

## Review

**Salma Ismail (2015) *The Victoria Mxenge Housing Project: Women Building Communities Through Social Activism and Informal Learning*, Cape Town University of Cape Town Press, 192 pages, £14.50**

Both apartheid and customary laws in apartheid South Africa created racialised and gendered patterns of poverty and inequality. Women, in particular suffered, a double discrimination through not being allowed access to land, finance or housing. This fascinating study follows a group of poor, homeless women in the Victoria Mxenge Housing Development Association (VM) who acquired the skills to save money, secure land, build houses and create a broader social movement.

Salma Ismail has created an important resource in this book through her personal dedication and scholarship, covering the progress of this initiative over a period of twenty years, beginning in the early days of the newly elected ANC government. This is crucial to her analysis, which explores the changing political contexts, the relationship between NGOs and the state, and the creative and critical role of radical popular education.

During apartheid, many women who migrated from rural areas to Cape Town in search of a better life ended up in 'squatter' settlements, without basic services, without their husbands and often forcibly removed. The VM group of women tackled the homelessness crisis by encouraging women to contribute towards a savings scheme, and learning how to build houses themselves. Backed by Freirian influenced organisations such as the South African Homeless People's Federation and the People's Dialogue(PD), the VM adopted a people-centred developmental philosophy, building communities and a broader social movement. In six years they built over 5000 houses in their own and other communities; structures were participatory and democratic, ensuring that skills were shared through practice. Many of the women

were loyal ANC members, seeing the government as a 'powerful patron', and their focus was on developing critical engagement with the state and petitioning for control over resources, rather than any overt challenge to the prevailing powers, or offering an alternative vision.

The democratic and participatory forms of popular education developed by them built on the traditional practice of mutual obligation, with individual learning transferred to the collective and the wider task of community-building. This collective approach sustained them through the laborious process involved in securing land tenure and building their own homes

However, the state soon found it could not deliver social change at the rate of need or expectation. In 1996, they adopted 'trickle down' neoliberal economic policies. This shift, and the combination of new policies that did not translate effectively at local level meant that their housing programme ground to a halt. Out of frustration, the PD and the VM women joined in a partnership with the state to hasten the delivery of housing and the subsidies. This led to tensions and conflicts familiar to many who enter these treacherous waters, and gradually the housing movement became fragmented and the Federation split up.

Ismail develops a thoughtful critique of popular education models and observes that the VM women's vision of popular education and development did not include any questioning of the larger political and economic framework, and this influenced the manner in which they engaged with the state - as others have also observed (Kane 2013). Their impressive and important work was unsustainable once the storms of neoliberalism and ineffective bureaucracy hit them. Trying to work in partnership with the state and becoming involved in service delivery weakened them and left them no room to manoeuvre or negotiate. There was no alternative vision to offer, no counter discourse developed, and no capacity to mobilise independently.

This book raises many questions about the scope and longer term aims of radical popular education and makes an excellent contribution to ongoing debates which practitioners will find well-grounded in practice, comprehensive, and thought-provoking.

**References**

Kane, L (2013) Comparing ‘Popular’ and ‘State’ education in Latin America and Europe,  
*European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, Vol.4, No.1, 2013, pp. 81-96

**Jane Jones**

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