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**Mothers of the Nation:
The Intersection of Motherhood and Activism in Women's Fight Against Apartheid in South
Africa, 1948-1994**

*Golda Bonjean-Alpart*¹

Introduction

The subject of motherhood is essential to discussions surrounding female activism in South Africa under apartheid (1948–1994). As Siphokazi Magadla explains in her book *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, “Apartheid violence was felt in intimate spaces both inside and outside South Africa.”² It is in these “intimate spaces” that mothering occurs, where children are nurtured, taught, protected, and can find familial comfort and belonging. South Africa’s oppressive practice of fracturing families through displacement and detention transformed such private places, shaping mothering and caregiving according to state violence. Motherhood was thus rendered political.

This politicization mattered all the more as most adult African women were already mothers when apartheid was officially instituted in South Africa in 1948. One study revealed that the total fertility rate for South African women was more than six children per woman in 1950.³ Among African women born in the ‘homelands,’ or Bantustans, in the late 1930s, childlessness never exceeded 4 percent.⁴ Motherhood was thus a biological reality for most South African women.

For many South African women, motherhood fueled political resistance. South African mothers who resisted were often driven by love, anger, and the urgent desire to protect their children from a violent system. They fought for not only the nation but also their own children, granting them a moral and political platform from which they could criticize apartheid. However, the maternal identity that gave women moral authority also limited them. Mothers were vulnerable to state violence and psychological torture; their ‘motherly’ obligations could be a discouraging force, and they risked

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² Siphokazi Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa* (Routledge, 2015), p. 96.

³ Johan Norling, “Family Planning and Fertility in South Africa under Apartheid,” *European Review of Economic History* 23:3 (August, 2019): p. 365

<https://doi.org/10.1093/ereh/hey016>

⁴ Norling, “Family Planning and Fertility in South Africa under Apartheid,” p. 379.

vilification by the media. Militancy came at a cost, but it was far from being incompatible with motherhood.

In her article, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth-Century South Africa,” Cherryl Walker defines motherhood according to three related but distinct identities: the actual practice of motherhood, the discourse of motherhood, and “motherhood as a social identity.” The practice refers to the actual lived labor and responsibilities of mothering (physical and emotional care, childbirth, etc.). The second dimension is the discourse around motherhood, which reflects the cultural and political norms of “the Good Mother” and womanhood, and which “inform and orders the practice.” The last identity, “social identity,” is how women understand themselves as mothers among multiple identities (worker, wife, friend, etc.); it is “informed by the discourse of motherhood, mediated by the practice of mothering, but not a simple derivative of either.”⁵

This paper examines motherhood as lived practice, political discourse, and social identity across household labor, protest, detention, propaganda, and media scandal. It argues that during apartheid, female activists faced maternal suffering that could fuel militancy. Their maternal vulnerability conferred moral legitimacy, and that legitimacy was then targeted by the apartheid state through psychological warfare. In turn, repression reshaped women’s militancy and their relationship to motherhood itself. Drawing on Walker’s multidimensional conception of motherhood, this paper contends that motherhood was neither a purely private identity, a simple patriarchal imposition, nor a uniform experience. Instead, it operated through a complex feedback loop in which motherhood could simultaneously motivate resistance, generate moral authority, and expose women to new forms of repression.

Background

The formalization of apartheid in South Africa in 1948 legalized and institutionalized racial segregation and domination as a systematic state policy. South Africa’s population was segregated according to rigid racial hierarchies: White, African, or Colored. Black South Africans were disenfranchised and, through countless laws, limited in their access to political representation, economic opportunities, education, land ownership, property, and fundamental human rights.⁶ Under apartheid, millions of South Africans were forcibly removed from their homes to create

⁵ Cherryl Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21:3 (1995): pp. 424-6.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637252>.

⁶ Elizabeth S. Landis, “Apartheid Legislation,” *Africa Today* 4:6 (1957): pp. 45–8.

White-designated areas, relocating them to overcrowded, impoverished ‘Bantustans.’⁷ Outside their designated ‘homelands,’ they lacked citizenship. In White areas, South Africans had temporary residency as laborers, provided they complied with pass laws requiring them to carry documents identifying their race and identity.⁸

Laws under apartheid were also designed to restrict gathering, protest, and resistance. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 made it a crime to protest any racial law, enabled the Minister of Justice to prohibit individuals from attending meetings, and criminalized “communism” while defining it broadly enough to include any plot to instigate change through “disorder or unlawful acts.” Other apartheid laws restricting protests, resistance, and assembly included the Riotous Assemblies Act and the Public Safety and Criminal Law Amendment Act.⁹ Draconian laws also allowed superintendents to expel people they deemed not “fit and proper persons” from townships, which specifically targeted freedom fighters.¹⁰

The battle against apartheid was particularly challenging for African women as they had to confront the systemic oppression of apartheid, coupled with deeply entrenched patriarchal structures.¹¹ In many African precolonial societies, motherhood and fertility carried significant social status.¹² While fertility continues to be highly regarded and the 20th century saw an “uncoupling of marriage and motherhood,” the dominant discourse that arrived in South Africa with capitalism and colonialism reshaped not only the opportunities available to women but also their political choices.¹³ Maternal identities were impacted by “Euro-Christian and Victorian notions of ‘the Good Mother,’”¹⁴ as well as Western patriarchal ideals that women should be submissive to men.

Apartheid then reinforced this patriarchal ideology.¹⁵ In 1952, for illustration, pass laws, controlling Africans’ entry and residence in urban areas, were extended to women. Those who did not live in urban areas since birth or have worked there for at least 15 years could not remain in an urban area for more than 72 hours. Women, constituting a small percentage of the workforce, were

⁷Gay W. Seidman, introduction to *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography*, by Emma Mashinini (Pan Macmillan South Africa, 2012), Kindle loc. p. 376.

⁸ Seidman, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, (2012), Kindle loc. p. 406.

⁹ Landis, “Apartheid Legislation,” pp. 45-46.

¹⁰ “Draconian Laws.” *VOW: Voice of Women*, (Lusaka, Zambia: Third Quarter, 1977), p. 14.

¹¹ Emily Bridger, “Soweto’s Female Comrades: Gender, Youth and Violence in South Africa’s Township Uprisings, 1984–1990.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 4 (2018): p. 571.

¹² Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 430.

¹³ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 433.

¹⁴ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 432.

¹⁵ Brigitte Mabandla and Amy Biehl, “‘God-Given’ Oppression Upheld by Tradition,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 20 (1993): pp. 5–8.

particularly affected.¹⁶ Under the migrant labor system, men worked away from their families in White-designated areas, while pass laws confined women and their children to rural homelands.¹⁷ In rural areas, women's work involved domestic work and farming,¹⁸ yielding low wages and poor working conditions.¹⁹ After the Bantu Laws Amendment Act, passed in 1964, women who lost their husbands, whether it be to death, imprisonment, or separation, were barred from residing in urban areas altogether.²⁰ Although more women began earning incomes in formal workplaces in the 1970s, they were still paid low wages, earned less than their male counterparts, faced ongoing abuse from their employers, and, in addition, continued to endure apartheid laws restricting their ability to organize and protest.²¹

Despite the brutalities of apartheid and the risks of political mobilization, South African women mobilized through organizations like the African National Congress (ANC), which was founded in 1912 but formally admitted women in 1943.²² In 1954, the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW or FSAW) was established, uniting South African women "with a common action for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities."²³ The FEDSAW also led mass mobilizations like the 1956 Women's March against pass laws.²⁴ Women fought as soldiers in the ANC's military branch, the MK. They also were part of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), participating in their combat operations as Poqo soldiers.²⁵ When the ANC and PAC were banned, women continued to participate in underground activities.²⁶ The 1970s witnessed hundreds of thousands of South Africans going on strike for better treatment, higher wages, and union representation. By the 1980s, the government officially recognized trade unions, in which women's

¹⁶ Elaine Unterhalter, "Women in Struggle: South Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 5:4 (1983): pp. 887-888.

¹⁷ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. p. 483.

¹⁸ Unterhalter, "Women in Struggle," pp. 887-8.

¹⁹ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. p. 469.

²⁰ Unterhalter, "Women in Struggle: South Africa," p. 888.

²¹ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. pp. 544-74

²² Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 15.

²³ South African History Online, "History of Women's Struggle in South Africa," 21 March 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-womens-struggle-south-africa>.

²⁴ Polo Belina Moji, "And She Didn't Die: Interview with Lauretta Ngcobo in Johannesburg," *Agenda* 28, no. 2 (2014): pp. 92-97.

²⁵ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 89.

²⁶ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 33.

leadership and contributions were integral. Through protesting their employers, they protested the greater enemy, the South African government,²⁷ and their enforcement of racial and gender hierarchy.

Apartheid formally ended in 1994, marking the beginning of a long process of rebuilding and healing. Black South Africans were finally afforded legal and political equality, but the legacy of apartheid continues, especially in the form of economic inequality. As long as people do not have the means to leave townships and live elsewhere, “apartheid-defined geographical spaces” remain.²⁸ Siphokazi Magadla explained that most of the women she interviewed in post-apartheid South Africa “have transitioned from a life of struggle to a preoccupation with piecing together their lives and those of their extended families at a great physical and psychological cost.”²⁹ That is to say, activism did not end with the end of apartheid. As Magadla put it, “South Africa is labelled the ‘protest capital of the world’, meaning that political struggle continues after apartheid.”³⁰

Historiography

The concept of motherhood has been identified differently across cultures and time, which is extensively articulated by Cherryl Walker’s journal article “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth-Century South Africa.” Cherryl Walker identifies two flawed camps that she has seen feminist debates on motherhood as a political identity fall into. The first camp of literature conflates motherhood with “patriarchal collusion,” which Walker critiques as being too focused on dominant ideologies rather than the lived meaning of motherhood. Literature in the second camp embraces motherhood’s capacity to be empowering but in doing so draws polarized dichotomies in which Western motherhood is passive, while Black motherhood is militant.³¹ This paper utilizes Walker’s less restrictive approach to motherhood, defined earlier, tracing how maternal identity, state repression, and political militancy interacted dynamically.

In doing so, this paper builds on existing scholarship demonstrating the compatibility of motherhood with militancy and activism. Emily Bridger’s “Soweto’s Female Comrades,” Natacha Filippi’s investigation into “Women’s Protests: Gender, Imprisonment, and Resistance in South Africa,” Shireen Hassim’s article, “Nationalism, Feminism, and Autonomy: The ANC in Exile and the Women,” and Siphokazi Magadla’s book *Guerillas and Combative Mothers* illustrate how militancy and motherhood coexisted. Meanwhile, Frene Ginwala’s “Women and the African National Congress 1912-1943” is used to showcase the more domestic roles mothers played in the resistance movement.

²⁷ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. pp. 544-74.

²⁸ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 152.

²⁹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 153.

³⁰ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 154.

³¹ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” pp. 419-23.

This paper brings together the varied forms of activism discussed in scholarly articles and books to demonstrate how motherhood permeated a range of resistance practices.

Personal accounts have especially informed this paper's exploration of activism in relation to motherhood as a social identity and practice. Autobiographies such as Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Winnie Nomzamo Madikizela-Mandela's memoir *491 Days*, and Ruth First's *117 Days* provide firsthand accounts of the emotional and physical toll of balancing activism with maternal responsibilities under the harsh realities of apartheid. This essay also analyzes firsthand accounts from *Women of Phokeng* by Bozzoli to show the dynamics influencing women's roles in and motivations behind their participation. The personal narratives of mothers who participated in the 1956 Women's March, like Lilian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi, and Pamela Brooks' and Frances Baard's *My Spirit is Not Banned* also illuminate the central role of maternal identity in mobilization efforts. This paper has especially benefited from Siphokazi Magadla's interviews with female combatants put forth in *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*. Other personal narratives in this paper have come from testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which provides firsthand accounts of the unique torture South African mothers faced under apartheid (1948–1994). Together, these primary sources help illustrate “women's own construction of an identity as mothers,”³² while informing their personal practice and experience of motherhood. Additionally, Nelson Mandela's statements about his wife, Madikizela-Mandela, further build upon the intersectionality of anti-apartheid resistance and motherhood, informing how mothers positioned themselves among multiple identities.

Along with first-hand accounts of women who participated in the 1956 Women's March, this paper utilizes a 1975 report by the United Nations Centre against apartheid for its portrayal of the mass demonstration. Pamela E. Brooks' “‘We Will Not Ride!’ — ‘We Don't Want Passes!’: South African Women Rising in Political Movement, 1950–1960” contextualizes women's participation in the protest against pass laws. These sources on women's participation in the Pass Campaign further situate motherhood as a social identity expressed by nurturing as well as militant practices within the liberation movement.

Motherhood as a discourse is a prominent theme in this paper's exploration of motherhood as a political and moral platform. Articles from the magazine *Voice of Women*, obtained from the Amistad Research Center, and *Sechaba* show how organizations like the ANC leveraged maternal identities to garner support and solidarity. FSAW's “Women's Charter” explicitly discusses the motivations behind their resistance to apartheid, which encompasses safeguarding the nation's children's future. Additionally, Kim Miller's “Moms with Guns” has partially informed this essay's analysis of the intersection of motherhood and activism. Miller articulates how the ANC's idealization of mothers

³² Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” pp. 419-23.

diverged from their actual treatment of mothers, but her discussion is limited to ANC visual culture.³³ This paper relates such visual culture to the actual practice of mothering. The self-image of mothers within such organizations is also explored because, as Walker highlights, “Neither mother’s practice nor their self-image can simply be ‘read off’ from political rhetoric.”³⁴ Interviews with activists like Thenjiwe Mtintso shed light on women’s experiences in the male-dominated world of activism, engaging motherhood as a gendered political discourse shaping participation.

Motherhood’s “discourse” dimension also figures in the last section’s discussion on the limits of militancy. Newspapers from the 1990s, specifically as it relates to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s “fall from grace,” obtained from the Amistad Research Center, and Newspapers.com are used in this section. Bridger’s “‘From Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Lady Macbeth’: Winnie Mandela and Perceptions of Female Violence in South Africa, 1985-91” also gives context to Winnie Nomzamo Madikizela-Mandela’s demonization as it relates to her militancy, which is corroborated from the newspapers during that time. Primary sources obtained from the Amistad Research Center also include testimony from the TRC on Madikizela-Mandela’s trial, which supports an existing tension between militancy and motherhood.

Despite a reinforcing relationship between militancy and motherhood, Western feminism has critiqued ‘motherhood’ as a patriarchal construct. However, motherhood should not be reduced to a mere imposition on women by men.³⁵ Cherryl Walker explains in her analysis of motherhood in twentieth-century South Africa that motherhood’s linkage with patriarchy comes from Westernization and colonial Christian ideals. There is nothing intrinsically anti-feminist or anti-militant about motherhood. Instead, it is the idealization and institutionalization of motherhood that denies women the pursuit of their personal, professional, and political aspirations, which is anti-feminist.³⁶

While there exists substantial scholarship demonstrating how motherhood and militancy coexist, as Walker suggests, the scholarship on this topic can still benefit from an approach that integrates the many different dimensions of motherhood. Scholars such as Selina Makana have raised the analytical bar in ways that inform this essay. In her article, “Patriotic Motherhood,” she argued that “for Angolan women who had experienced multiple levels of oppression under colonialism, their pain was not an end in itself because it fueled their activism.”³⁷ Such work demonstrates that these dynamics are not unique to apartheid South Africa, but were present across contexts of colonial rule.

³³ Kim Miller, “Moms with Guns: Women’s Political Agency in Anti-Apartheid Visual Culture,” *African Arts* 42, 2 (2009).

³⁴ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 426.

³⁵ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 417.

³⁶ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 419.

³⁷ Makana, “Patriotic Motherhood,” p. 363.

This paper extends an integrative approach, tracing how maternal identity, state repression, and political militancy interacted dynamically and across identities, but situates this dynamic in South Africa. By building on existing research and centering personal narratives, this paper argues that motherhood was lived practice, political discourse, psychological identity, a source of power and constraint, all at once, and the apartheid experience of motherhood, particularly its targeting of maternal vulnerability, reshaped these dimensions and their relationship to women's resistance.

Dual Burden of Motherhood and Activism

While navigating both racial and gender discrimination, South African women managed childcare, homemaking, and working for an income, even when a husband was present. Mothers worked to support themselves and their families since their husbands' income was often insufficient.³⁸ Emma Mashinini, a trade union activist who spent her life challenging the apartheid regime, illustrated the immense responsibilities that accompanied being a Black woman, mother, wife, and provider. She began work at 7 am, spent her day thinking of her children, and returned home around 7 pm. Her evening responsibilities included chopping wood, gathering coal, clearing ash for a fire, emptying dirty water from the basin to wash her children and husband, picking up dirty clothes, and cooking dinner for her family. Before bed, she would prepare for the next day's morning by laying out her children's uniforms and preparing breakfast. When Mashinini's husband got out of work, on the other hand, he spent his evening sitting and reading the newspaper. She said, "It was just the order of the day that I had to do everything. And if, after he washed, he emptied the water instead of just leaving it to stand, I would be so grateful. I would feel that was so nice of him."³⁹ A minor act of assistance, clearing the basin from one's *own* wash, was an extraordinary gesture to Mashinini, illustrating unequal distribution of responsibilities in which women bore the brunt of household work and family management while also bringing in income.

The migrant labor system further reinforced this unbalanced division of labor between men and women by separating men from their economically dependent wives and children.⁴⁰ The United Nations Centre against Apartheid recognized this when they published a document in 1975 bringing attention to Black women's struggle and gendered injustice: "No one feels the pains of the migratory labour laws more than the black woman who is left alone to till the land, build the home, educate and bring up the children single-handed."⁴¹

³⁸ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. p. 468.

³⁹ Emma Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography* (Pan Macmillan South Africa, 2012), Kindle loc. p. 872.

⁴⁰ Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. p. 454.

⁴¹ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, *Women against Apartheid in South Africa*.

Many women found themselves single mothers and sole breadwinners due to not only labor migration, but also unstable marriages, and their husbands' imprisonment.⁴² Since both law and coloniality subjected South African women to their husbands once they married, victims of domestic abuse often wore their bruises in silence until they could acquire the courage, strength, and necessary arrangements to leave their husbands. Mashinini, for example, despite valuing the family unit, left her first husband due to consistent abuse.⁴³ Other mothers "lost" their husbands due to imprisonment. Nelson Mandela, who spent his child-rearing years in prison, acknowledged this when he noted that his wife "accepted the onerous burden of raising our children on her own."⁴⁴

Despite the already overwhelming demands placed on South African mothers to provide for their families and maintain their households, oftentimes done independently, in the 1970s, they increasingly participated in the struggle for liberation as the nation's "mothers." The activist work of Madikizela-Mandela and her association with Nelson Mandela, for example, earned her the title "Mother of the Nation."⁴⁵ Similarly, Lilian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi, an anti-apartheid activist and President of the Women's League in 1956, is known as the "Mother of the Black Resistance in South Africa."⁴⁶

Domestic duties were largely assigned to women within organizations like the ANC,⁴⁷ contributing to their designation as "mothers of the nation." Even when they were denied full membership from the ANC, the wives of ANC members were considered auxiliary members who were responsible for housing men, providing them with "suitable shelter and entertainment."⁴⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s, the roles of the Women's Section of the ANC included establishing childcare facilities and managing food and clothing donations.⁴⁹ Women fed the ANC soldiers, whom they regarded as "their children with needs."⁵⁰ As Makana argues, "If good citizenship meant giving oneself

⁴² Seidman, introduction, Kindle loc. p. 483.

⁴³ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. 2069.

⁴⁴ Nelson R. Mandela, "Statement by Nelson Mandela on Winnie Mandela," 13 April 1992, ANC-DIP, transmitted by ECCSA at 12:21: p.50.

⁴⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Winnie Madikizela-Mandela," Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 July, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Winnie-Madikizela-Mandela>.

⁴⁶ Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, "South African History Online, 22 September 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/lilian-masediba-ngoyi>

⁴⁷ Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," 420.

⁴⁸ Frene Ginwala, "Women and the African National Congress 1912-1943," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 8 (1990): p. 84.

⁴⁹ Hassim, "Nationalism, Feminism and Autonomy," p. 435.

⁵⁰ Raymond Sutter, "Women in the ANC-Led Underground" in *ANC Underground in South Africa*, Jacana Media, (2008), p. 244.

to the struggle, then motherhood had to be taken as a kind of productive labor that entailed taking care of the soldiers.”⁵¹ Women’s roles as mothers thus extended from their biological children to the entire nation, assigning them a distinct role within the liberation movement.⁵² They also supported fellow mothers in the movement, mentoring them in raising and caring for their children,⁵³ and caring for children whose mothers were arrested. Therefore, the ability of militant mothers to protest and risk imprisonment depended on the support of other, less militant, women in the community.⁵⁴

While their domestic duties in the anti-apartheid movement were consequential, mothers also resisted militantly. On the 9th of August, 1956, 20,000 women across the Republic united in Pretoria to protest pass laws (see *Figure 1*). The United Nations Centre against Apartheid wrote in 1975: “It was the day when the men stayed home to tend the children and the women went onto the offensive en masse.”⁵⁵ They marched five to six paces from one another, either in pairs or groups of three. They stopped and gathered at the Union Buildings, where they waited for Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Sophie Williams, Rahima Moosa, and Francina Baard to join them from inside.⁵⁶ Francina Baard explained, “We took all those petitions that had been signed, piles and piles of them, and we marched up to Strijdom’s office to give them to him.” Even though the secretary told them the Prime Minister, Strijdom, was out of office and barred them from entering, the six women walked right into his office: “We put those pamphlets on his desk, and on the floor, and the room was full of them.”⁵⁷ They then shared a long moment of silence with the 20,000 women outside the Union Buildings. After thirty minutes, Lilian Ngoyi led the crowd in singing ‘Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika’- ‘God Bless Africa’.⁵⁸ Taunting the Prime Minister, the women sang, “You have touched the women; you are going to die! Watint a bafazi; watint imbokotho uzokufa!”⁵⁹

The militant South African women who participated, organized, and led the Women’s March in 1956 were mothers entrenched in the fight against apartheid in more ways than one. The march leader Lilian Ngoyi, a single mother of two children, was at the forefront of the trade unions

⁵¹ Makana, “Patriotic Motherhood,” 365.

⁵² Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 418.

⁵³ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” p. 249.

⁵⁴ Brooks, “‘We Will Not Ride!’ — ‘We Don’t Want Passes!’”, p. 207.

⁵⁵ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, *Women against Apartheid in South Africa*, Reports, Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, 1975.

⁵⁶ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, *Women against Apartheid in South Africa*, Reports, Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, 1975.

⁵⁷ Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit Is Not Banned*, p. 319

⁵⁸ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, *Women against Apartheid in South Africa*.

⁵⁹ Brooks, “‘We Will Not Ride!’ — ‘We Don’t Want Passes!’”, p. 208.

movement.⁶⁰ Similarly, Francina Baard was a single mother⁶¹ who ran a trade union in Port Elizabeth.⁶² Rahima Moosa was pregnant with her daughter while organizing and leading the Women's March in 1956.⁶³ Florence Matomela was another leader of the anti-pass campaign; she had five children.⁶⁴ These women had overlapping responsibilities that defined them as activists, mothers, leaders, and fighters.

The increasing repression of the apartheid state pushed many activists to continue their struggle through underground networks. Bleka Mbete prepared to leave for underground work while breastfeeding her child, explaining that when a comrade arrived at 4:00 am, "I had to pull my son from my breast. I'll never forget the feeling of him holding onto my breast, holding onto my nipple, and me pulling him out of the breast, pulling him away from my nipple, and knowing that actually, I was unlikely ever to bring him back to that breast and that was that."⁶⁵ The overlap between militancy and motherhood entailed immense personal sacrifice. As Mbete put it, "that was the reality of underground work."⁶⁶

Through the underground networks, women could join the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the military branch of the ANC, to receive formal training in guerrilla warfare.⁶⁷ MK women acted in missions that disrupted "military installations, power plants, telephone lines and transportation links" to "scare away foreign capital, and weaken the economy."⁶⁸ They traveled across South African borders, transporting materials and information. Nondwe Mankahala was a mother and an MK member who explained, "I did not know what I was carrying," but would later learn "that the equipment was actually explosives."⁶⁹

Women exhibited militancy through their involvement in paramilitary organizations like the MK, as well as the Poqo, the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress's (PAC).⁷⁰ The Poqo, particularly active in rural areas, carried out armed revolts against state authorities and White settlers.

⁶⁰ Brooks, "We Will Not Ride! — 'We Don't Want Passes!'"", p. 227.

⁶¹ Frances Baard and Barbie Schreiner, *My Spirit Is Not Banned*, in *The South Africa Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas V. McClendon (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 313.

⁶² Baard and Schreiner, *My Spirit Is Not Banned*, 311.

⁶³ South African History Online, "Rahima Moosa," *South African History Online*, Last modified 21 October 2022. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/rahima-moosa>.

⁶⁴ South African History Online, "Florence Matomela," *SAHO*, 17 February 2011, last updated January 6, 2023, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/florence-matomela>.

⁶⁵ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 89.

⁶⁶ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 89.

⁶⁷ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 41.

⁶⁸ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 106.

⁷⁰ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 90.

Mildred Nonotice Daphu, who became involved in the PAC in 1963, explained that the PAC was “building a force, soldiers who would challenge white people.”⁷¹ Poqo women, like Nocollege Mzolisa, risked banishment and detainment despite also having children.⁷²

While some chose to fight militantly by joining organizations and receiving guerrilla training through the MK, for most, militarization was just a matter of everyday life. Limpho Hani, for example, would perform routine bomb checks each morning before driving her daughter, Lindiwe Hani, to school. Her daughter later recalled,

Mama would make us stand a few metres away from our green Toyota Corolla, while she systematically opened the bonnet and then checked the underneath before finally turning the ignition. It only dawned on me years later that she was checking for bombs, that our lives were under constant threat.⁷³

Apartheid violence was not confined to battlefields or formal combat, but infiltrated all aspects of daily life. Mothers as protectors were militarized accordingly, often without any formal military training, uniform, or ANC membership. Thousands participated in self-defense units, community-based militant groups, throughout the country, viewing their participation “less as a matter of choice than as a fight for the survival of their families.”⁷⁴ This resistance occurred in “homes, schools, churches, and funerals,” where mothers acted as “defenders of their communities.”⁷⁵ Amabutho, for example, was a self-defense unit based in Gqeberha, formally known as Port Elizabeth. One woman, Ma-Mafutha, who frequently sheltered Amabutho members in her home, explained how “one night a bullet came through the window: Twaa! It hit the wall, the wall in the kitchen. We were protected by God because I cannot tell you how we survived. I was cooking, making supper: Twaa! I reasoned that he was shooting at us; he wanted my life as well.”⁷⁶ Mothers frequently put their lives on the line when they opened their homes to members of self-defense units hiding from police. While militant work occurred alongside caregiving, the overlap between the two required that mothers make immense personal sacrifices.

Maternal Sacrifice and Psychological Trauma

⁷¹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 11.

⁷² Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 103.

⁷³ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 95.

⁷⁴ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 114.

⁷⁵ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 120.

⁷⁶ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 112.

For mothers, there was ultimately no singular and straightforward approach to the fight against apartheid. The age of their children influenced their motivations, strategies, and attitudes, whether they were old enough to look after themselves or were of school age,⁷⁷ their personal and socio-economic circumstances, and their type of employment.⁷⁸ Some women were discouraged by their husbands, who would not let their wives go to meetings or attend protests.⁷⁹ Many women were discouraged from protesting because they had children who depended on them for care and survival. Nthana Mokale, for example, explained that the pass campaign was unsuccessful because women still applied for passes under the pretense that “they had the welfare of their children who were at school at heart.”⁸⁰ Others continued for the greater impact that the liberation movement served. However, they had to adopt a different mentality that surpassed their immediate concerns regarding food, employment, and survival,⁸¹ one that could withstand fear.

Women who witnessed the abuse of activists may have been discouraged from participating. As the anti-apartheid activist Bertha Mashaba iterated, “It was difficult to organize women for a campaign, but once they are organized, you can never stop them.”⁸² While many were entrenched in the fight against apartheid and remained inspired, others who were not as heavily involved may have been disheartened by the terror associated with challenging apartheid, and that was heightened by witnessing what others endured – prison, torture, and death. Nthana Mokale, for example, protested her removal from Sophiatown with the ANC. Yet, the protests were so brutally repressed by the police that people ran for their lives. Being faced with the risk of imprisonment or death led many to retreat and accept their removal. By the time the pass campaign came around, Mokale was uncertain whether her participation was worthwhile. She described the discouraging effect of witnessing people burning their passes in protest, only to be beaten by the police the very next day when they went to work without them.⁸³

Likewise, resisting apartheid came at a high price. South Africans who opposed apartheid and violated its laws risked being imprisoned and tortured.⁸⁴ One ANC woman, Florence Siwede, refused to purchase a pass until the police knocked on her door in 1959. They made sure she went through the humiliating process of acquiring one before returning to her home to arrest her. Siwede’s children, one

⁷⁷ Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*, (Heinemann, 1991), pp. 190-91.

⁷⁸ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, p. 195.

⁷⁹ Brooks, “‘We Will Not Ride!’ — ‘We Don’t Want Passes!’”, p. 212.

⁸⁰ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, p. 191.

⁸¹ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, p. 196.

⁸² Brooks, “‘We Will Not Ride!’ — ‘We Don’t Want Passes!’”, p. 225.

⁸³ Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*, p. 177.

⁸⁴ Filippi, “Women’s Protests,” p. 442.

of whom was an infant, were left with their working father while she was held in jail for two days and beaten so badly that the police gave her a hearing problem.⁸⁵

Outwardly protesting the apartheid government required immense bravery and a willingness to face violence. Protestors were consistently met with severe consequences. In 1960, after the 1956 Women's March, for example, the single mother Lilian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi was detained and endured 71 days of solitary confinement, before then being exiled for 11 years. Francina Baard was placed in solitary confinement and sent to prison for five years in 1963. The husband of Florence Matomela died while she was serving a five-year prison sentence in the 1960s. Her health deteriorated during her imprisonment, and when she discovered the tragedy of her husband's death upon being released, "the shock was too great, and she died immediately."⁸⁶ Some women were detained and placed in solitary confinement without a warrant or charge. When this occurred, they could neither contact their children nor arrange for a neighbor or family member to provide temporary childcare.⁸⁷ Hence, thousands of children in South Africa were often placed in dangerous situations when their mothers were imprisoned, especially when their fathers were also absent due to imprisonment, separation, disappearance, or death.

A lack of knowledge over their children's whereabouts and safety caused mothers behind prison walls immense agony and uncertainty surrounding the well-being of their children. While Madikizela-Mandela, along with her husband, Nelson Mandela, was imprisoned, she outlined the utmost importance of appointing a guardian for her children in instructions to her attorney. She emphasized, "I have repeated this a million times and am extremely worried about it."⁸⁸ Her separation from her children and their screams from the night she was taken from them haunted her, ultimately contributing to the suicide attempt she made in her first year of solitary confinement.⁸⁹ Women endured physical torture coupled with the psychological torture of being separated from their children, with no assurance that they were safe or properly cared for. Anti-apartheid activist Ruth First also shed light on the extent to which imprisoned mothers worried about their children. First's mother provided childcare to her children while she was detained; however, the heartache she imagined her children experiencing and the fear that her mother would be stripped away from them kept her awake at night.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Brooks, "'We Will Not Ride!' — 'We Don't Want Passes!'", p. 221.

⁸⁶ United Nations Centre against Apartheid, *Women against Apartheid in South Africa*.

⁸⁷ Anti-Apartheid Movement, *This is the Story of One Woman in South Africa Today*, London: Warwick Press.

⁸⁸ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, "My Husband," In *491 Days*, (Ohio University Press, 2014).

⁸⁹ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, "State of Mind," In *491 Days*, (Ohio University Press, 2014), p. 25.

⁹⁰ Ruth First, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation Under the South African 90-Day Detention Law*, (Penguin Books, 1965), Kindle Ed., p. 965.

Police then capitalized on their fear by lying to mothers that their children were sick or had died. The anti-apartheid activist Albertina Sisulu explained that the worst torture she experienced in detention in 1963 was when the police came to her “in the morning to say, ‘We’ve come to tell you that your baby has passed away in the night.’” Sisulu distinguished this unique form of torture mothers experienced as particularly horrible because it “is not for one day, three days, but for ninety days of your detention.”⁹¹ Thenjiwe Mtintso’s activism landed her in detention on multiple occasions between 1976 and 1978. She also explained how state police capitalized on maternal vulnerability:

When I was detained my son was 9 months old, and I left him in bed ... One day they came in with a big photo in the *Daily Dispatch* that showed a red Volkswagen that had been smashed and I had a red Volkswagen at that time. They said to me ‘You see, that is your car ... one of your colleagues was driving your car with your son inside and we were chasing him and that’s what happened to your car and your son is in dead there.’⁹²

Like Sisulu, this psychological warfare stayed with Mtintso for the remainder of her time in prison.⁹³ When mothers recounted the trauma they experienced as prisoners, their narrative oftentimes centered on their roles and responsibilities as caregivers. So, while their maternal identity was a source of motivation, it also was a source of vulnerability that the police deliberately targeted as they knew how to make a mother suffer.

Emma Mashinini is yet another example of this emotional reality. She was so psychologically troubled and traumatized in solitary confinement that she forgot the name of her second-youngest daughter: “I would fall down and actually weep with the effort of remembering the name of my daughter. I’d try and sleep on it, wake up. I’d go without eating, because this pain of not being able to remember the name of my daughter was the greatest I’ve ever had.”⁹⁴

The sacrifices made by mothers fighting apartheid left them grappling with profound guilt, insecurity, and the fear of being misunderstood by their families. One mother said she worried about her responsibilities while she was detained and believed that because she was imprisoned, she was “not the right kind of woman.”⁹⁵ Emotions of guilt are linked to a socially constructed and ingrained concept of what a mother should and should not be. When mothers choose to step into roles that do

⁹¹ Beth Goldblatt and Shiela Meintjes, *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (University of the Witwatersrand, 1996).

⁹² Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 40.

⁹³ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 40.

⁹⁴ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. 2095.

⁹⁵ Goldblatt and Meintjes, *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*.

not encompass their designated responsibilities as nurturing, selfless, loving, and virtuous women, they suddenly become neglectful, cruel, “bad mothers.”⁹⁶ Children as young as five or six had little understanding of the concept of freedom or the significance of their parents’ work. They were frequently left confused when their parents were physically separated from them. When Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, his children wondered why their friends had parents, and they did not. Madikizela-Mandela dreaded that her children would turn on her and say, “Mummy and Daddy gave us up and chose the world.”⁹⁷ Emma Mashinini similarly thought of her family in prison. She considered herself a “nuisance” to her family and friends, who she feared would abandon her.⁹⁸

While some women who witnessed the abuse freedom fighters endured may have been discouraged from joining the anti-apartheid movement, personal trauma did not deter mothers who were entrenched in the anti-apartheid liberation movement, since loving one’s child and fighting apartheid was a mutual relationship. Motherhood gave women reason to fight against the very system that deprived their children of a future. Equally, the suppression they were met with only further fueled their resilience. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s children almost died while she was in prison. She explained that the sight of their lean, skeletal bodies, rather than discouraging her, made her more violent and angrier at the enemy.⁹⁹

Belinda Martin also exemplifies this effect. Before her pregnancy, after being separated from her family, Martin became involved in the anti-apartheid resistance movement. She joined the MK, where she received military training and became a soldier in 1970. In 1975, she was put in detention, where she was beaten severely, electrocuted, forced to watch other activists get tortured, and placed in solitary confinement. Meanwhile, Martin was three months pregnant. The torture resulted in her miscarriage, after which she had to “remain with the foetus in the cell.” She explained in an interview, “It started rotting and smelling until one of the matrons couldn’t stand it any longer.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, the horror she experienced in detention did not make her retreat. Upon her release, she fled the country to reunite with MK.¹⁰¹

By the same token, Emma Mashinini explained after being imprisoned, having committed no offense, that her experience, rather than taming her, had the opposite effect: “It angers you. It sharpens

⁹⁶ Amelia E. Barr, “Good and Bad Mothers,” *The North American Review* 156:437 (1893): pp. 408–15.

⁹⁷ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, “Epilogue,” In *491 Days*, United States: Ohio University Press, 2014, p. 236.

⁹⁸ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 2095.

⁹⁹ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, “Epilogue,” p. 236.

¹⁰⁰ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 37.

¹⁰¹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 37.

you. Maybe before you were speaking from the ground, so now, you must climb on the rooftops. They train you, they build you up to say: I am going to fight on and on and on.”¹⁰²

Many were angry *because* they loved their children and wanted to protect them from an unjust and abusive government. Mashinini suffered from guilt, depression, anxiety, and insecurity. She also knew a thing or two about grief and heartache: Her dearest son-in-law, Aubrey, was murdered in the ghetto of Soweto; she never stopped grieving her 17-year-old daughter, Penny, whose tragic death she would not share;¹⁰³ and she had three children who all passed within weeks of being born due to apartheid conditions of inadequate medical care, polluted water, and malnourishment.¹⁰⁴ Mashinini loved her children deeply, writing in her autobiography that “Nothing meant anything to me apart from my children,”¹⁰⁵ that “I didn’t want my children ending up in a factory like me,”¹⁰⁶ and that the proudest day of her life was seeing Penny rise to the platform as the President of the YWCA Teens at a meeting in Soweto.¹⁰⁷ Such women’s perseverance in the face of extreme state violence exemplifies that being a mother neither uniformly deterred women from fighting against apartheid nor diminished the love they held for their children.

While women redefined motherhood politically, families did not necessarily interpret motherhood the same way. Many children, upon being reunited with their mothers, felt abandoned. Belinda Martin explained that she had left her daughter with her parents while fighting apartheid, and when she returned in 1991, her daughter could not accept or recognize her as a mother. She said, “It took years for us to have a mother-daughter relationship.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, when Nomsa Ngcipe was exiled, she left her baby with her mother’s sister, and she said, “I got back, and my son did not know me. That was my biggest challenge, really. It was difficult because he stayed with my mother’s sister. When I got back, she prevented me seeing him.”¹⁰⁹ Pamela Daniels reiterated this point that many “families did not accept the women that they came back with, and it created a lot of tension.”¹¹⁰ While other mothers returned to no home or family at all.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Janet Watts, “Freedom Is Around the Corner,” *The Observer* (London, England), 8 October 1989, p. 36.

¹⁰³ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 2851.

¹⁰⁴ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 764

¹⁰⁵ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 999.

¹⁰⁶ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 1059.

¹⁰⁷ Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, Kindle loc. p. 2866.

¹⁰⁸ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 176.

¹¹⁰ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 181.

¹¹¹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 171.

Such tensions reveal the emotional costs of politicized motherhood, but not the incompatibility between militancy and motherhood. If female freedom fighters like Mashinini remained persistent in their struggle against apartheid despite being imprisoned, beaten, tortured, and wrestling with emotions of grief, guilt, and depression, then motherhood and activism are clearly not mutually exclusive concepts. On the contrary, motherhood could reinforce the anger that fueled their activism. By the same token, their activism did not diminish their roles as mothers. Although mothers fighting apartheid may have been physically separated from their children through imprisonment, their absence was necessary for safeguarding their children's future. They may not have lived up to an idealized version of motherhood that stresses women's presence in their children's lives; however, nothing was nurturing, loving, and virtuous about apartheid. One could just as quickly argue that mothers who did not do anything about its implementation were as "neglectful" as mothers who did.

Motherhood as a Political and Moral Platform

Through women's fight against apartheid, the meaning of motherhood expanded from one that encompassed their roles within their families to their roles within the liberation movement. This concept of motherhood fostered a sense of global solidarity amongst all women and rallied international support. A shared experience of motherhood united women in South Africa with women worldwide, attracting large-scale attention. Likewise, the Women's International Democratic Federation issued a statement to women "all over the world," specifying "the mothers in the USA." They called upon women across the globe to divest from their governments to support the people of South Africa.¹¹² A social identity of motherhood, as Walker articulated in her article "Conceptualizing Motherhood," has the potential of crosscutting other, more narrow, ethnic, and 'racial' identities,¹¹³ making mothers powerful tools in bolstering the resilience of communities. Additionally, a message from Canada, as showcased in the magazine *Voice of Women* in 1977, demonstrated support for South Africa, referring to female justice warriors as mothers: "The burden you have borne through decades of struggle deserves the highest praise. You have SUFFERED, you continue to suffer. You have shed tears. You are the mothers of the revolution."¹¹⁴ In this instance, maternal suffering is evoked as it creates moral legitimacy for resisting. Mothers hold moral authority as caregivers and protectors, making it harder to dismiss their political resistance.

While motherhood was used as a rhetorical device by organizations like the ANC, it was also a genuine source of political motivation. The FSAW's "Women's Charter" makes it apparent that

¹¹² "Appeal from Women's International Democratic Federation," *VOW: Voice of Women*, (Lusaka, Zambia: 1977), p. 2.

¹¹³ Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," 437.

¹¹⁴ "Canadians Concerned about South Africa," *VOW: Voice of Women*, p. 7.

mothers fought for their children; they explicitly demanded “for the development of every child through free compulsory education for all; for the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, creches and nursery schools in the countryside.”¹¹⁵

Undeniably, the well-being and future of South African children were a driving factor behind many women’s fight. Although militant mothers may have risked their survival and safety, which in turn jeopardized their children’s security, they also recognized that the most significant risk to their children’s livelihood was the institution of apartheid. Even women who were not mothers themselves recognized that women “had a right to secure a future for their children.”¹¹⁶ Maggie Resha, who worked with Lilian Masediba Matabane Ngoyi, explained that Ngoyi would use this logic to mobilize other women in the anti-pass campaign, stating they “had a duty to protect their offspring, to preserve their dignity as mothers, who produced the future leaders and workers of the country.”¹¹⁷ Motherhood thus situated women’s political mobilization as a moral obligation.

Women’s testimonies at the TRC hearings show that their moral authority stemmed not only from their domestic roles as mothers and caregivers but also from their suffering that demanded recognition and accountability. In 1995, the TRC investigated and documented gross human rights violations in or outside South Africa between 1960 and 1994. Its purpose was to “compile as complete a picture as possible” of these violations and to reflect fairly and fully on the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators.¹¹⁸ The real psychological and physical trauma that South Africans experienced under apartheid was seen at the TRC hearings. Mothers whose children and husbands left home one day to never return still lacked closure, and the knowledge of how they died, where, and by whom. Mothers cried out for their lost children, with one begging, “Please, can’t you bring back even just a bone of my child so that I can bury him?”¹¹⁹ When family members spoke at TRC hearings of their trauma, they centered testimony on their experiences of losing loved ones, rather than personal inflictions, which was “especially true of the mothers whose children had been killed.”¹²⁰ As Selina Makana argues, mourning was not only a way women coped with loss but also facilitated social transformation after violence. Makana calls for a depoliticization of grief, explaining that “rage, loss,

¹¹⁵ Brooks, “We Will Not Ride!” — “We Don’t Want Passes!”, p. 215.

¹¹⁶ Belinda Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983*, (Heinemann, 1991), p. 183.

¹¹⁷ Brooks, “We Will Not Ride!” — “We Don’t Want Passes!”, p. 208.

¹¹⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume 1* (Cape Town: 1998), p. 304.

¹¹⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, p. 8.

¹²⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, p. 367.

and grief have been powerful tools for women's individual and collective activism throughout history and across many nations."¹²¹ Yet, she also articulates that even when women participated directly in the struggle, including in militant roles, public discourse continued to frame them primarily as mothers or protesters rather than as warriors.¹²²

Militancy Versus Motherhood

While ANC images, like that in Figure 2, gave broader representation to women and depicted militancy and motherhood simultaneously, they still situated womanhood in a socially accepted role of motherhood. One visual artist and activist, Judy Ann Seidman, explained that MK visual artists "fiercely" argued about the iconic image of the ANC mother. Specifically, many believed representations of women should be "as soldiers, not solely as mothers and sisters and daughters of the men who did the 'real fighting.'" Moreover, Seidman explained that many MK women, who were soldiers in their own right, did not resonate with such images:

As one MK soldier who had spent years in Angola said, the only time one saw a woman holding a gun and a baby was when the village was attacked, and the woman grabbed the baby and the gun and fled- hardly the image of strength and commitment that we hoped to portray. So eventually, the woman-baby-gun-image was dropped from the visual lexicon.¹²³

The image Seidman described did not fit ANC's prototype of "revolutionary strength," or reflect the reality of many MK women, whose political participation was not defined by their motherhood. Nevertheless, it reflected a different reality of the militant mother, who was simultaneously vulnerable and strong. Seidman thus illustrates a tension between lived experience and propaganda in which vulnerability is "hardly the image of strength."

At the same time, other militant women's experiences uncover a degree of truth to the "woman-baby-gun-image," even if it did not neatly fit the reality of MK female combatants. For example, Figure 2 shows a cover image from the ANC's political journal, *Sechaba*, depicting a fierce mother using her right hand to hold a bayonet and her left to support her sleeping child.¹²⁴ Rahaba Mahlakedi Moeketsi, a woman who participated in the 1956 Women's March, said in an interview,

¹²¹ Makana, "Patriotic Motherhood," p. 371.

¹²² Makana, "Patriotic Motherhood," p. 368.

¹²³ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 63.

¹²⁴ Kim Miller, "Moms with Guns: Women's Political Agency in Anti-Apartheid Visual Culture," *African Arts*, 42:2 (2009): p. 69.

“We had our children on our backs during the March. Many women had their children with them during the March. Some were carrying the white children with them, those who were working for whites.”¹²⁵ In this sense, the “woman-baby-gun-image,” is not solely a propagandized fantasy. This is especially true of women who were not MK combatants with formal military training, the majority of women in the armed struggle. For this reason, Magadla refers to the experiences of MK women as “the exception, not the rule,” noting that “apartheid violence was experienced and resisted in homes, schools and churches, all spaces that are historically understood to be outside of combat.”¹²⁶ Images like those in Figure 2 may or may not have literally documented women’s experiences, but they mattered because they symbolically captured the overlapping responsibilities of caregiving and political struggle experienced by many women.

While female anti-apartheid activists expanded the meaning of motherhood from a private, domestic responsibility to a national one, this expansion had clear limits. When women strayed too far from the bounds of their femininity, they risked losing their platform as mothers. Female comrades have reported being sexualized and reduced to objects of male desire when they entered “unmotherly” arenas. Thandi Modise was a female member of the MK when, one night, she overheard an argument between two men. She recalled: “There had been a feeling among some men that because there are these five, six women there, ‘Why should they be sex-starved?’”¹²⁷ Women were soldiers in the MK, where they were subjected to sexual harassment and expected “to explode the myth of women as inferior on a day-to-day basis.”¹²⁸ However, when *Sechaba* presented them on their cover pages with children on their backs, they garnered moral authority and respect.

The ANC provided women with a platform to criticize apartheid, recognizing them as the nation’s “mothers,” but failed to appreciate that mothers are more than just nurturers and can be militant, too. As Walker argues, “The understanding of women’s roles, and especially their equation of that with ‘motherhood’, reflected a deeply ingrained and shared commitment to male authority and patriarchal family forms on the part of the male leadership.”¹²⁹ While women were allowed to serve in the MK and receive military training, they were primarily excluded from active combat roles.¹³⁰ Some of the ANC’s policies also explicitly discouraged women from becoming mothers. For example, when

¹²⁵ South African History Online, “History of Women’s Struggle in South Africa,” 21 March 2011, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-womens-struggle-south-africa>.

¹²⁶ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 192.

¹²⁷ Thandi Modise, “Thandi Modise, a woman in war,” interview by Robyn Curnow, *Agenda*, No. 43, *Women and the Aftermath* (2000), p. 37.

¹²⁸ Hassim, “Nationalism, feminism and autonomy,” p. 440.

¹²⁹ Walker, “Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa,” 432.

¹³⁰ Miller, “Moms with Guns,” p. 71.

female MK soldiers became pregnant with the children of MK men in Angolan camps, they were exiled to Tanzania. They then shouldered the responsibility of childcare while the father of their children continued their military duties.¹³¹ They desired mothers as political tools and symbols of resistance. However, mothers as political and militant agents did not hold the same value.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela epitomized the militant mother. She called for violence in speeches at political rallies,¹³² was instrumental to the ANC, armed boys in the MK, and stood up to the police.¹³³ Bridger argues that Madikizela-Mandela expanded the meaning of motherhood, for she was not only a woman protecting the youth, but did so while also embodying militancy. At a funeral in 1985, she spoke to the crowd: “I have come to weep with you, my children . . . I have come to wipe up the blood of your sons and daughters with you.” Demonstratively, she, herself, identified as a mother to the nation, as she claimed them as her children. But, she also identified with militancy, declaring in 1985, “I will tell you why we are violent. It is because those who oppress us are violent.”¹³⁴ Madikizela-Mandela fought for the entire nation’s children as she did for her own, serving as their protector, defender, and a shoulder to cry on. In this manner, her militancy itself was a maternal act.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s downfall reveals motherhood’s limits for militant mothers. Bridger attributes her destruction to her calls for violence in speeches and her involvement in the Mandela United Football Club (MUFC). The MUFC was quickly linked to gang violence, damaging her image.¹³⁵ They were accused of violent crimes, including murder, beating, and kidnapping, all of which she denounced. When charged with kidnapping and assaulting Stompie, a fourteen-year-old boy, she testified, “That is a pathetic fabrication from your client, who I really regard as senile now.” She still had the backing of her husband, remained loved by prominent figures like Desmond Tutu,¹³⁶ and retained popularity in many African communities, with *The Observer* writing in 1996 that “Majemaswu, the black township in Brandfort, do not believe a word of it.”¹³⁷ However, according to the media, which demonized her, Madikizela-Mandela was guilty until proven innocent. Newspaper

¹³¹ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 32.

¹³² Emily Bridger, “From ‘Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Lady Macbeth’: Winnie Mandela and Perceptions of Female Violence in South Africa, 1985–91” *Gender & History*, 27:2, August 2015, pp. 449.

¹³³ Bridger, “From ‘Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Lady Macbeth,’” pp. 452-453.

¹³⁴ Bridger, “From ‘Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Lady Macbeth,’” pp. 449-450.

¹³⁵ Bridger, “From ‘Mother of the Nation’ to ‘Lady Macbeth,’” p.447.

¹³⁶ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10, American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1, Amistad Research Center.

¹³⁷ Phillip van Niekerk, “Where They Cannot Stop Loving Winnie,” *The Observer* (London, UK), 24 March, 1996, p. 23.

headlines declared, “Winnie Mandela is Defiant, Calling Accusations ‘Lunacy,’”¹³⁸ “‘The Mother of a Nation’ has fallen from Grace,”¹³⁹ and “Mandela’s wife, it turns out, isn’t the Mother of Africa her supporters had wanted her to be.”¹⁴⁰ Around the time she “fell from grace,” she and her husband, Nelson Mandela, separated. Notably, he asserted that their separation had nothing to do with any of the media’s allegations.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, as a divorced woman, Madikizela-Mandela was abiding by even fewer notions of femininity. The media seized on the opportunity: one newspaper read, “Winnie Madikizela Mandela, once the ‘Mother of the Nation,’ has a new moniker: ex-wife.”¹⁴² Madikizela-Mandela’s militancy came at a cost, as the media reduced her to Nelson Mandela’s defiant ex-wife.

The slander Winnie Madikizela-Mandela faced extended far beyond any suspected “criminal activity.” The media attacked her mere character, framing her as a “power hungry woman who pushed her own self-destruct button;”¹⁴³ she was “combative, stubborn, willful, and quick to anger;”¹⁴⁴ and she was “a disloyal wife.”¹⁴⁵ Rather than being an accurate reflection of her character, portrayals of Madikizela-Mandela were constructed by the media and used as evidence for her guilt of violent crimes, like murder and kidnapping. Whether or not the egregious accusations Madikizela-Mandela faced were legitimate was irrelevant to the media since she was ultimately guilty of betraying the ideal of “Good Motherhood.”

However, a statement issued on February 26, 1991, criticized the apartheid state for diverting attention from its crimes against humanity to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who had been “banned, banished, imprisoned, tortured, and persecuted” by them. One individual undermined judgment from

¹³⁸ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10. American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1. Amistad Research Center.

¹³⁹ Jerelyn Eddings, “‘Mother of a Nation’ Has Fallen from Grace: Soweto Fears Winnie Mandela,” *The Record* (Hackensack, NJ), April 26, 1992, A-19.

¹⁴⁰ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10, American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1, Amistad Research Center.

¹⁴¹ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10, American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1, Amistad Research Center.

¹⁴² “Mandela Divorce: Winnie Mandela, once the ‘Mother of the Nation,’ has a new moniker: ex-wife” *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 March 1996.

¹⁴³ Rosemary Yardley, “*The Noble Rise and Ignominious Fall of Winnie Mandela*,” *Greensboro News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), 10 March 1989, p. 18.

¹⁴⁴ Scott Kraft, “*Winnie Mandela’s Rise and Fall: Corrupted by Power, or Too Naive to Know Better?*” *Valley News* (West Lebanon, NH), 13 March, 1989, p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10, American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1, Amistad Research Center.

anyone who was not a Black South African, but especially from state institutions that upheld apartheid:

Nomzamo W. Mandela has spent her entire adult life in defense of the rights of the oppressed majority in our country. Her sacrifice, courage, and resilience have stood as a shining example to people and the world over, and to her comrades in the ANC. If she has been less than perfect in carrying an impossible load, that judgment can be made only by her peers. The apartheid judicial system totally lacks the moral legitimacy and the impartiality to judge those it has brutalized.¹⁴⁶

Even though the apartheid government was undeniably responsible for the systemic oppression, torture, and killing of thousands, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was publicly scrutinized as if she were the primary villain of the era. Her guilt was not proven, she denied accusations, and remained loved within many South African communities. Still, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's militancy made her a national scandal because she was what other mothers feared being: "not the right kind of woman."¹⁴⁷

Conclusion

This paper supports Walker's argument, which cautions against a simplistic appraisal of motherhood and calls for a more nuanced debate on its significance, considering different perspectives.¹⁴⁸ The ANC's treatment of female members varied from their construction of motherhood as a political tool, which differed from the actual labor of mothering, and which was distinct from how women subjectively identified with motherhood.¹⁴⁹ This disjunction of political rhetoric and visual images, mothers' lived experiences, and personal identities all point towards the complexity of motherhood as a source of power and as a burden. While not all mothers were militant and willing to jeopardize their own safety and that of their children, many did so for the sake of their children, while others may have embraced militancy as an identity distinct from motherhood.

It is apparent that South African women's resistance against their oppression under apartheid heavily intersected with their motherhood identities. They fought on behalf of not merely themselves,

¹⁴⁶ Trials: Winnie Mandela, 1992-1991, Folder 10, Box: 231, Folder: 10, American Committee on Africa records addendum, 012-1, Amistad Research Center.

¹⁴⁷ Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes, *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*: "Human rights violations- a gendered perspective." (Centre for Applied Legal Studies, 1996)

¹⁴⁸ Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," pp. 435-436.

¹⁴⁹ Walker, "Conceptualising Motherhood in Twentieth Century South Africa," p. 419.

but also for their children, the nation's children, and for the sake of greater humanity. Their resistance came at a cost that was especially great given their domestic duties as mothers and laws that targeted women's liberty. This cost, though, despite being immensely burdensome, had the capacity to fuel a stronger fight.

Even though maternal and political identities oftentimes coexisted, overlapped, and mutually reinforced each other, the public and the media refused to acknowledge the complexity of motherhood as a political and personal phenomenon. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela serves as a case example of the limitations of a maternal political platform. For recognition, mothers still had to be tethered to their maternal identities. In other words, they had to be honest wives, not disloyal divorcees, and as protectors of the nation's children, they could be militant, but they could not be *too* militant as to be cast as aggressors. The symbolic titles hold less significance than their lived experiences as mothers. "Mother of the Nation" does not invoke the imagery of mothers' labor and grief as activists with children. That is not to argue that figures like Winnie Madikizela-Mandela should not be remembered and honored with such titles, but instead that their remembrance should not stop there. Motherhood in and of itself can be powerful, and discounting activists' identities as mothers undermines their resilience, bravery, strength, and exceptionality in challenging apartheid.

While women played a crucial and instrumental role in securing formal political and legal equality for all South Africans, new generations of women are now growing up in a democratic South Africa still marked by "structural poverty, landlessness and daily experiences of gender-based violence and femicide."¹⁵⁰ The meanings of activism and motherhood continue to be reshaped as a new generation of women confront different forms of injustice and participate in a struggle that did not end with apartheid's formal defeat in 1994.

¹⁵⁰ Magadla, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers*, p. 191.

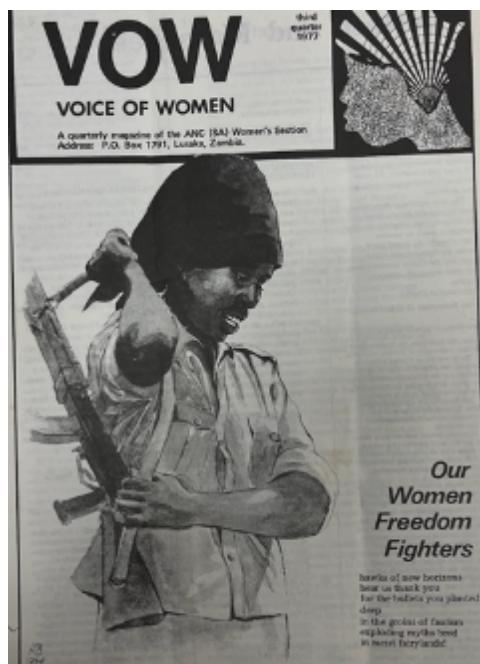


Fig. 1 Cover image of *VOW* Magazine. *VOW: Voice of Women*. Lusaka, Zambia: Third Quarter, 1977.



Fig. 2 Cover image of ANC's magazine *Sechaba* in April, 1968, taken from article. Kim Miller, "Moms with Guns: Women's Political Agency in Anti-Apartheid Visual Culture," *African Arts* 42, no. 2 (2009).