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LYMO

Faculty of
Human Sciences

University of Plymouth
Drake Circus
Plymouth

Devon PL4 8AA
United Kingdom

Â» Tel 01752 283239
â\200\234 o \Guo Fax' 01752 233228
E-mail mmaconachie@plym.ac.uk

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Moirâ Maconachie PhD
Senior Research Fellow

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TAKING WOMEN'S CONCERNS SERIOUSLY: THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME OF THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL COALITION IN SOUTH AFRICA (1992-1994).

Moira Maconachie

ABSTRACT

In the period before the elections leading to the establishment of the Government of National Unity, a broad coalition of women's organisations -- the Women's National Coalition -- was formed. It set out to ensure that the democratic agenda would take gender issues and the participation of women into consideration. This article discusses the national research programme conducted by the coalition, presents the key findings and, in conclusion, considers which of the claims made on behalf of women in Women's Charter for Effective Equality were supported by a majority of participants in the research programme.

INTRODUCTION

Writing about the Women's National Coalition (WNC) research programme has given me an opportunity to reflect on what we recognised at the outset would be an ambitious undertaking.' The short title of this article -- Taking women's concerns seriously -- is adapted from a comment made by a black woman who participated in a WNC focus group held in the PWV region (Mohlakeng). She is cited (WNC, 1994, v1:81) as having said that 'because women were frequently uneducated, they felt inadequate and unimportant. They felt that no one would listen to them or take their concerns seriously.' This comment captures what I still consider were the intentions of the research programme and in this article I suggest that the WNC set out to do both things: to listen to what women had to say and to take their concerns seriously.

The programme of research was organised by members of the Research Department at head office in Johannesburg and by members of the different regional coalitions. The research findings have been published by the WNC in three volumes, the third volume being a final summary report. In preparing this article I have drawn information from all three volumes as well as from my experience as a member of the Research Supervisory Group (RSG) set up by the Steering Committee of the WNC. Given the spectrum of opinion about the WNC and the number of women involved in the research programme at different levels, in different capacities, and over different periods of time, there will undoubtedly be other points of view, contrasting emphases, and a variety of interpretations of particular events. That said, my purpose in writing this is straightforward: I hope, by giving attention to the broad canvas, to provide an overview of the research programme and to present the findings which helped shape and inform the drafting of the Women's Charter for Effective Equality.

The Women's Charter is a fairly comprehensive list of claims made by women, but it gives no hint of the extent of support for different clauses and issues. Drawing on the various

research findings, I want to add some colour and emphasis to the document, highlighting those issues that most of the women who participated in the research programme considered important and the majority decisions or recommendations that were proposed by them. To sum up, this article aims to do the following: to place the WNC research programme in the broader context of political transition, to outline how the research was designed taking into account the goals of the WNC, to identify the key findings of the research and, then, in discussion to filter them through the themes that structure the Women's Charter.

THE CONTEXT: SHAPING A NEW FUTURE

So much has happened since the WNC was established in April 1992 that it is important to remember that the coalition was formed at a time of political uncertainty (would a settlement be reached or would the negotiations process implode?). Support for the idea of a coalition of women's organisations and the launch of the WNC need to be understood in the context of the build up to popular democracy in South Africa, and not assessed or retrospectively evaluated only from a vantage point that is comfortably located post-1994. Coalitions are necessarily limited and cumbersome, but in a time of transition forging a coalition of such a wide range of women's organisations, from such disparate communities, can be considered an achievement. The part played by particular women and women's organisations in making the political settlement possible is something that has yet to be fully assessed.

Women's issues were put on the agenda by a range of organisations but the WNC specifically was able to emphasise and give voice to the importance that women themselves were attaching to their participation in creating a new dispensation. The response of the media and of political parties was cautious, and they were initially hesitant and awkward in their inclusion and coverage of an expanded democratic agenda. However, later on, agreement was reached that parties attending CODESA and participating in the multi-party talks would be required to (and they did) include women in their teams. There was speculation about what the impact of the presence of women sitting at the negotiating table would be: Was it merely easy-to-forget tokenism or could it have a positive influence? It was during this period of time that we saw women's rights enter from outside the mainstream (where they had been simmering since the late 1980s) and slowly rise in importance, to eventually feature in the election campaigns. In the run-up to the elections many questions were asked: Would sufficient women have access to voter education, would they stand for election, would the parties include enough women on their lists, would women be influenced in who they voted for by the stance of the parties on women's issues? These and other questions were raised, and the WNC played a part in creating a context in which women as a group emerged as a political constituency to be won.

The existence of the WNC was a challenge to the parties participating in the elections; none of them had ever had to confront the potential -- however real or imaginary -- of a vocal women's lobby before. Many more women were finding a political voice and the women who put themselves forward as candidates for positions could, and many did, make reference to a constituency of women voters to justify their demands for the inclusion of more women and for more attention to be given to women's concerns. '

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THE WNC: ITS GOALS AND WHAT THE RESEARCH SET OUT TO DO (L;?i X° y v

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The WNC reports identify the marginal position of women within political parties and the
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their relative exclusion from the multiparty negotiations as reasons for calling together the
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meeting of women held in September 1991. A Steering Committee from that meeting
organised the workshop attended by both national and regional women's organisations
in April

1992 at which the WNC was established. The stated goals of the coalition were to acquire

and disseminate information about women's needs and aspirations, and to
\200\234Unify women in

formulating and adopting a charter or other document and entrench effective equality in the
constitution of South Africa (WNC Constitution cited in WNC,1994,v1:19). To achieve

these goals the WNC was mandated by member organisations to conduct a national campaign
which would inform and involve women in discussions about issues relevant to their lives and

futures. In addition, it was to conduct research that would give voice to women's concerns

and would collate details about what women wanted. The campaign and the research were to
culminate in the drafting of a charter which, as an aspirational document, was to be educative

and encourage more women to become actively involved in shaping what should happen in the
new South Africa.

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The WNC began with a broad membership of over 60 national organisations and four
regional coalitions. Its membership rose to over 90 organisations and to 13 regional coalitions
(each with a paid co-ordinator). The membership of the WNC included women from different
backgrounds: cutting across the apartheid divide as well as the broad range of ideological,
religious and economic interests. Divergent women's organisations were drawn into the
he
coalition which was able to agree, despite political differences and disagreements, on the
importance of the task of including women's voices in devising a democratic future
for South
Africa. Not only did they agree on the significance of the task they set themselves but they
y also
considered it a shared responsibility.

The coalition was a short-term commitment to achieve set and broadly-agreed goals and,
importantly, did not eliminate differences between member organisations who chose whether

and how they would respond to WNC proposals and suggestions. The WNC report (1994, v1:20-21) suggests that the coalition was founded on the following: (i) the view that gender oppression bonds women in a common [but not identical] set of experiences; (ii) the shared belief that women's lives and experiences could be positively transformed by proactively organising and by providing women with platforms and mechanisms to voice their demands; (iii) commitment to the principles of inclusivity and party-political non-alignment; and (iv) commitment to non-racialism. The co-convenors of the WNC had to rely on achieving consensus to secure that the coalition was on-going, not an easy task in the face of the political crises occurring between parties and between members of the WNC. It also meant that particular issues -- those considered potentially too divisive (such as abortion) -- were deferred instead of addressed.

Representatives from all participating organisations sat on the Council of the WNC which met four times a year to review and ratify decisions taken by the Steering Committee and the Executive. The Steering Committee, an elected body, was granted overall responsibility for the running of the organisation, and the Executive of five office bearers (elected in their personal capacity) each had separate portfolios and areas of responsibility. The Steering Committee was responsible for launching the campaign and the research

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programme, and it appointed the working groups (the RSG and the Legal Working Group). Its other tasks were to encourage national and local organisations and groups to join the coalition, to expand the base of the WNC and to encourage the formation of regional coalitions.

The research programme and the nationwide campaign were separately managed and administered by full-time staff at the WNC's head office which opened in October/November

1992. The particular focus of this article is the research programme and not the campaign.* There were a series of problems in getting the research underway, > and the intervention of the

convenors of the WNC and of the RSG eventually proved necessary to ensure that the research would be co-ordinated and undertaken. The scope and scale of the programme changed during the first year. During the start-up phase a national research methodology workshop was held (January 1993), a mapping document was drawn up, links were made with the regions, and pilot focus groups were conducted. But by May 1993 the whole programme, which at that time included plans to conduct 1,000 focus groups across the country, was in jeopardy due to personnel, organisational and financial uncertainties. A number of meetings

were held to resolve the impasse and consideration was given to contracting out the whole research effort. A decision was taken that the research programme should remain an integral part of the WNC's strategy to empower women, especially those with relatively little access

into formal structures. This was a reaffirmation the WNC's commitment (made at the methodology workshop) to train and actively involve women from the regions in the research programme as facilitators and participants. The RSG took on a more active role in ensuring that the overall research programme (described in more detail below) got off the ground, and

two RSG members were seconded to the WNC to co-ordinate the research and to ensure that staff were appointed.Â®

The research programme went ahead with the participation and involvement of different groups of women who undertook a range of activities to ensure that various deadlines would be met. Focus groups were held in all the regions and questionnaires were distributed to the

regions in the campaign packs (each of which focused on a particular theme as part of the WNC's national campaign). Two market research companies also undertook research on behalf of the WNC. An interim report based on the qualitative findings of the focus groups was prepared and sent to a key informants for comment while the overall research findings

were collated and analysed.

A draft of the Women's Charter was prepared for the WNC National Convention held in February 1994 where revisions were made and another draft was accepted for distribution and comment. Submissions were received from organisations afterwards and the revised Charter was adopted by the WNC in June 1994 and formally launched on Women's Day, August 9th

1994, when it was handed to President Mandela and the Regional Premiers. Interest and enthusiasm in the research programme had dwindled after the Convention which meant that the responsibility for finalising the work of the research programme was shared by a relatively small group of women.

THE RESEARCH: STRATEGIES, SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The WNC was mandated by member organisations to undertake research that would reveal women's needs, dreams and aspirations for the future (WNC, 1994, v1:20). The

stated intention of the research was also to engage women who had been excluded in the past, and the methodology seminar paid attention to how best rural women, illiterate women and women who were not members of organisations could be reached. Not only would women's voices be heard through the research done, but the voices of women who were usually 'silent' would be heard and included. Focus groups were chosen as the way to do this. An initial set of 50 focus groups were done nationally by a market research company, The Qualitative Consultancy (TQC), contracted by the WNC. This was an exploratory study. Another 208 focus groups were done nationally by the WNC. Members from the regions were trained to facilitate and record the groups, ensuring skill transfer and ownership of the research programme by the women involved. The focus group findings form the heart of the research.

Other research strategies included a set of five different questionnaires which were included in the monthly campaign packages sent out to the regions. These were short and had to be filled in by women themselves which is a method that favours those who are literate and who have some formal education. A community report card was circulated to regions but generated little interest (N=105 women). A chain letter was initiated to encourage women to write to the WNC. As an informal way of gathering submissions from women (N=373 women) it again favours literate women. To complement the work they were doing themselves, the WNC commissioned Market Research Africa (MRA), a large market research organisation, to conduct a national survey of women's and men's attitudes on a range of issues (identified by the WNC). Unlike the research done by the WNC itself, the survey used personal interviews and was based on a formal sample.

There are important limitations to the research done by the WNC. The emphasis was firmly on coverage and participation, and not on being representative (an issue raised at the methodology seminar, and excluded). Consequently the findings cannot be generalised. There are additional limitations in the way the research was conducted. When the focus groups and the questionnaires were being coded (in preparation for data capture) a number of the tapes, records and questionnaires were found to be incomplete which made it impossible to fully describe each of the samples. For example, a record of the number and biographical details of the women who took part in the focus groups was not always kept or was inadequate. The same thing happened with the questionnaires and because the questionnaires went out each month and did not identify the women who had completed them, it was impossible in the end to determine how many women in total had completed questionnaires (some women may only have filled in one questionnaire, others all five). Although the different strategies reveal common themes in the findings, combining the findings to avoid repetition would lend a false coherence to what at the time was a wide and often disparate range of activities (WNC, 1994, Summary).

THE MAIN FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUPS, THE SURVEY AND THE CAMPAIGN QUESTIONNAIRES

The main findings have been identified by undertaking a systematic assessment of the research findings. By 'main findings' I refer only to those themes and issues that were mentioned or accepted by more than half of the women who participated in the three research strategies that it was feasible to assess in this way: the WNC focus groups, the WNC campaign questionnaires, and the face-to-face survey done by MRA. Each of the strategies is briefly outlined below together with a summary of the main findings. In discussion afterwards,

it will be possible to highlight which themes and issues included in the Women's Charter were emphasised by the women in the research strategies assessed.

(1) The focus groups. A total of 208 focus groups were done by the WNC in the 13 regions (in addition to the 50 done by TQC, giving an overall total of 258 groups). The design of the guidelines used by the WNC (which included a set of issues to be raised by the facilitators) as well as the training and the facilitation of the focus groups was undertaken by the Focus Group Sub-group at Head Office. As far as possible the selection of groups was based on the initial mapping document; but the final count showed that too few white groups were done and too few afrikaans-speaking groups. An additional seven focus groups were done later on (these groups were not quantified with the rest).

The majority of the women who participated in the WNC focus groups were over 25 years old, had children, had at least a primary school education, and were Christian; just over half of them were married or cohabiting and roughly half were unemployed (WNC, 1994, Summary:36). There was coverage over the whole country and marginal groups of women were included. The main findings from the focus groups (N=201) drawn from the themes and issues raised during the largely unstructured discussions held with women are summarised in Table 1. Legal and employment issues predominate along with everyday experiences of race and gender discrimination.

<TABLE 1 HERE >

(2) The survey. MRA conducted face-to-face interviews with a national urban multi-ethnic sample of adult women and men during February and March 1994. According to the MRA their probability sample ensured coverage representative of plus/minus 89 percent of the total urban adult population (WNC, 1994, v1:171). The sample included 2,439 households and 1,219 men and 1,220 women participated. A summary of their responses (by gender) to the 36 items included in the schedule is given in Table 2. There is overwhelming support in favour of most of the items, and the findings reveal that on most of the items there was substantial agreement between women and men. Although most responses were still favourable, there was less support from men (support dropped to less than 70 percent) for items concerning issues such as: women's right to say no to sex; money being spent to inform women about their rights; women deciding themselves how many children to have; women deciding themselves about whether to have an abortion (less than half the men agreed); and whether it is wrong if it denies women the same rights and entitlements as men.

<TABLE 2 HERE >

(3) The WNC campaign questionnaires. The questionnaires formed part of the national campaign run by Head Office. Each month for a period of five months (July-September 1993) a separate issue was highlighted and a questionnaire was included as part of the information packages sent to the regional coalitions and organisations. The special issues were: Women's legal status; Women and land (urban and rural); Women and violence; Women and health; and Women and work. The content of the packages and construction of the questionnaires were agreed upon by the group of women responsible for planning the approach taken to each issue.

The general response to the questionnaires was uneven and the rate of returns dropped markedly after the first questionnaire. Some regions responded better than others: Natal and the PWYV responded comparatively well and the Eastern Cape picked up during the campaign -- when copies of the full set of questionnaires were sent to the regions to encourage more women to complete them. The final numbers of questionnaires returned were: 1,241 legal, 423 urban land, 320 rural land, 625 violence, 707 health, and 501 work questionnaires. Overall, the majority of women who completed the original set of questionnaires were over 25, had children, had at least a Standard 9 education, were employed, were Christian, and half of them were married or cohabiting. In February 1994 another shorter questionnaire was distributed Manyano groups to fill other gaps in coverage and it was completed by 3,018 women.

The main findings from selected general and opinion questions' (and not the personal information questions) included in the original campaign questionnaires are summarised below:

(a) Legal status: Over 80 percent of the women agreed that: fathers should be punished for failing to pay child maintenance; all religions and cultures should treat men and women equally; police should intervene if a woman is battered; housework and childcare should be shared equally; a man should not be allowed more than one wife at the same time; and every political party should be required to include women among their representatives in parliament. Between 50 and 60 percent of the women agreed that a woman's marital status should not impact on her income tax, and that both parents should be given guardianship of any children on divorce.

(b.i) Urban land: Over 70 percent of the women agreed that: a married woman living with her husband in their own house should inherit the house if he dies; if a couple both rent a local council house and decide to separate the tenancy should then be given to the person who keeps the children; a company which gives housing subsidies to employees should offer it to both men and women irrespective of their marital status; and an employer of a married domestic worker who lives-in should allow the domestic worker's husband to live with her. Sixty-six percent of the women agreed that if a male-breadwinner couple who live in a local council house decide to divorce then the tenancy should be given to the person who keeps the children.

(b.ii) Rural land: Over 80 percent of the women agreed that: if a married man living with his wife in a rural area takes a second wife he should not be allowed to evict his first wife from their home; a married man who lives in town but has a wife who lives and works the land in a rural area should not be allowed (in the event of the law changing) to sell that land to provide for himself and a second wife in town; a married woman who lives and works in a rural area whose husband is retrenched and who, on his return, tells her to give him her job (as it is more important that a man should work) should keep her job; and a white farmer should not be allowed to evict a woman who is a seasonal worker from the house she occupies on his farm if she wants to stay but the man she lives with is leaving his permanent job on the farm to take a job in town. Over 70 percent of the women agreed that there should be a minimum wage for farm workers and for domestic workers on farms. Sixty-one percent of the women agreed that if a man in a rural area had two wives then both wives should inherit his land if he died, and that if a woman grew vegetables which her husband took to market to sell then they should both control the money from the sale of the vegetables.

(Âç) Violence: Fifty-three percent of the women agreed that they had been personally affected by the political violence in the country. Over 70 percent of the women said that they had never been sexually harassed, and that neither they, nor any of their family or friends, had

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ever been sexually molested as a child, nor had they been raped. Fifty-five percent of the women said that neither they, nor any of their friends or family, had ever been battered.

(d) Health: Over 70 percent of the women agreed that teenagers should get sexuality [sic] education at school, and that a married woman who doesn't want any more children (although her husband and his family want her to) should be able to decide herself whether to use contraception.

(e) Work: Eighty-five percent of the women agreed that typical women's work should be better paid and also supported the slogan 'equal pay for equal work'.

DISCUSSION: THEMES INCLUDED IN THE WOMEN'S CHARTER

Clearly many of the themes and issues raised by women during the research are echoed in the Women's Charter. The Women's Charter includes a preamble and has 12 articles each of which comprises a set of claims made on behalf of South African women." The objective in filtering the main findings of the research through the articles and clauses of the charter is to discover what level of support there was for particular themes and issues included in the charter. I hoped that by exploring the research findings it would be possible to add weight to the document. In addition, I was curious to find out if any issues raised by women in the research programme (evidenced in the main findings) do not appear in the charter.

Table 3 summarises the results. The 'score' column gives a rough indication of how many of the clauses (listed under each of the 12 articles) raise issues supported by the main research findings.'* This column, for example, reveals that whereas none of the three clauses listed under the article 'Media' raised any issues included in the main findings of the research, five of the eight clauses under the article 'Family life and partnerships' are supported by the main findings. The particular issues that are supported are identified in the next column, and then the extent of support is given separately for each research strategy.

<TABLE 3 HERE >

The main column in Table 3 identifies the particular issues. This column lists those issues that, on the basis of the main research findings, may be highlighted, or underlined, in the Women's Charter. These issues carry the support of the women who participated in the WNC focus groups, who returned the campaign questionnaires or who were interviewed in the MRA survey. Judging from the findings presented, the women who participated in the research were substantially in favour of a number of issues included in the charter.

There are also issues of concern supported by the main research findings that are not directly included in the charter. Under the article 'Economy', the 'absent' issues include: support for getting the same promotions as men, minimum wages, and improved pay for women's work. Under 'Education', the issues include: a better education for all and educational access for the poor, for blacks and for women. Under 'Violence against women', the main findings identified specific support for police intervention in battering cases. Under 'Health', the issue that is not directly mentioned is abortion rights, and yet a majority of the women surveyed by MRA supported women's right to abortion. Other 'controversial

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questionsâ\200\231 that are not directly mentioned in the charter include polygamy and lobo
la which
are raised in the main findings, but not unambiguously (e.g., women who completed the WNC
questionnaires were opposed to polygamy, those surveyed by MRA were split down the

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middle). While these issues were expected to arise during the research, they could not reasonably be expected to be resolved in any way. It was never anticipated that the women who took part in the research would hold similar or consistent views.

Many of the organisations within the WNC held divergent views on various issues and it is therefore not surprising that a disclaimer note has been added to the front page of the Women's Charter. It reads: IMPORTANT NOTE ON THE CHARTER: While the Women's Charter has been adopted by the WNC, the women's organisations which are part of the WNC retain their freedom to reserve their position on particular clauses with which they do not wish to associate themselves. This could be interpreted as hesitancy on the part of organisations to own the entire charter and perhaps to continue the WNC -- a likely outcome of the history of an uneasy coalition that some considered had already served its purpose politically by the time the National Convention was held in February 1994.

CONCLUSION

The WNC's research programme allowed the women who participated to voice their concerns at a turning point in South Africa's history. They were provided with an opportunity to say what they wanted, and also to say why what they wanted was important to them. What is striking about the research programme and the Women's Charter is a common emphasis on what is wrong. There is little in the way of dreaming about the future, strategically considering how to realise the claims made, and no attention is given to what women consider good or valuable about being women. Filtering the main findings of the research programme through the structure of the Women's Charter and considering both together, has nonetheless proved useful. It has shown that there is a degree of agreement across the three research strategies, and also indicates clear support for certain themes included in the Charter.

The claims made in the charter do need to be addressed by government, with the involvement of the range of women's organisations and political parties, to ensure that women's prospects in the future are improved. Although the transition is secured, the promises of democracy and of effective equality for women within a broader culture of human rights have yet to be fully realised. And predictably women, like men, disagree on what such a future entails and how best it might be ensured.

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ENDNOTES

. This article is based on a longer seminar paper presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in

London in 1995.

i Then the PWV (Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereniging), now known as Gauteng.

i Referred to simply as the Women's Charter in the rest of this article.

i There is a brief overview discussion of the campaign in the published WNC reports. As far as I know,

no-one has yet produced a detailed account. Pregs Govender (now a member of parliament) was the Campaign Manager until after the National Convention in 1994 when she resigned.

: Frene Ginwala, a convenor of the WNC, was a remarkable catalyst and an initiator of the research

programme (she is now Speaker of the National Assembly). Initially the role of the RSG was simply to broadly oversee the process and excluded direct involvement in the particularities of the research. Debbie Budlender

was the researcher in charge of the programme until April/May 1993 when she resigned.

? Anne Letsebe and Shiela Meintjes co-ordinated the research programme. Stoney Lebethe was appointed full time as research manager in September 1993 and Kim Segal as researcher in November 1993. It is impossible to name everyone, a list of those who were actively involved in the research is given in the WNC reports.

? Tape recorders were used and notes were taken. These were sent to Head Office to be analysed in

December.

i These are briefly listed as the impact of race and gender in women's lives, the changes that women

envisioned and the possible means of ensuring these changes (WNC, 1994, Summary:33). A copy of the guidelines is included as an appendix in Volume Two of the reports.

i The issues are presented for the total number of focus groups. The report distinguishes between focus groups

on the basis of race, but the number of white, Indian and coloured groups was too small to make the percentage distinctions reasonable. For example, 30 percent might involve just 2 or 3 groups.

i The findings were presented by a number of dividers including sex and race, but no cross-tabulation of sex and

race was provided. The findings presented here concern gender differences, and according to MRA the margin of error (for their sample size of 1200) lies within the range (plus/minus) 1.3 to 2.9 (response rate from 95 percent/5 percent through to 50 percent/50 percent) at the 95 percent confidence level (WNC, 1994, v1:173).

i Unfortunately, there is no documentation of the thinking behind or the reasons for the ch

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formulation of particular items included in the campaign questionnaires and in the MRA survey. The details of all the research instruments were not screened or discussed at meetings of the RSG.

The summary statements are as close as possible to the original items; for example: A domestic worker

lives in a room at the back of her employer's house. She gets married and her husband wants to live with her in the room. Should the employer allow this? had a 73 percent yes response, and has been summarised as an employer of a domestic worker who lives in a room at the back of the house should allow her husband on her marriage to live in the room with her.

It is not possible to include a copy of the text of the Women's Charter (it is 8 pages in length) , and the

discussion therefore assumes that reader is familiar with the document.

In the Women's Charter separate clauses (or claims) are itemised (with bullet points) below each

article; many of the clauses include and link together more than one issue.

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