not be blind to internal challenges brought on by our involvement. In addition to good political intentions and moral imperatives, we constantly need to critically reflect on the whole spectrum of our actions.

This includes engaging with and about the benefits we accrue, the political mileage we gain and the social capital we fortify by our involvement, even as we remain marginal within our disciplines and institutions. In reflecting on our work as activist scholars and its impact, we must consider actions, practices and power and ensure that our involvement does not produce new hierarchies or reproduce and cement old hierarchies (Choudry 2020).

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