

Gender, Institutions and Change: Feminist Institutionalism after 10 years

In the Belly of the Beast: Of Structural Problems and Straitjackets – the South African Commission for Gender Equality

For the past two years I have been a Commissioner for the South African Commission for Gender Equality (CGE). Even though I have been doing research on the CGE for years it was only once I have entered the “belly of the beast” that I could understand why the CGE was struggling so to implement its mandate. The extent of the structural impediments were not clear to me as an outsider, but the magnitude of the problem surfaces very quickly once you become a commissioner. Furthermore, I did not understand to what extent strategic plans act as a straitjacket to prevent the commission from acting on urgent issues or to do crisis intervention.

A lack of a feminist consciousness apparent among staff contributed to a lack of an understanding about the importance of activism and engaging civil society. The conflict between the now defunct Ministry of Women, Youth and People with Disabilities contributed to the blurring of lines of different mandates, leading to problems that reverberated through the entire South African National Gender Machinery.

Drawing on theories of feminist institutionalism and gender machineries I will analyse the structural architecture of the CGE, as well as the impact of strategic plans and under budgeting to understand their impact on the non-delivery of the CGE. I will also highlight events where the CGE was successful to show that failure to deliver on its mandate is not inevitable

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