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An assessment of women's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa

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Abstract

Apartheid (apartness) in South Africa was one of the most discriminatory and inhuman regime of the twentieth century. The country saw suffering and bloodshed on a scale and in an incomprehensible fashion, which pushed South African black women into action. Apartheid adversely affected the life of blacks and in order to get rid of the excruciating discrimination and humiliation, South African black and women of colour launched an intensive anti-apartheid movement, and they played a very significant role by defying existing cultural and societal norms. This paper seeks to assess the role played by women in shaping the anti-apartheid movement by focussing on Pass laws, forced removal, women's representation in the fight for equality, rights, and freedom.

Keywords: *Afrikaan*, apartheid, Bantu education, pass laws, resistance, segregation

Introduction

Apartheid affected African men and women alike. In traditional patriarchal South African society women had no political or social standing, and their access to means of sustenance depended upon their subservience to a chief and appendage to a male relative or spouse. Amadiume (1997) ^[1] points out that even though motherhood gave great responsibilities, custody and guardianship over children rested with men. Moreover, poor women carried primary responsibilities of providing for their families, both materially and domestically. The condition of African women worsened in apartheid, South Africa. As Cutrufelli (1983) ^[4] rightly opines, African women were oppressed as Africans and also as women. They were "Forced to become heads of families when their men left to work in cities and mines, women assumed responsibilities of their absent men. They built dwellings, supported families and farmed lands" (Cutrufelli 1983) ^[4]. They became the backbone of the nation, keeping the home fires burning literally and figuratively. Though impoverished, brutalised, and abused, they refused to be vanquished. Indeed African women have been a dynamic force in the struggle against apartheid.

Life under apartheid and roots of struggle

Pass laws in South Africa drastically restricted and regulated the independence of women. In 1930 and 1937, municipalities were empowered to prevent African women from entering their areas to look for work. And in 1956 women were included in the all-embracing and rigid legislation (Lazar 1993: 13) ^[9]. Thus in order to live or work women had to seek permission from the authorities. They had to carry a stamped pass book and they were not allowed to stay for more than seventy-two hours in any urban area without special permission. To protest this unjust law, African women organised the first political protest in 1913 in the Orange Free State. They worked alongside their men and were engaged in strikes and bold militant protest against the imposition of passes. This protest was inspired by their role as women's, as mothers and as homemakers keeping in view the permanent urbanisation. Despite their petitions and complains to the authorities about the maltreatment and abuse by police and security forces, bureaucracy and municipal officials, most of the women were arrested and out in prison for disobeying the pass laws. Later this inspired them to have a passive resistance. And women from all over the Orange Free State participated in this. This led to the formation of one of the earliest politically motivated women's organisation, the Orange Free State Native and Colored Women's Association (Wilford 1998: 69) ^[25].

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As a direct result of this campaign, the Bantu Women's League, part of the African National Congress, was formed. Gradually, black women joined the struggle, and they became politically active within the African National Congress, African People's Organisation (APO), Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), Pan-Africanist Congress and various trade unions.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a steady increase in the number of women moving to Johannesburg as the city provided ample opportunities. Schools run by missionaries were made available. Jobs in white homes were also available. This further continued in the sphere of shops and factories too. Educated African women found employment in nursing, midwifery and social work while the less educated found jobs as waitresses, working in shops or as domestic workers in white homes. A burgeoning informal service sector was monopolised by women as hawkers, beer brewers, dressmakers and washerwomen (Wilford 1998: 66) ^[25]. Even though their protest could not succeed in having the pass laws overruled it helped pave the way for formation of different women's national movements.

1940s-1950s formation of ANC women league and other organisations

During this period women emerged at the forefront as political leaders. They raised their voices against many forms of oppression and other issues like lack of housing, food shortage, and indiscriminate arrests. In 1943 the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) was formed with Madie-Hall Xuma as its first president. They protested against a statute empowering a government minister to ban an individual on the basis of certain acts, such as the suppression of Communism Act of 1950. When the National Party came to power in 1948, it quickly enforced apartheid and more encompassing discriminatory laws were introduced to ensure the supremacy of whites (Lazar 1993: 35) ^[9].

In Alexandria Township and the Vaal Triangle women joined a bus boycott to protest against increase in the price of bus tickets. At dusk and dawn, nurses, domestic helps, and township dwellers walked long distances to and from work. The boycott was successful and bus tickets were reverted to their old price.

With chronic shortage of housing squatter camps started mushrooming everywhere. Consequently the government relocated the squatters in remote areas without basic amenities. The country seethed with unrest and events forced the ANC into an activist role and it launched a country-wide Defiance Campaign of civil disobedience against the government. As men were away in cities, women became increasingly involved in squatter movements. They ignored the repressive laws and continued to protest non-violently. Among women activists, Anna Silinga stands out. Described as "Veteran battle axe", Silinga refused to carry the statutory pass until the day she died. A gutsy fighter, she was the first African woman to sit in a "whites-only" waiting room at the station (Lazar 1993: 36) ^[9].

On 17 April 1954, women from all over the country joined together to form the embryonic Federation of South African Women (FSAW). Its main goal was to mobilise women as a support base to expand the scope of women's work within the national liberation movement. From its inception the organisation directed its protests against the Pass laws. Their protests were defiant, vociferous but non-violent. The FSAW brought together a broad front of women's

organisations and included the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO), etc. The FSAW organised historic march of 20,000 women to Pretoria in 1956 became a symbol of women's determination and strength (Wilford 1998: 71) ^[25]. Young and old women came from all South Africa by bus, train, car and many had walked, some with babies on their back in real traditional African style. It was a momentous occasion and one that has inspired South Africa ever since (Lazar 1993: 39) ^[9].

By mid-1950s, the state government was determined to limit further urbanisation and to halt the influx of women. State repression grew and political work became increasingly difficult as supporters and leaders continued to be arrested, detained, banned and banished. By early 1960s the FSAW, though never actually banned was effectively moribund.

In 1955, six white women formed the Defence of the Constitution League (DCL) which was later renamed the Black Sash. It was established as a result of anger over a bill introduced by the government to remove Cape Coloured voters from the common voters' roll, and they called upon all white women to protest against the government's destruction of the existing constitution (Lazar 1993: 37) ^[9]. The demonstrators wore distinctive black mourning sashes, symbolising mourning for lack of basic constitutional rights for people other than Whites in South Africa. They used their whiteness to challenge the white minority government and its puppet vigilantes with the knowledge that their white skin protects them from attack. They ceaselessly monitored and provided vital services to people affected by repressive laws and dealt with problems resulting from the policy of apartheid-detention without trial, forced removals, pass offenses, township violence, hunger relief, aid for squatters, legal aid for the under privileged, etc. They initiated the "Free the Children" campaign which drew together human rights organisations to protest detention of children. Among white activists, Helen Suzman was a force to reckon with. A valiant White parliamentarian and a fearless debater Suzman was the only voice to champion the cause of the oppressed and she remained the only contact between many black political leaders and their family for 46 years as she vigorously opposed apartheid and represented the values of liberalism. Helen Suzman's lifelong efforts demonstrate how apartheid in South Africa brought together women of conviction and strength from all races and walks of life.

In 1958 an ANC led anti-campaign called upon women to come to Johannesburg City Hall with a letter of protest addressed to the Johannesburg mayor urging him not to issue passes to African Women. In twos and threes they came because they were not prepared to take the pass or *dompas* (Afrikaan word meaning "dumb pass"). The protests culminated in a march of thirty five hundred women through the city streets. But as they were marching the police mounted a brutal baton charge without any provocation. Hundreds of women were arrested and loaded into *kwelas-kwelas* or police pick up vans and driven off to jail. Finally in 1963, after seven bitter years of anti-pass campaign African women were forced to take passes in order to acquire employment. As the Africans were still trying to come to terms with this insensitive decision, tragedy struck in the form of the unfortunate Sharpville Massacre.

1960s: Sharpville Massacre and Increasing Role of Women

Sharpsville Massacre baptised the 1960s in blood. On 21 March 1960, hundreds of unarmed anti-pass protestors stood silently in an act of passive resistance outside the police station in Sharpsville in the Transvaal (Lazar 1993: 66) ^[9] refusing to carry passes. But the police suddenly opened fire and within forty seconds, sixty nine demonstrators lay dead. In his book "Shooting at Sharpsville", Bishop Anbrose Reeves wrote: "So 216 families and over 500 children are paying the dreadful price of 40 second of uncontrollable firing at Sharpsville. The toll of irresponsibility finds its expression in amputations... wives left widows and children fatherless" (Lazar 1993: 66) ^[9]. The authorities immediately clamped down on liberation movements. Bans, detentions and arrests escalated and a State of Emergency was proclaimed. This incident further pushed resistance organisations towards violent retaliation and the government introduced more draconian laws to crush anti-apartheid struggle. The Unlawful Organisations Act of 1960, Defence Act, Police Amendment Act, General Laws Amendment Act of 1961, etc. all aided the state in viciously restraining anti-apartheid protests. The Federation of South African women was particularly hard hit when most of its leaders and supporters were banned or imprisoned. There was grass-roots resilience among the people and they continued the struggle, albeit clandestinely.

Under the Native Administration Act of 1927 and later amendments, those who opposed the government and gathered anti-government support were physically removed from their familiar environment and banished to remote areas. This was an effective way of silencing opponents because those banished were placed among different tribes with whom they were unable to communicate. Subsequently in the wilderness many disappeared and some even starved to death. It was women activists like Helen Joseph and Amina Cachalia who disclosed this brutality to the world media. Their aim was first to ensure that the banished were still alive, then second to draw the attention of the civilized world to their plight.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of many leading women in the struggle. Winnie Mandela, the first African social worker in South Africa was twenty four when she married ANC leader Nelson Mandela in 1958. She was banned under the Suppression of Commission Act 1950 from 1962 to 1975 and later detained under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act in 1969. In 1970, she was acquitted, then banned again and placed under house arrest (Lazar 1993: 71) ^[9]. Throughout perpetual government harassment, Winnie Mandela stayed at the forefront of the struggle and became the symbol of the struggle. She was banished to the godforsaken town of Brandfort in the Orange Free State. However within weeks Winnie Mandela organized a form of resistance to racist opposition. She ignored the "whites only" sign in the local stores and used the whites' entrances. The township people followed her example and have done so ever since.

With the formation of a Domestic Workers Union in the 1960s women also became more active in trade unions and workplaces. Gradually state prisons filled to overflowing with pass offenders. Thousands of women spent long nights on icy cement floors. When arrested they sang and raised their fists in the ANC freedom salute and it was in this climate that the Black Consciousness Movement gained momentum.

1970s: Black Consciousness Movement and Soweto Uprising

During this critical moment young black South Africans embraced the Black Consciousness movement and became increasingly politicized but it was womenfolk who came out into police. The issue that sparked Soweto uprising was education. For decades Whites received the most superior education while African schools fell under the Department of Bantu Education which was grossly inferior. In mid 1970s the government decided to replace English with *Afrikaans* as the medium of instruction in African schools. African children themselves were frustrated and bitter. Moreover they saw *Afrikaans* as a language of the oppressor. On June 16, 1976 as thousands of students converged at Orlonde West High School to protest against this issue the police panicked and started firing indiscriminately. Thirteen-year-old Hector Peterson was shot dead on the spot. The students' anger exploded. Rioting broke out and spread to other townships. Over six hundred people lost their lives in the ensuing violence. Girls became equally militant and many joined underground liberation movements and thousands left the country to train in guerrilla warfare with the sole intention of returning to overthrow the apartheid regime.

After Steve Biko died in police custody in 1977, his wife Ntsiki emerged as one of South Africa's unsung heroes and she is still considered a role model by South African women. Biko's friend and associate Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, an exile in Tanzania established a clinic for the community and tended to her patients under most restrictive banning orders. This demonstrates the extraordinary calibre of remarkable women who rose above severe hardship and repression.

The 1980s were marked by armed resistance with women and children on the forefront. With the rise of armed underground movements and use of violence by government security forces, townships and squatter camps started to resemble war zones. Shortly after the ban on ANC and Pan African Congress in 1960, ANC supporters formed *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) while militant PAC members formed *Pogo* (abbreviation of *Xhosa* name *UmAfrikaPoqeo* meaning "blacks only") (Lazar 1993: 96) ^[9].

The year 1983 was famous for the formation of the United Democratic Front, a united political resistance against the government. The UDF with more than six hundred affiliated organisations publicly acknowledged its intention to set up alternative systems of local government based on the concept of participatory democracy by focussing on local concerns to their particular constituencies (Nelson & Chaudhury 1994: 664) ^[14]. The regionally based women's organisations in the UDF included the United Women's Organisation in the Western Cape, Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), Natal Organization of Women (NOW) and the Port Elizabeth Women's Organization. The driving force in the organisation were younger women who were very conscious of the different political conditions pertaining in the 1980s. They successfully trained women in women empowerment, organisational and leadership skills. As they prioritised women's needs and recognise the need to organise separately, mobilisation was crucially tied to national liberation which meant dismantling of apartheid.

In December 1985 the Congress of South Africa Trade Union (COSATU) was formed. Here women workers

played a major role in industrial stopover actions in 1985 and 1986 including strikes, work stoppages, go slows, working to rule, etc. They also participated in local, regional and national stayaways which marked the rising militancy of workers. Under the state of emergency women had to put up with raids and harassment and also tackle the problem as homemakers as well as activists. Government forces continue to detain thousands of activists. They were questioned, tortured and tried for series of acts which was construed as endangering the state. Many women were immobilised by having to leave their homes and hide, and of about 52,000 people detained over the years, 12% were women (Nelson & Chaudhury 1994: 647) ^[14]. Consequently the state of emergency showed the need for much greater involvement of women in the struggle and a new consciousness emerged.

This consciousness manifested in the Port Alfred Women's stayaway in May 1986. For ten days, all African women of Port Alfred stayed away from work to protest the release of a man who was detained for less than eight hours after he raped an elderly woman and also to protest against detention of six school girls who were attacked by security forces. Following a meeting to mark International Children's Day (1 June, 1986), women of Chesterville wrapped themselves in blankets to keep guard over their street throughout the night to counter the violence being meted out against their children in night raids by state-sponsored vigilantes (Diepen 1988: 105) ^[6].

Regarding forced removals in South Africa, the story of Bakwena ba Mogoba is remarkable. For more than 70 years, 500 families of Bakwena ba Mogoba people lived on two community farms in the Western Transvaal. The government regarded this land 'a black spot' in an area designated white and thus began the removal by knocking down houses, schools, churches and medical centres. One significant aspect of the forced removal was the way it impacted the womenfolk. They were at the frontline because their material well-being was more directly affected than that of men. The women dug open graves and warned officials that their corpses would have to be thrown into the graves before they would agree to be moved. Often after facing "hysterical, angry women", officials were more than willing to deal with male representatives of the community. The women's open confrontational style was both a strategy and an emotional response to the crisis.

The Federation of South African Women or FEDSAW which was established in 1986 in Western Cape brought women together around specific issues like unemployment, housing, health, education, children, family, violence against women, culture, media, representation, and religion. On 30 November 1990 eight nighttime marches were held in different parts of the Western Cape calling on women to "take back the night". The size of the marches ranged from 100 to 2,000 women (Nelson & Chaudhary 1994: 649) ^[14]. FEDSAW can claim two specific achievements. First, it brought together women from different ideological background. Secondly, it challenged the existence of racially segregated "separate amenities" like hospitals and schools. The campaign brought black people arriving en masse at hospitals designated for white people. The publicity so embarrassed the government that it agreed to desegregate hospitals and move towards resolving the education crisis.

Women against Repression (WAR) was set up in 1989 with an aim to publicise repression and put pressure on the

government to lift the emergency. It organised workshops and demanded responsible policing in the context of increasing township violence. And in May 1990 women of Transvaal formed the Rural Women's Movement to empower rural African women to ensure their voice was heard in the debate on a new constitution.

These campaigns were nails in the apartheid coffin. They showed the government that even from inside the jails and prison people would not tolerate oppression any longer.

On February 2, 1990, President de Klerk unbanned all resistance movements; a week later, he released Nelson Mandela from prison (Lazar 1993: 98) ^[9]. Apartheid was officially abolished on February 1, 1991 when President de Klerk announced the proposed scrapping of repressive legislations, the Group Areas Act, Population Registration Act, and the Land Act (Lazar 1993: 98) ^[9]. This announcement inaugurated a new form of politics and a new era in South Africa's history, cautiously termed "transition". Apartheid "sliced and diced South Africans" (Macdonald 2006: 92) ^[13] and created yawning gulf between women of different race, class and ethnic background but the developments in post-apartheid South Africa created an important opportunity for women to mobilise the support of Parliament to move women's issues from the margin to the centre of politics. The democratic process also gave rise to a constitution which entrenches a Bill of Rights in Chapter 2 of the New Constitution. Gender equality has been enshrined in Section 2(9) of the Bill of Rights of the Republic of South Africa's Constitution. Chapter 9 of the new constitution provided for establishing the Commission for Gender Equality in post-apartheid South Africa (Burger 1997: 340) ^[3]. It is empowered to evaluate and make recommendations to Parliament on matters that affect the status of women or any other legislation which the Commission deems necessary. Post-apartheid South Africa has adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Conclusion

To sum-up, breaking the shackles of patriarchy and age-old traditions, the women in South Africa actively took part in the long-drawn and largely nonviolent movement against the Apartheid regime. The protection of land, livelihood and life of black and coloured people from white supremacist regime forced the women to fight for their rights. They were politically active within the rank and file of African National Congress, African People's Organisation, Communist Party of South Africa, Pan-Africanist Congress and various trade unions. Their large scale participation in anti-apartheid movement not only gave a space for women to resist Apartheid rule, it also gave an opportunity for them to shape the constitution of free South Africa. As a consequence, the provisions advocating gender justice and equal rights for women are enshrined prominently in the constitution.

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