

Women in the ANC-led underground

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The involvement of women in liberation struggles tends to attract controversy. This relates mainly to the extent and character of women's participation. Some suggest that their activity merely replicated existing patriarchal relations or that women performed unimportant roles, while the men were cast as heroes. Much of this controversy relates to how one theorises the relationship between feminism and national liberation, in particular whether there is one feminism or whether we are speaking of feminisms and patriarchy or patriarchies.

Although the focus of this chapter is on underground activities, it does relate to these problematic areas in the specific way in which they are manifested within the period of underground organisation in South Africa.¹

What is the understanding of the scope of underground?

The notion of underground activities with which this chapter works includes both political and military activities. Its focus is not on any one geographical space, even though the ultimate goals may have related purely to South Africa. Although a particular underground activity may have been performed in Johannesburg, the underground phenomenon needs to be traced also to earlier phases of training, preparation, planning, logistics, reconnaissance and other forms of support.

In operating with such a definition one finds an interface with what may conventionally be treated as distinct phenomena in the 'exile period', where the preparatory phases may have taken place. Even the prison experience may legitimately be considered part of the focus of underground in certain circumstances, insofar as some people were trained in prison.

In this specific study the evidence does not relate to imprisonment, largely because the prison experiences of women were on a smaller scale – they mainly served short sentences, in small groups, compared with the Robben Island situation. This, as was the

case with white male and black women prisoners, was less conducive to the establishment of extensive political machinery that could impact beyond the prison (see Buntman 2003).

Another distinction that needs to be drawn is between formal and informal underground networks. There are very many people who constituted themselves as ANC underground units without any contact being made with the organisation. Often such contact would not have been possible in the situation that prevailed. Such people saw how Molotov cocktails were made in illegal publications, and threw these at apartheid targets, or created their own pamphlets or painted slogans on walls.

It is true that, especially where violence was used, it could often drift into gangsterism performed in the name of the ANC, but it is a reality that formally joining the ANC was not a feasible option for most people. How should they have made contact, who should they have trusted? In consequence, there was this phenomenon of people constituting themselves as ANC. Such self-constituted groups were not restricted to the urban areas but also found in the former Transkei (Gasa interview). It is a pattern that existed before the onset of illegality, because many people have always considered themselves ANC or members without ever filling in a form or paying a membership fee. Chief Albert Luthuli, for example, was not a member of the ANC when he was elected Natal president. ANC membership was as much a cultural as a political phenomenon.

One result is that one cannot realistically attempt any quantification of underground work. We do not know how many people were involved, especially if one adopts a wide definition incorporating contributions in various phases and in a number of ways to the execution of an underground activity.

Sources

There is a small literature related to underground activity in South Africa in general, and very little on the role of women. Jacklyn Cock produced pioneering work on women in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in her *Colonels and Cadres* (1991). Experiences of women in underground activities have been recorded in autobiographies (eg. Jaffer 2003; Middleton 1998), in Hilda Bernstein's interviews on the exile experience (Bernstein 1994), and in unpublished MA and BA honours theses, the latter generally being hard to obtain because they are not always housed in the libraries of the universities where they were produced (but see von den Steinen 1999).

In this study, financial resources and time constraints have meant that choices have had to be made in terms of the sources that are prioritised. Archival resources, while consulted in a limited way, have not been the primary basis for this work. While it is recognised that these could yield important results, material is located in many parts of the country. These resources are not all well organised and back-up from staff is sometimes very limited and unreliable. At the same time, travelling to such locations entails high costs.

In any event, documentation tends to relate only to those who are known to have worked underground (apart from underground reports to the ANC and the South African Communist Party [SACP] that are thus far not available in the archives consulted – and even these relate to underground activities *formally connected* to outside ‘handlers’ and not to those falling within the wider definition provided earlier).

There are large numbers of people who may die without anyone knowing that they were underground operatives. There is no document that tells of their contribution. There are those who quietly assisted or performed various acts. Even if there were not the constraints mentioned, the results yielded from oral work tend to be much greater and more rounded than documentation, though ideally both should be thoroughly canvassed and used to verify and enrich one another.

This greater utility of oral evidence is because of the largely unknown character of the phenomenon and the limitations of the focus of available documentation. The unknown relates to both the quantitative element – how many people were involved – and the qualitative – what was entailed in the experiences.

Methodology and location/persona

Although the reliance on oral history as a primary source in this chapter is necessary, for the reasons outlined, I have tried to be self-conscious about the conditions of the interviews and the impact that my persona may have had on the interview process.

In the first place, I am a white man seeking information from or about mainly black women. It may well be that there are experiences that women may be prepared to reveal to other women but may have withheld from me. I have not tried to probe into areas that may be embarrassing to the individuals concerned. For example, in one case, a person indicated very clearly that she did not want to discuss torture. I did not specifically want to do that but my impression was that the experience might have entailed some form of sexual abuse that she did not want to relate.

At the same time, the sample to which I have had access may well have excluded people who have information that relates to abuse within the liberation movement, but about which people do not wish to talk. One person who I tried to interview said, ‘I do not want to go there.’ This may, from what I have heard, have related to a romantic relationship, but it may also have been a case of abuse. I do not know and am aware that partly because I am a man I may not be told certain things. (See also Lyons 2004, an Australian woman who encountered similar constraints in interviewing former Zimbabwean female combatants.)

That I am from the liberation movement and previously in a leadership position may have had an impact on the interview relationship. There may be a constraint that some people feel about raising scandalous matters with someone who is perceived as a member of leadership (even though no longer that). Also, because of the sense of

hierarchy within the organisation, there may have been a desire to say what pleases an interviewer perceived to be in leadership. It is my impression, however, that the types of people interviewed were not likely to have been impressed by alleged or actual places that the interviewer may have held in ANC hierarchies, and that whatever silences there may have been would have been for other reasons that have not impacted on the veracity of the evidence collected.

Underground history in South Africa

The history of women's involvement in underground organisation does not begin with the banning of the ANC. It stretches back to the early years of the twentieth century when women were amongst groups who trained in Comintern² universities, learning underground methods (Davidson et al. 2003). The decades that followed saw much clandestine activity of Communists with the hosting of Comintern agents or arranging of visits of individuals or delegations to Moscow. Women like Ray Alexander were very involved in such activities (Simons 2004).

When the Communist Party was proscribed and subsequently reconstituted underground, many women were active at various stages of its illegal existence, inside and later outside the country or in units that were formed after the Rivonia reverses (cf. Suttner 2004).

The ANC prepared for underground from the moment of the Communist Party's dissolution in 1950, implementing the M-Plan during the 1950s. Women were involved, though this chapter does not contain interviews on that period. The banning of the ANC forced the organisation to turn the theoretical preparations of the M-Plan, which were uneven in their impact, into a practical but ill-prepared plan of action. Women were very much part of this early underground, which was more or less smashed or driven into substantial 'invisibility' in the mid-1960s.

Although the early formation of MK in 1961 may have comprised mainly men, women were to be amongst the earliest trainees, including Jacqueline Molefe (Sedibe). But women not formally connected to MK were often involved throughout the period of illegality in ensuring the success of various military operations.

The crushing of the ANC leadership in Rivonia, leading to imprisonment and exile, left a difficult task for those who remained at large under various forms of restrictions. Women like Albertina Sisulu and, in a separate group, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Joyce Sikakhane, Shantie Naidoo and others, slowly rebuilt the underground in the Soweto area. While I do not have information for this period in other areas, it is reasonable to assume that similar processes were in motion, partly because certain members of the Soweto group did travel to other areas with this in mind (Houston 2004).

In the late 1960s and even earlier some of the first trained MK groups entered the country. It is not clear to what extent women in the underground provided logistical

support for them, though Dorothy Nyembe was convicted for assisting MK soldiers, some of whom had reached South Africa after the Wankie Campaign (Houston 2004).

In addition, from the outset underground groups like that in Soweto were involved in recruiting for MK. This is said to have been a major underground activity of units in which Albertina Sisulu was involved (Sisulu 2002). Contrary to conventional wisdom, parents did not always discourage political involvement of their children and in some cases were involved in their recruitment (Marx 1992; Sisulu 2002; Tshabalala interview).

From the beginning small numbers of women joined MK and after 1976 larger numbers (see for example Bernstein 1994; Cock 1991). Many women were involved in various types of underground units throughout this period, some from inside, but some sent in for particular missions.

What was the character of women's involvement in the underground?

Existing historiography has from an early stage tended to dismiss or downplay the involvement of women in political struggle, for entering as 'mothers', or supportive of the role of men, or performing conventional female roles.

Much of this commentary operates with narrow conceptions of what a feminist role can be, assuming that contexts do not alter or modify the meaning of what may mean reproducing a patriarchal relationship under other circumstances. Likewise, notions of motherhood are treated as static and do not take adequate account of the reasons why women's first point of entry into the political arena is often as mothers. It also fails to recognise that male protection of womenfolk is not merely a 'proprietary' right, but also an attempt to provide protection against real and ever-present dangers specific to apartheid repression, especially manifested when in police custody (see Suttner 2005).

The critics also do not place sufficient weight on the importance of women entering the public domain *per se*. This we know is the area where men are supposed to realise themselves as men just as women are supposed to find fulfilment in the private sphere (see Whitehead 2002).

In the context of underground struggle, considered within the wide spectrum of the definition already provided, it is impossible to provide numbers of women who participated. The problem with providing statistics for the underground as a whole, or even for armed struggle as a whole, is that, as indicated, there are both formal and informal contributions, the latter often being as important for the success of an operation as the former.

Whatever the exact number, women were present in significant numbers, albeit generally a minority. But that presence was suffused with ambiguities. The ambiguities of the roles of women related to the often-varied responses of the men they worked with, or under whose command they fell (though many women were also commanders).

One cannot therefore define the emergence of women in the ANC underground independent of notions of masculinity and models of masculinity represented by some heroic figures within the organisation and its underground structures. One cannot make bald and unqualified assertions since the situation was often complicated and contra-

dictory and the responses of both men and women were by no means uniform. Also, the period of women's involvement in the underground was one where the gender consciousness of the ANC as an organisation was gradually developing. The early entry and modes of relating to women in MK could not be grounded as firmly in constitutional texts of the organisation as the place of women can now be defended, in the light of the ANC having formally embraced gender equality and promoted it in a democratic South African Constitution.

(S)Heroic projects

Elaine Unterhalter suggests that 'struggle autobiographies', mainly by males, are cast in the mould of a notion of 'heroic masculinity', where men are the main performers of heroic deeds (Unterhalter 2000). They build bonds of solidarity between men, and the home is a place of comfort and the private domain reserved for and preserved by women. The role of women in this notion is primarily supportive or, put crudely, to wave husbands goodbye when they embark on their heroic missions. It is a place from which men depart but also a place of comfort to which they retreat after performing various male-centred tasks.

Notions of 'heroic masculinity' have been drawn from masculinity theories and applied to the South African situation (cf. Unterhalter 2000; see more generally Whitehead 2002). While there is definitely something useful and suggestive in this approach, we need to be extremely wary of casting notions of heroism within a monolithic model. Even where someone may be correctly designated a male hero, by the definitions of the struggle concerned or by other forms of characterisation, we may well find, as the evidence to be presented shows, that these heroic figures have quite varied ways of playing out their masculinity and heroism or conduct themselves in a manner that requires modification of this notion. This is not to necessarily contest the way in which some literature does depict male heroism, as Unterhalter shows. But that is not the only model of manhood and heroism found within the ANC-led national liberation movement. Most importantly, the 'heroic project' was never confined to men. It was also a (s)heroic project, belonging to women.

Depictions of heroism as the prerogative of men

Ben Turok's autobiography has given credence to the notion that heroism is a characteristic peculiar to men. Underground work is the preserve of the man, who is assumed to 'make history', and the woman's domain is the private sphere (see Whitehead 2002). Thus Turok wrote after he had placed a bomb at the Rissik Street post office:

Mary [his wife] asked me what the matter was and I was not able to tell her...When she read the newspaper the next day, everything became clear. She

was rather resentful at not having known about my MK role...*Certainly, she had to pay as high a price as I did. She had previously been left with the children while I was in hiding and she had to face the police when I was away. But our security demanded this kind of balance and she was bound to accept the arrangement.* (2003: 130, emphasis added)

And again:

Deeply steeped in these [revolutionary] texts, I now saw myself as a typical communist revolutionary. I held senior posts in the ANC,³ SACP and MK. My personal life was now overtaken by my being swamped with work; I was constantly in meetings. Mary had also become fully integrated into the work of the COD⁴ as chair of the Johannesburg branch *while trying hard not to neglect the boys...* (2003: 139, emphasis added)

In other words, Ben Turok's job was to concentrate on revolutionary activities. Mary could be involved, but without neglecting the children.

Unterhalter's study identifies a common construction of masculinity in texts across race, class and generation:

Heroism and adventure is work lived exclusively in the public realm, which must be supported unquestioningly by the private sphere (mothers, wives, girlfriends, children)...In men's autobiographical writing the support provided by a feminised portrayal of 'home' is always complemented by male camaraderie, deep bonds of friendship formed in adversity. Side by side with heroic autonomy, is deep loyalty generally to other men. If there is a choice between the private (feminine) world and the public sphere of heroism and adventure, the choice is always made by the author for the public world, backed up by reference to history... (2000: 166–7)

It may be that this is what is accurately conveyed from reading these works. But further evidence, from outside such writings, creates more complexity. There were women, like Ray Alexander, who joined the Communist underground, while her husband Jack Simons refused, to some extent reversing conventional domestic responsibilities (cf. Simons 2004; Suttner 2004). This replicated a pattern in their marriage, where Jack, a leading theorist, would drive Ray to trade union negotiations and wait in the car, having to content himself with his books, flask and sandwiches (Simons 2004).

There were, as indicated, women as well as men in MK and the broader underground. In some cases these women had men under their command (see below and Radebe interview). There were many such women. Amongst those that I know of are Jackie Molefe, Lindiwe Zulu, Thandi Modise, Marion Sparg, Dipuo Mvelase and Thenjiwe Mtintso.

Women in MK: the 'heroic female project'

The notion of a 'heroic male project' is clearly disrupted by women embarking on 'heroic projects', working underground and going to war with the apartheid regime.

'We lived in the same camps. The women did exactly the same training as the men. Exactly the same. Drilling, handling weapons, topography...everything' (Gwendoline Sello in Bernstein 1994: 149; see also Cock 1991; von den Steinen 1999).

But the experience was by no means unambiguous and unproblematic. Impressions and reflections on this period convey more than one message and interpretation. One of the negative experiences encountered by some was the 'male camaraderie', referred to by Unterhalter. Katleho Moloji reported that the men did not take the women seriously or undermined them or considered them a threat (Bernstein 1994).

Referring to 'male camaraderie', although not using those words, Moloji notes, 'And you could see some of the things that you're not involved in. It's only men, who stand there whispering. And then they're gone; and you start asking yourself, "Why am I being left out?"' (Bernstein 1994: 183; see also von den Steinen 1999).

Often there was an initial assumption that women did not come to join MK or go into exile in their own right, but to follow a lover. Thus Shirley Gunn was asked, 'Whom are you following?' (Gunn interview).

But others like Thandi Modise report different types of experiences (see Thandi Modise in Cock 1991, qualified in her later interview with Curnow 2000). Likewise, Jacqueline Molefe, now General Sedibe, claims that women earned, through their actions, the respect of men in the army and were treated as equals (see Cock 1991). Faith Radebe also did not experience men as undermining of her or other female members of MK, and in fact considered them supportive and pleased to have women as leaders in particular situations (Radebe interview).

Also, it appears that some of the male leaders and commanders, especially Chris Hani, were intolerant of practices undermining of women (Mvelase interview).

Problems of intimate relations

There were also problems in terms of intimate relations between men and women (von den Steinen 1999). The numerical imbalance, with men far outnumbering women, would create tensions and frustrations under any circumstances.

But the frustrations and resentments were magnified by the inequality of status. Many women formed relationships with senior figures. It is sometimes suggested that this related to the capacity of these men to provide more of the good things of life in a harsh environment (Hassim 2004).

Insofar as the women had to relate in their training with the trainees and not the commanders with whom they may have formed relationships, this caused tensions and

made it more difficult to relate amicably. Some commissars, while admitting the right of these women to form such relationships, advised them to be discreet and treat the relationships as private (von den Steinen 1999). It was considered desirable, in order to respect the feelings of those not in relationships, to conduct romantic affairs in semi-underground fashion (Radebe interview).

Insofar as high rank sometimes led commanders to exploit the vulnerability of new recruits, Chris Hani took preventative steps. Dipuo Mvelase reports:

There was a situation where in our army there were very few women and they come into the army, officers will jump for them, all of them and use, or misuse their powers and the authority that they have to get women. That led to some nasty situations. Comrade Chris established this Rule 25 – it was a new rule – that no officer will have a relationship with a new recruit because it is an unfair relationship. A recruit needs to be given a chance to know our army so that they can make a decision about these things and understand...things because when they come in people use their authority and the difficulties of training as a soldier, to start relationships with these women. The rule was a problem with officers. But not that they could defy Comrade Chris. People complained about it, but it was observed. (Mvelase interview)

Mvelase claimed ‘there was no time that Comrade Chris left the camps without sensitising all of us about the gender issue and taking it up seriously, not only with the soldiers but with officers also, with the administration’ (Mvelase interview).

But even if a relationship were established under these difficult conditions, the demands of conducting the struggle often imposed great strain through deployment of lovers/spouses in quite separate places, sometimes leading to their breaking up. Gwendoline Sello, while her marriage survived, describes the situation:

In 1982 I came to get married here in Dar es Salaam. But...most of the time we were never together, because he was fighting most of the time in the front. We stayed together for two years, but only for two years...I was seven years in the GDR [German Democratic Republic]. I didn't see my husband until 1987...Then he joined me, only for two years again and then I left him there when I came back now to Tanzania. Now he's in the GDR...He'll come back in two years. (Bernstein 1994: 150)

Faith Radebe fully accepts the need in a revolution for operational considerations to take precedence. But this placed intolerable strain on her marriage. Husband and wife were not able to spend time together or sufficient time together at important moments of personal crisis or illness. She is clear that this did not feed into already existing weaknesses in her marriage, but literally the demands of the national liberation movement made it impossible to relate in a manner that could sustain the relationship. But she did not blame or repudiate the revolution or the liberation movement. It is a

reality that Radebe sees as regrettable but one of the necessary or inevitable fallouts from a revolution (Radebe interview).⁵ (For other examples, see Bernstein 1994.)

Abuses

There were undoubtedly situations of sexual harassment or abuse or rape and it was sometimes hard to report these or to find adequate mechanisms for protection (Modise⁶ in Curnow 2000; von den Steinen 1999). The exact extent of this phenomenon does not appear to be quantifiable on the information currently available. While some report harassment, others never encountered it (eg. Radebe interview). It constantly surfaced in the women's section meetings (Hassim 2004).

Again, this is one of those subjects which, as in all situations, tends to be under-reported where it occurs, and also, many who may have experienced such abuse would be more likely to relate it to a woman than to a man. What is presented here does not pretend to be more than an indication of a phenomenon which is not unexpected, but on which adequate evidence is not yet available.

Nevertheless, without any evidence one can posit a hypothetical situation conducive to abuse. If a woman were raped in an underground unit, would she be free to access normal legal remedies? If she were to do so, presumably the entire unit, innocent and guilty alike, might be exposed to the police. This hypothetical situation may have been actual experiences in some cases. I do not know and have not heard of any such case. It does, however, raise conflicting moral questions: the need to safeguard the security of the unit as a whole and the right of a woman to protection from abuse. Can one find a way to avoid pitting one principle or right against the other?

This is hypothetical and I do not propose how it should be resolved or suggest how it may have been resolved had it happened. It is merely raised as illustrative of problematic questions that may arise in dealing with instances of abuse.

Conditions of subterfuge within the country also lent themselves to deception in personal relationships. Statements to the effect that 'a cadre of the movement can be called for duty any hour of the day or night' could obviously be used and were used in order to cover extramarital and other relationships.

Women, pregnancy and children

If sexual relations resulted in pregnancy it tended to lead to the woman's political activities being prejudiced more severely than that of the man, with her generally being sent to Tanzania (Hassim 2004; von den Steinen 1999). Because of the difficult conditions there, this may have been interpreted not only as a way of treating pregnancy, but as punitive.

But women insisted on being able to continue as fighters or to take part fully in other activities and appear to have won these rights, insofar as there were childcare facilities in Tanzania able to house the children in the event of the mother being posted elsewhere (von den Steinen 1999).

Not all women left their children behind. Some were able to take them with on assignments they embarked on, including sometimes working underground inside the country. In some cases, the mother/child relationship appeared less likely to lead to suspicion of being a trained MK soldier (Gunn interview; von den Steinen 1999).

Interestingly, at another level the often stereotypical notion of macho soldiers is qualified by Faith Radebe's account of male soldiers' longing to have children visit the camp in Angola. She reports how they continually asked that Angolan women be allowed to visit with their children so that they could have children around them.

In addition, in the same camp men objected to women who were pregnant being sent to Tanzania to have their babies. They wanted the women to give birth in the camp and facilities to be provided. They longed for elements of normality in their lives, represented in this case by the presence of babies (Radebe interview).

Deployment of women

Some statements suggest that women were not adequately deployed, that the organisation was reluctant to place them in dangerous situations, especially in combat (Cock 1991; Lyons & Israel 1999; von den Steinen 1999). The evidence by no means completely supports this view and may, instead, be based on a flawed conception of what is meant by 'combat' or dangerous work. In the first place, where von den Steinen (1999) refers to serving in the immediate frontline states, at best as couriers or in communication inside the country, as apparently less dangerous, this is mistaken. Likewise, Lyons and Israel, although writing mainly of Zimbabwe in an article referring to southern Africa in general, refer to women carrying weapons and ammunition across the borders – 'an inglorious but necessary task' (Lyons & Israel 1999: 7).

But this *was* dangerous and indeed essential work and generally part of the important preparation prior to crucial operations. In fact, the use of the word 'necessary' is in itself an admission that without the task being performed the overall action could not have been executed. It may have been that in some situations people better suited to certain work, in the sense of being less likely to attract attention to what they were doing, would be male and female in other situations.

But it is important that we do not fetishise a narrow conception of combat as meaning direct physical fighting. It needs to be understood as entailing a number of components, including planning, reconnaissance and a variety of other forms of preparation. Indeed, *sometimes where women performed a conventional role as mothers providing for 'sons' in feeding them, they were not merely perpetuating traditional female roles, but performing an essential element of the success of a military operation.* What Irene Staunton writes of the Zimbabwean liberation war has wider application:

These women, the mothers, were both victims and actors. Throughout the war, over and over again, they fed and protected the freedom fighters and they risked

their lives to do so. This they know and it is a fact of which they are proud. ‘The men were around, but they only used to say, “Hurry up [with the food] before the soldiers come and beat you up!”’ They regarded the *vakomana* [the boys, i.e. the freedom fighters] as their children, everybody’s children, with needs, which they as women, as mothers, had a responsibility to meet. (Staunton 1990: xi–xii)

In other words, the same phenomenon – a woman putting food on the table – has more than one meaning. Or are we to merely ascribe to all of these contexts the same meaning, that women are cast in a specific role where they serve the needs of menfolk, or do we give a different meaning, where as in the quotation from Staunton, what the mothers do is an essential component of the war effort?

Totsie Memela’s work in reconnaissance, which may be the type of activity described as less ‘glorious’, appears to have been just as dangerous as the actual infiltration of the *Vula* group for which she prepared, having to ensure that every point at which they entered, every place where they would stay, was safe.⁷ In so doing she tested the danger or otherwise of the various elements of the enterprise before the group entered (Memela interview). Earlier, people like Dorothy Nyembe, in providing shelter and other assistance to MK soldiers in the late 1960s – without herself engaging in direct combat – were as essential to their activities as the weapons they carried (Houston 2004).

Totsie Memela’s work entailed going into the country and included smuggling in arms, in false bottoms of suitcases and other items, and within the doors of cars, and placing these in DLBs⁸ where they could be picked up by fighters. Memela describes how her expertise developed:

And as time went on I had gone...for training in Angola, and when I came back I was able to actually prepare DLBs, actually put guns and be able now to write maps for people to be able to come and pick that up. And know more about DLBs and how do you make sure, where do you put the information for people to know where the dropping has been. How do you make sure that you’ve put the signs so that they can be able to see where you’ve actually dropped the guns? And some of the times I would get specific people that I’d been told to go and give the material to. I would have to make sure that I have cleared my route, I understand what’s going on to make sure that I don’t get arrested, and later on starting actually infiltrating people, comrades, from outside. (Memela interview)

‘We’d go to the North and we’d drop material.’ This often entailed Memela herself finding a suitable spot for a DLB during the day, digging in the evenings on farms, and ensuring that the signage (the way of identifying its location) was sufficiently simple for soldiers to be able to find the materiel. There had to be clear timing for picking up the weaponry and no need for compasses or complicated methods to find the DLB.

I kept on graduating in terms of the responsibilities...but the bulk of the time my role was infiltration, which started from a simple letter and later on I was now

infiltrating or taking people outside the country, groups of people. At the time, for example, when in Natal, there was quite a bit of violence, I used to take out students and I would come inside. And I was coming into the country illegally [initially she used to do ANC work while entering legally]. I would come into the country...make the connections and...take out these groups...because I had quite a huge network in Swaziland. And then I would take them to...safe houses and...send them through to Mozambique for all sorts of different things. (Memela interview)

Sometimes Memela had to take out leadership figures when things became hot for them; sometimes she had to bring in people like Mac Maharaj or Sphiwe Nyanda. In every case, routes had to be checked, patterns of roadblocks known and information had to be available should these change. It required legends to cover the presence of individuals in parts of the route, should they be discovered. It required means of communication to know whether or not they had arrived safely.

It is, however, important to acknowledge the reality that much of the direct combat experience of most MK soldiers was in Angola, fighting the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA⁹) or protecting camps against South African Defence Force (SADF) bombings. In many of the Angolan campaigns women were in the forefront of armed combat (Bernstein 1994). Wally Serote relates a situation where a group was ambushed and a woman soldier turned an anti-aircraft gun into an artillery weapon against UNITA, covering the retreat of her comrades and sacrificing her own life (Serote conversation).

This is not to suggest that the tendency to deploy women in traditional female roles, as typists and clerks, was not prevalent. But there were important exceptions and there were fairly substantial numbers of women engaged in dangerous work and combat. Not all sections of the predominantly male leadership accepted restrictions on deployment of women to 'more dangerous work' (see below). Jacklyn Cock correctly questions the notion of combat that is often used in order to assess the involvement of women:

[W]omen have not generally been used in combat roles, as that is conventionally defined to mean direct, hand-to-hand fighting in confrontation with the enemy. As a guerrilla army, MK has not engaged in much of this kind of conventional combat, but the exclusion of women from combat may be significant given that the experience and tradition of actual combat with the enemy is an important ingredient in MK's prestige.

No women combatants are mentioned by name in the NEC's [National Executive Committee's] statement delivered by Tambo on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of MK...The exclusion of women from traditional combat means that no woman participated directly in the famous MK actions that are now the subject of myth in the townships – actions such as the 1967 Wankie campaign...Women were

also generally excluded from combat roles in Angola, where MK soldiers gained battlefield experience and fought against Unita.¹⁰ Nor were women directly involved in any of the really spectacular MK missions such as the attack on Sasol in June 1980, or the Goch Street shootout led by Solomon Mahlangu. The word ‘directly’ is important here, because women were extensively deployed as couriers and in surveillance and reconnaissance, so they contributed indirectly to these actions. Furthermore, if ‘combat’ is redefined to mean exposure to danger, then acts of arson and sabotage performed by women MK cadres are part of ‘combat’. (Cock 1991: 165–6)

Chris Hani played an important role in challenging tendencies to confine the role of women:

In our army we had a situation, when we came in, women were deployed mainly in...communications, in the medi-corps or in the offices. Comrade Chris challenged that. We get the same training but we are deployed differently. It is unacceptable for the people’s army. Women should be deployed anywhere they are trained for and he used to be the key person in trying to get women to come into the country [as guerrillas] because his view was we are all trained for combat duties but women tend to get involved in combat-related duties, not in combat itself though they get the same training as men. (Mvelase interview)

Cock indicates problems in the notion of combat itself. In both modern and revolutionary war one tends to find a situation without:

direct confrontation and where the boundaries between ‘front’ and ‘rear’ cannot be sharply demarcated. There is no doubt that women have played an important and courageous part in MK activities. Undoubtedly the nature of the struggle and the breakdown of normal male–female roles encouraged *many women to discover new capacities within themselves*. They formed a complex web of support that sustained combatants in many ways; they provided much of the infrastructure of resistance – they acted as couriers, they provided intelligence and refuge... (Cock 1991: 167, emphasis added) (On MK as an empowering experience, see Radebe interview and Mtintso in Hassim 2004.)

Cock also refers to partly mythological images of female fighters, as well as actual cases of MK women guerrillas crossing the border for combat, which tends to indicate that the extent and nature of deployment needs further research (Cock 1991). It should be mentioned that mythology is often just as important in regard to MK as actual performance or, in this case, the actual presence of a particular category of soldier. The inspiration of a popular army and its impact on popular imagination may have been far greater than the actual scale of the attacks that it executed. That there was a belief that women were deployed in a particular place may well have inspired others to take action themselves.

Masculinisation of women as the price of working in MK and underground generally?

Cock remarks on a sense that some women had that the wearing of military fatigues led to their losing their femininity. She refers to the SADF maintaining a hierarchical ideology of gender roles and cultivating a subordinate and decorative notion of femininity. On the other hand, 'the egalitarian ideology of MK sometimes involved a denial of femininity' that she cites one informant as finding irksome (Cock 1991: 168).

Sometimes when women did what was required to succeed in the army, they claim it evoked resentment from some of the men. This is by no means a universal experience. In fact, as Cock's and my own research has shown, the experiences of women were not one and the same. Different women wanted to assert themselves or found they had to assert themselves differently in order to succeed in MK. Different women had different ways of claiming or did not wish to assert their femininity, as they understood it. The response of the men also varied and was often very supportive (cf. Radebe interview).

It seems that many women enjoyed weekends when they could wear conventional clothes and affirm their being women in a way that was akin to what they would have done in 'normal life', and not be purely soldiers. Wally Serote describes an image he has in a camp, where Thenjiwe Mtintso emerged from her tent wearing a miniskirt, with a pistol in her belt (Serote conversation).

This raises a number of interesting questions. Did women generally, often or sometimes have to pay a price in joining MK, in terms of contesting their right to be women – as they saw it – as well as soldiers? Or did they have to suppress elements of their conceptions of their own femininity in order to be acceptable? In other words, was there a 'masculinisation' of women, the adoption of modes of behaviour that conformed to a militarised conception of masculinity in order to win acceptance?

There is nothing unusual about such a phenomenon, that women might under certain circumstances become 'masculinised'. A contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories* states:

[M]asculinity does not only have to do with men. From the woman who is simply assertive, strong and self-confident to the woman who explicitly identifies as butch, to defy the boundaries imposed by femininity is to be deemed 'masculine'...Excursions into 'masculinity' by women would not be socially frowned upon were they not recognised to be claims on social power. (Code 2000: 324; see also Connell 2000)

In fact, there is much research in Africa showing examples of the capacity to transcend biological sex (see Miescher & Lindsay 2003). It is an undeniable reality that women entered a male-dominated terrain, an institutional set-up that tends to be conducive to macho behaviour. It is something that would impact on any army even if differently

constituted and partially mediated in the case of MK by norms of gender equality being gradually consolidated.

Even if feminism and notions of gender equality were gaining currency within the ANC, there obviously would remain gaps between the consciousnesses of various people. To this day norms of gender equality are unevenly diffused within the ANC and the society at large. That much is well known. As a result, many men, when seeing women succeed in the military, would have perceived this as a claim on 'social power' within a terrain regarded as a male preserve. This would consequently provoke some form of antagonism.

Related to that and to the earlier part of the *Encyclopedia* quotation, the reference to women being 'butch' has relevance to the way two white women underground workers, Barbara Hogan and Marion Sparg, were depicted by the media and judicial authorities. On their arrest both were treated by the media as misfits, with nasty references to their being overweight.

In other words, because the idea of a white woman identifying herself fully with the cause of the oppressed black people of South Africa was in itself abhorrent, identification as an underground worker, and especially as a trained soldier in the case of Sparg, was particularly repugnant to the white male view of what should constitute femininity. Consequently, the only way of reconciling what was irreconcilable in their understanding was to deny their femininity.

Suppression of the personal?

There is no doubt that the requirements of revolutionary conduct required sacrifices and suppression of emotional and other needs expressed in normal social relations. People in the underground and especially in MK found themselves in exceptionally difficult and stressful situations where they had to deny or could not give expression to important parts of their personality. The joining of any organisation requires submission of one's personal will, in varying degrees, to that of the collective or those to whom the collective have delegated authority – in the case of an army, its command structures.

Likewise, in a political organisation, especially underground, one cannot always act according to one's own judgement and certainly not without some degree of authorisation or consultation.

In essence, the idea of a revolutionary imbibed in the liberation struggle is one of an individual who expects nothing personally, who is prepared to sacrifice all personal needs in order to ensure the success of the struggle. (cf. Hermet 1971, writing on the Spanish Communist Party's underground experience.) Consequently, there is no sacrifice too great that can be offered or expected and there is no situation where personal needs can supplant those of the organisation. The heroic legacy of Party cadres is constantly communicated to members (Hermet 1971). The exemplary revolutionary

life of Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara, the famous Argentinean-born Cuban revolutionary, inspired generations of revolutionaries throughout the world (cf. Guevara 1997; see discussion in Suttner 2005).

The argument will not be that some harmonisation between personal and political needs was always impossible. There are cases where it was achieved, despite the great stresses. It may be that Albertina and Walter Sisulu achieved this in their marriage (Sisulu 2002; Suttner in *Mail & Guardian* 19.02.2003). Walter and Albertina Sisulu's responsibilities to the 'ANC as family' do not seem to have impaired their conventional role and exercise of responsibilities to children and grandchildren. In fact, Walter Sisulu was constantly consulted on Robben Island about the naming of children or his advice was sought on family issues. In the case of Albertina Sisulu, her role as mother cannot be narrowly confined to that of a caregiver or whatever other conventional notions attach to motherhood. As a mother, she also saw herself as a politiciser of her own children and a wide range of others who came to be embraced in the notion of 'sons and daughters' (see Marx 1992; statement of Lindiwe Sisulu in Strasburg 2004).

Whatever the dangers or negative legacies in this perspective for the place of the personal, this orientation may have been one of the conditions necessary for success in revolutionary ventures. Single-mindedness may have been required for successful conduct of the tasks of a revolutionary and may also have helped blot out some of the pain entailed (cf. Suttner 2001).

ANC/SACP as parents

There is a tendency for the relationship between cadres and an organisation in a revolutionary situation to result in the organisation taking on a variety of social roles in relation to members, roles that would under other situations be attached to other people/categories of people or institutions.

As indicated earlier, much has been made of 'motherism' within the ANC, the centrality of mothers on the political terrain. That was the basis on which women initially entered the political terrain and remained the predominant basis on which African women confronted the apartheid regime at a public level in the 1950s and again in the 1970s and 1980s. I do not want to debate whether or not that was a form of feminism, which is so confidently denied. My concern here is with the notion of parenthood and the underground.

What is interesting is that the concept of parenthood and motherhood underwent various permutations in the period of illegality. On the one hand, the conventional role was reinforced in that due to the absence of parents, members of the women's section were important as mother figures, especially in assisting young mothers who had no other role model around, to advise on feeding and otherwise raising a baby (Hassim 2004; Jordan interview).

MK female guerrillas say they missed their mothers 'every night', but that men also did, and Gertrude Shope was asked to come to visit camps for two days instead of one, because so many of the men wanted to interact with a maternal figure (Tshabalala interview).

On the other hand, in the course of joining underground/MK activities, many women had to deny their maternal role in leaving their children behind and some men also denied parenthood in relation to their own sons and daughters. Most felt great pain on doing this (see Bernstein 1994). But others saw it as part of a conception of broader parenthood. One father acknowledged that he placed no special weight on the relationship with his own son who sought him out on the parade ground. He said that all the men there were his sons (see Reddy & Karterud 1995; Suttner 2005).

This relates to the phenomenon in revolutionary situations where the organisation tends to displace actual parents as an overarching parent. In South Africa, Communists sometimes used the word 'family' as a metaphor or code word to refer to the Party, something found in many Communist Parties (see Hermet 1971).

But this was also true of the ANC. One woman cadre, in explaining to her children that she had to leave them behind in Tanzania in order to execute an ANC assignment, told them, 'Although I may be your mother, your real mother and father are the ANC. The ANC will look after you, feed you and clothe you' (Majodina 1995: 29). (This trust in the care provided was not universal. See Hassim 2004.)

When comrades wanted to marry while in MK, permission had to be sought from the ANC leadership. Security considerations made contact with family back home difficult if not impossible, and placed strain on young couples who felt that taking such a step without the knowledge of their family was problematic (von den Steinen 1999).

Baleka Mbete argues that the need for the organisation to approve was not authoritarian but a responsible attitude, ensuring that adequate investigations were conducted to ensure that other parties were not prejudiced, for example, undisclosed spouses left behind in South Africa. There was also an overall need to care for young people who left in their teens and had no role models, other than the mothers and fathers in the ANC (Mbete and Jordan interviews).

This displacement of 'normal' interpersonal relationships that would conventionally take precedence in one's life, by the relationship to the organisation and the struggle as a whole, finds expression also in notions of 'revolutionary love' or 'love for the people' and similar phrases (see Suttner 2005). But though this may have happened, it does seem that successful revolutionary activity may have required such suppression and repression of emotions.

Multifaceted identities

Returning to the earlier question of whether the price of joining MK or working underground meant the 'masculinisation' of women: there is a photograph in a book by

Margaret Randall, depicting a 16-year-old Sandinista woman soldier. In military uniform, there is a rifle on her shoulder, she wears a huge cross round her neck and in her shirt pocket there is a pen and a nail file. The caption reads: ‘ “Somewhere in Nicaragua” this sixteen year old woman defends her country...with a gun, a cross, a nail file and a pen’ (Randall 1985: np).

What is captured so clearly is that this woman entering the military world comes with multiple identities. Some of these are in abeyance at various times and are only acted on at particular moments. This young soldier can attack the ‘contras’. She may write poetry. She may read the scriptures and at moments of leisure she will care for her nails.

It is true then that in a revolution elements of one’s personality tend to be repressed. For operational reasons one’s desire to be with someone may be interrupted. One may be sent far away to do the business of the revolution. That does not mean that the desire for one’s normal life or the normal life that one hopes to enjoy in a democratic society is therefore obliterated. It has to wait unfortunately but it may still be what most revolutionaries still hope to enjoy.



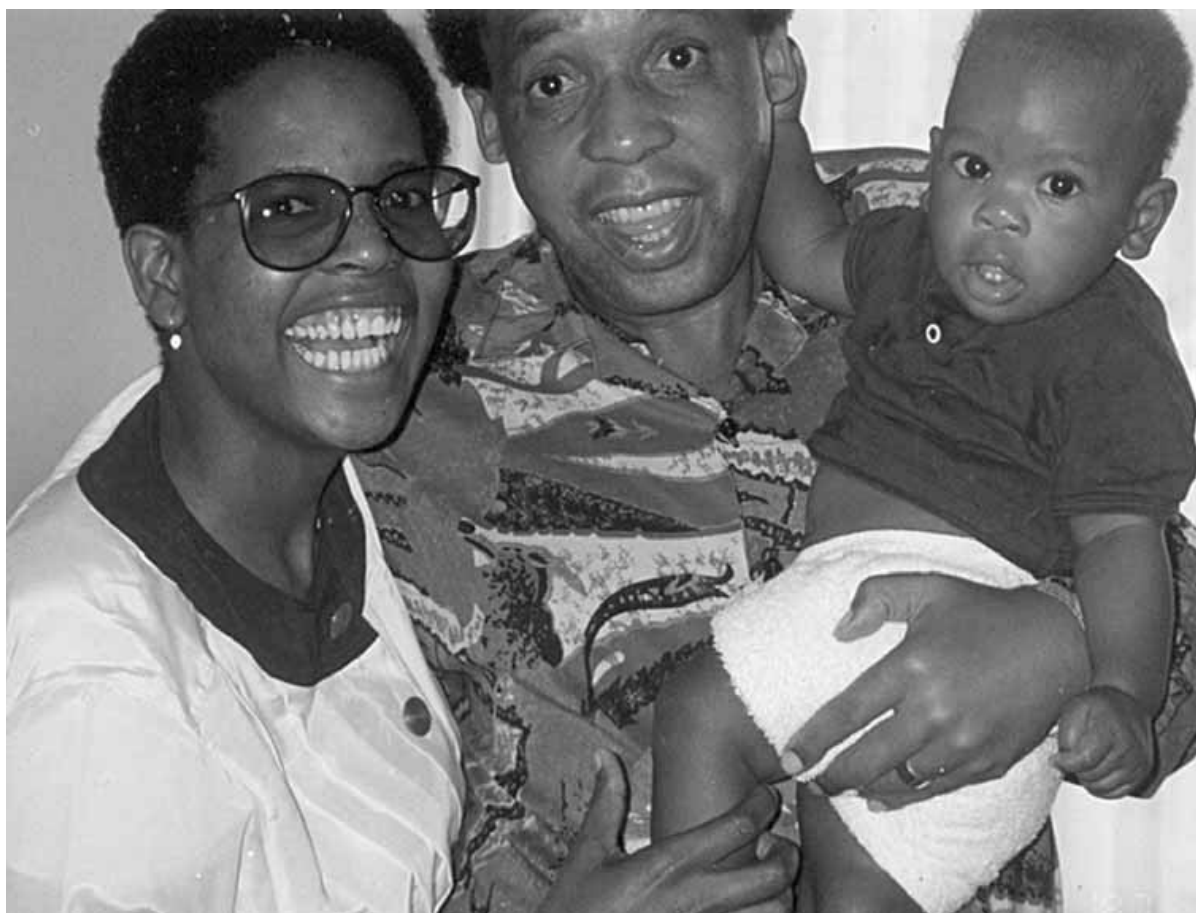
Sandinista woman soldier

Male role

What role women played in the underground and MK was crucially dependent on the attitude of male soldiers and other cadres, and the extent to which the MK model of a soldier and other underground models could encompass women as well as men. While evidence needs to be gathered on the attitudes of a wider range of people than those whom I have researched, certainly some of the behaviour of Vuyisile Mini, the first MK martyr, subverts conventional notions of the macho male – shedding tears over comrades failing to realise the seriousness of war (see Suttner 2005).

Women in MK testify to Chris Hani departing from what may often have been the norm, making cadres feel that their personal fears and emotional make-up were as much the concern of the army as strategy and tactics. Dipuo Mvelase, a female MK commander, describes how Hani raised issues that for many people were outside the conventional bounds of revolutionary discourse:

He was...a comrade to whom you felt you can say anything and not feel bad about it, whether it is personal or whether it is about the struggle...Someone you



Dipuo Mvelase with her eldest child, Tinyiko, and Chris Hani.

could confide in, probably say certain things that I couldn't even say to my mum...Despite the fact that everybody needed his attention because he was the commander in that area [in Angola], we had about three hundred new recruits and he spent every single evening talking to us. And you felt wanted, you felt at home. You felt important you know.

Asking you about your family, how you feel, what is your experience, do you miss home? Questions that you thought you wouldn't be asked because we are in a revolution...you as a person, you get lost...But Comrade Chris made sure that you don't get lost...[H]e humanised the struggle...He made every one of us feel we count. This is something that one never experienced before, because there are those big expectations that revolutionaries have to do this – have to sacrifice that. That revolutionaries are ordinary people, one never felt that until I met Comrade Chris... (Mvelase and Setsubi interviews)

Hani integrated such concern in the way cadres were briefed prior to being sent on missions into the country:

Comrade Chris's brief...had more to do with you and your readiness than with the details of your mission. He would ask: are you really ready and some people

find they are not really ready to come into the country. But they are scared because they will be called cowards...less revolutionary.

[He made] you feel that if you are not ready it doesn't mean you are less revolutionary...You can still make a contribution and to win the war it doesn't mean you have to be in the country... (Mvelase interview)

No easy route to characterising the role of women within the ANC underground

This chapter has conveyed the essential conditionality of any assessment of the place of women within the underground activities of the ANC. The ANC carries a number of legacies within its organisational consciousness, practices and individual identities. Some of these are warrior traditions. Some stress specific conditions of manhood that may pre-suppose limits on the role of women. Yet other elements of that legacy are conducive to realising gender equality. Notions of manhood within the ANC are diverse. It may be that the example of Hani is atypical of MK or MK leadership. He nevertheless represented a role model for many and complicates the picture and indicates the urgent need to go beyond formal texts or other writings and uncover the variety of actual relationships that existed. Before more can be said, further research needs to be done in order to bring this legacy to the surface and unpack the extent to which it impacts on the present.

NOTES

- 1 The research on which this chapter is based was made possible by generous funding provided over four years by the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala and SIDA. That was a wider project on underground organisation in general. I have also benefited greatly from being hosted in both the Centre for Policy Studies in Johannesburg and the History Department at Unisa in Pretoria. My gender consciousness has been developed through discussions with many people, most notably Nomboniso Gasa and Helen Bradford. I owe a more general debt to Greg Cuthbertson for his overall encouragement and advice. Helen Scanlon read the chapter, but unfortunately her suggestions could not all be incorporated within the time constraints prevailing.
- 2 The Comintern refers to the Communist International, a worldwide organisation of Communist Parties that operated from Moscow from 1919 until 1943. Each member party was referred to as a 'section' of the Communist International (Davidson et al. 2003).
- 3 For the record, whites could not be members of the ANC until the 1969 Morogoro conference allowed membership to those based outside the country.
- 4 This is the abbreviation for the Congress of Democrats, an organisation formed for whites within what became the Congress Alliance, comprising the ANC, South African Indian Congress, Coloured Peoples' Congress, COD and later the South African Congress of Trade Unions, which was formed in 1955.
- 5 Obviously when one is outside of such a struggle and does not make the choices Radebe made one can adopt various moral positions towards the break up of a marriage. But Radebe had made these choices and she recognises the very unfortunate price that resulted from her decisions.
- 6 Modise's earlier interview with Jacklyn Cock (1991) does not mention harassment and is a glowing account of men's respect for women soldiers. I am not inclined to treat this contradiction as a serious problem. The later version is more likely to represent Modise's experience. Having just emerged from prison and instilled in tight military discipline, when she did the first interview, Modise may well have suppressed negative experiences. Given the elapse of a decade before the Curnow interview, she may have felt greater freedom to speak of what she previously concealed. This is not to say that every experience of Modise was replicated for others or that her interpretation of her experience must be accepted in every respect.

- 7 Operation *Vula* was a fundamentally more daring underground operation than that previously attempted, in the sense that it sought to connect external leadership and other operatives on a much more substantial scale with local operatives within the country. It started in the mid-1980s.
- 8 A DLB means a dead letter box, a place where you hide arms or other dangerous items. It is placed in a location that can be identified by other individuals who know where the DLB is being placed. It is emptied without there being any contact between the person(s) who created the DLB and those who access it. So a DLB is a place of storage, which avoids any form of contact between the cadres using the weaponry and the cadre(s) who placed them there. That is the type of security required, knowing as little as possible of other individuals, if missions are to succeed.
- 9 A movement supported by the apartheid regime and competing with the ruling Angolan liberation movement.
- 10 Some of Cock's evidence qualifies this. My evidence is that whether intended or not, women were involved in fighting UNITA. See also Bernstein 1994.

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INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS

Interview tapes and transcripts are in the author's possession and will be deposited in a library when transcription is completed.

Gasa Noloyiso, Johannesburg, 23 December 2002.

Gunn Shirley, Cape Town, 28 February 2005.

Jordan Pallo, Cape Town, 20 February 2003.

Mbete Baleka, Cape Town, 19 February 2003.

Memela-Khambule Totsie, Pretoria, 20 August 2003.

Mvelase Dipuo, Johannesburg, 29 June 1993.

Radebe Faith, Johannesburg, 11 October 2004.

Serote Wally, Maputo, January 2004.

Setsubi Nomphumelelo, Pretoria, 20 August 2004.

Tshabalala Phumla, Johannesburg, 13 July 2003.