Women's Resistance to Apartheid

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Women's Resistance to Apartheid

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Apartheid was an oppressively destructive system that influenced many lives, not only in South Africa, but also in many nearby provinces and countries. This influence occurred because apartheid was so morally wrong. It forced many men, women and children to be slaves in their own country. These people could not live their own lives. They were made to obey the laws of the white people with a nightmarish force that terrified all and killed thousands. Even those blacks that lived under apartheid lived in conditions that were more horrible than anything anyone could ever possibly imagine. They were forced into overcrowded cities whose pollution and poverty caused the death of many, made to work for wages that could barely keep one individual alive, let alone an entire family, and given no opportunity to better themselves through a decent education. These horrific conditions ultimately resulted in a struggle of resistance against the system by many individuals of South Africa. Surprisingly, this resistance was greatly influenced and aided by a very large group of women fighters. Even more surprising is the fact that this group of women consisted not only of black women but also white women.
Women’s Resistance to Apartheid
By: Melinda Laber

Apartheid was an oppressively destructive system that influenced many lives, not only in South Africa, but also in many nearby provinces and countries. This influence occurred because apartheid was so morally wrong. It forced many men, women and children to be slaves in their own country. These people could not live their own lives. They were made to obey the laws of the white people with a nightmarish force that terrified all and killed thousands. Even those blacks that lived under apartheid lived in conditions that were more horrible than anything anyone could ever possibly imagine. They were forced into overcrowded cities whose pollution and poverty caused the death of many, made to work for wages that could barely keep one individual alive, let alone an entire family, and given no opportunity to better themselves through a decent education. These horrific conditions ultimately resulted in a struggle of resistance against the system by many individuals of South Africa. Surprisingly, this resistance was greatly influenced and aided by a very large group of women fighters. Even more surprising is the fact that this group of women consisted not only of black women but also white women.

Yet even though these white and black women were fighting against the same system, their resistance to apartheid differed in many ways. The foundation of this difference was their skin color, but the structure of this difference consisted of a variety of different things, including their way of living and their education. This difference, among many other things, also resulted in a list of very different individual examples of prominent leaders, whether they be for the group as a whole or for specific towns and societies. The lives of black women under apartheid differed a great deal from the lives of white women under apartheid. Ultimately, as a result of this difference, the black women’s resistance to apartheid differed a great deal from the white women’s resistance to apartheid.

Before the 1920’s and 1930’s, black family life mainly took place on the farms. In the early 1900’s the men on these farms often had two wives. These wives performed many essential tasks. They were a vital part of society because they were responsible for looking after the entire homestead, including taking care of the livestock, ploughing the fields and looking after the children. Even early on, many things changed in South Africa when apartheid came into effect. Through the short story, Nokulunga’s Wedding by Gcina Mhlope, one sees that during early times “woman had to marry whoever had enough money for lobola” (38). As a result of this policy, women were seen only as necessary objects in the pursuit of a caretaker for the home and family. When this pursuit was made the men could sing, “the bride is ours, the bride is ours, mother will never go to sleep without food, without food…” (Mhlope 43). For the females, this horrible situation eventually led to a feeling of utter hopelessness and despair, a feeling that many more would experience for decades to come. As time went on, and apartheid became a stronger and stronger force, these homesteads and this type of life began to change drastically. Under this new system, men needed jobs to earn hard cash to pay for newly imposed heavy taxes. With these jobs, the men were forced to move to overcrowded cities and look for work or go to dirty, wet mines and suffer a constant fear of being killed.

These moves to the city brought with them a gradual breakdown of the family. The men who worked in the mines were often gone for nine straight months, leaving no male role model for their children and no companion for their wives. Things were not very different for the families of those men that went to the cities. These men often became hard and unnatural because they were separated from their wives. One sees the influence
that this situation has on the family, specifically on the wives, in Nadine Gordimer’s novel, *July’s People*:

Most of the women of child-bearing age had husbands who spent their lives in those cities the women had never seen. There was a set of conventions for talking about this. The man had written or had not written, the money had arrived or was late this month, he had changed his job, he was working in ‘another place’. Was there anyone, some other woman whose man had perhaps worked there, someone to whom the name of yet another town none of the women had never seen, was familiar? (83)

July only came home every two years, and while he was in the city he had a mistress. By the 1920-1930’s this situation also began to change because many black women began to leave the farms and move to the cities. Often they would go to the cities in search of their husbands, the fathers of their children, or their missing sons. This situation created a more normal living pattern than before, but one that was still very dysfunctional.

In the towns, the men tended to have only one wife. One of the biggest problems with these types of relationships was that many couples often married for the sole purpose of pooling their money. Then, after the children were born, they would stay together only for the sake of these children. This created a very unhappy household that was detrimental for the children. On the other hand, there were also a lot of men who drank very heavily and beat their wives and children or who deserted their families altogether leaving the women as the sole provider. In his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, Ezekiel Mphahlele gives us a very clear picture of this type of situation and the effects it had on the wives of these men. Mphahlele’s father drank a great deal and worked very little. His mother brought in all the money for the family. When he finally went too far and hit her too hard, he was arrested and jailed. This left Mphahlele’s mother like many other black women of this time, alone and solely responsible for taking care of a family on meager wages.

Yet, even though these women’s lives were a constant struggle, they managed to survive and also, at the same time, find individually subtle ways to resist the system that they hated so dearly. The most widely method used by many black women was beer brewing. The women who brewed beer were a very bright group of individuals in a class all their own. It was against the law for Africans to brew or even drink beer. Yet, these women would still brew it in their homes and then, through very intricate methods, they would bury it in their yards so that the police could not find it. Mphahlele also did a very good job of describing this situation in his autobiography: “Marabastad continued to brew beer. Police continued to raid as relentlessly and to destroy. There were Saturday and Sunday mornings when the streets literally flowed with beer. Each yard had several holes in which tins of beer were hidden” (43). The homes of these women often turned into bars or shebeens at night. They would clear out the rooms and put in benches for the filthy, drunk men who puked all over their bathrooms and then went home and beat their wives. Even though the dignity of these women suffered because they brewed beer, they continued to do it because it allowed them to stay home with their families and it provided them with extra income. For those women who were married, it gave them a lot of independence through a say in how the family’s money was spent. For those women who were single mothers raising families, it gave them income to send their children to school, an ability that was very important to many. “Leave school, my daughter, and work. You cannot sit at home and have other people work for you; stand up and do the white man’s washing and sell beer. That’s right – that is how a woman does it; look at us, ... we have sent our
children to school with money from beer selling” (Mphahlele 41). These women were the backbone of the family. They believed that it was very important to take care of their children because they were the next generation. Hopefully, through education and ambition, these children could begin to destroy the system they were all forced to live under.

It was with this education that many black women were also able to fight against apartheid. Black women through the centuries have been viewed by the whites as “unproductive in industry, as totally dependent on [their] male counterparts, as helpless, unintelligent to the point of being useless and stupid” (Kuzwayo 12-13). Yet, many women, through their struggle against apartheid and through their achievements, continually disproved this view. For a long time, women were not allowed an education. Yet, eventually, their churches began to play a vital role in their progress through education. “The churches have been a vehicle for progress, growth and development for all black women educated before the mid-1950’s” (Kuzwayo 251). The mission schools were sometimes the only places that they could learn. Here they were taught education along with Christian principles and values. This education gave these women a “physical, psychological, and emotional liberation ... as they began to discover their potential and identity” (Kuzwayo 252).

By the 1940’s, many of these women were graduating as teachers and nurses. For a while, many thought that these were the only professions that they could handle. Nosipho summarizes this belief and its detrimental effects in Ndebele’s story Fools: “She [the black woman] could train to be a nurse, or train to be a teacher. So many girls go into these professions not because they are interested in them, but because it has become a terrible tradition. These two professions have become a railway line beyond which most women cannot think. In time, women become the railway line itself” (237-238). Many women eventually began to struggle against this tradition and move into other professions. By the mid 1940’s, the first group of back women doctors emerged. Shortly thereafter, many black women lawyers also began to emerge. Through these professions, they proved their equality to men and other white women, disproving the theory that they were unintelligent.

From here, with a solid education behind them, they began their major protests and demonstrations in resistance of apartheid.

As I’ve shown in the above pages, the lives of black women in South Africa were not easy. Any of their accomplishments, whether it be brewing beer and raising their families, or organizing protests and demonstrations, are remarkable considering the fact that “women in South Africa suffer[ed] a triple oppression of gender, race and class” (Walker 2). The system of apartheid put every black person at the bottom of the social ladder, but black women were the lowest members on that bottom step, especially in regards to their rights and privileges. They had to suffer the most and they were the strongest because of it. They lived under a system that felt that there was no need for women’s liberation. Even their black men thought this was true because it was an idea that “came from a culture, a so-called Western Civilization, that had meant only misery to Africa and its people” (Fugard 3). Yet, the black women fought against these beliefs and these struggles and resisted apartheid vehemently and strongly through many protests and demonstrations.

Some of the first pass laws of Africa were introduced in 1913. At this time, government officials in the Orange Fee State tried to force women to buy entry permits each month. In response to this new requirement, these women sent deputations to the Government, gathered many petitions and organized massive demonstrations in protest. Many women were sent to jail, but they continued these actions sporadically for several
years. In the end, the permit requirement was withdrawn. “No further attempts were made to require permits or passes for African women until the 1950’s” (Schmidt). The Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act was passed in 1952. This act replaced the numerous documents that men were forced to carry with them for identification with one single document. It also stated that African women at some time in the future would also be required to carry these single documents, or pass books. This act resulted in widespread anger and protest among the black women. “Finally, in the 1950’s, the primary catalysts of the anti-pass protests were not the traditional male leader, but thousands of African women, many of whom had never before been involved in political protests or demonstrations” (Schmidt). They protested so strongly against this act because they knew that if they were forced to carry these passes, there would be an increase in the effectiveness of the influx control system, making it even harder for them to acquire urban residency. They also fought because they knew that the act “would mean the further destruction of family life, that children would be ‘left uncared for, helpless, and others (would be) torn from babies for failure to produce a pass’” (Schmidt). They could not let this happen so they had to fight against it.

The ANC Women’s League and the nonracial Federation of South African Women mainly organized the urban campaigns. In the rural areas, resistance to the pass laws was mainly spontaneous. On January 4, 1953, hundreds of African men and women assembled in the Langa Township outside of Cape Town to protest the impending application of the Native Laws Amendment Act. Preparations also began to be made for the first nonracial National Conference of Women, to be held in Johannesburg in April 1954. On this day, 146 delegates representing 230,000 women from all parts of South Africa attended this first national women’s conference. That day the Federation of South African Women was also formed. It was made up of many women’s groups, including African, Indian, Coloured and whites. Its objectives were “to bring the women of South Africa together to secure full equality of opportunity for all women, regardless of race, colour or creed; to remove social and legal and economic disabilities; to work for the protection of the women and children of our land” (Schmidt). The “Women’s Charter” was also written on this day. It also called for equality and better working conditions. Its ending statement was: “We shall teach the men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and practice….freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage” (Schmidt). This charter was also included as part of the Freedom Charter drawn up in Kliptown on June 25-26, 1955 and adopted by the Congress of the People.

In the following years, the ANC Women’s League teamed up with the FSAW and organized many demonstrations outside Government offices in towns and cities around the country. The first national protest took place on October 27, 1955. For this protest, 2,000 women of all races marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria. On August 9th, 1956, 20,000 women from all parts of South Africa participated in a second march on the Union Buildings. For their protest, they silently stood outside the Government building for 30 minutes with their hands raised in the Congress salute. They concluded the demonstrations by singing freedom songs and chanting their slogan “now you have touched the women! You have struck a rock, you will be crushed!” Yet, even with all their efforts, they did not get what they wanted. In 1958, many employers began to require that their employees have the reference books even though there was, as of yet, no law requiring African women to carry them. “On October 26, 1962, the Government announced that all African women, aged 16 and over, would be required to carry reference books as of February 1, 1963. By
that time, the ANC Women’s League had been outlawed, and the FASW had effectively ceased to exist because much of their leadership had been banned, banished or imprisoned” (Schmidt). Yet, their fight was not in vain because it gave them the chance to prove to others what they could do and how effective they could be.

There were also many specific black women who played very vital roles in black women’s resistance to apartheid. These women were an inspiration and they provided a hope, for many, that apartheid could be beat. These women had the personality characteristics of strong leaders who fought apartheid with all of their beings in the only ways that they knew how. One of these women was Mphahlele’s Aunt Dora. Dora was a very strong-willed woman who was not scared of anyone. She fought long and hard for those things that she thought were unfair, such as the day that she fought an Indian shopkeeper because he did not stamp the book for the correct amount of shillings. She beat this man up and got the book stamped. Her husband beat her for doing it, but she still won her fight. In Ndebele’s *Fools*, we also saw many women like this who fought for what they believed in. All of the women in Mimi’s family had these characteristics. Mimi raised her child, moving on and living her life, even after all that the teacher had put her through. Busi, Mimi’s sister, was the physically strong one willing to physically fight for what she wanted. And lastly, but most importantly, there was Mimi’s mother. She was the ultimate protector of all her children against apartheid. She brewed beer just like the many women already discussed. The best remark about her was made by Nosipho: “But there are the likes of your mother, whose books are people, and who have amassed a wealth of wisdom the proportions of which I can never imagine” (Ndebele 237). She represented those black women of South Africa who had no formal education, yet who still held a wisdom so profound that it enabled them to resist apartheid in ways that no other women could.

These fictional characters were based on those prominent black women leaders and figures that dedicated their lives in the struggle against apartheid. One such figure was Bessie Head. One learns a lot about Bessie Head through her story entitled *The Cardinals*. She was a child of mixed race who was sent to live in the slums of Africa with people she did not know. Bessie Head, like many other figures, used her writing ability to fight against apartheid. Her amazing descriptions about the conditions in Africa at the time of apartheid give us a very good idea of how horrible it was. Stomachs always turn when one reads this story. This effective fighting technique was exactly what Head wanted to employ in her stories. She comments on many things in this story, but most importantly she captures how important writing was during this time: “It is the duty of the conqueror to abuse you, and treat you like an outcast and alien, and to impose false standards on you. Maybe we can help throw some of those standards overboard. It is a great responsibility to be a writer at this time” (72).

Ellen Kuzwayo was another very prominent and important black women fighter against apartheid. She was born on June 29, 1914. Some of her many achievements include the following: from 1964 to 1976 she was General Secretary of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA); from 1976 to 1982 she served on the Committee of Ten as one of the committee members; she served as a Zamani Soweto Sisters Council Consultant since 1978; she has been the Maggie Magaba Trust Chairwoman since its inception in 1979; she’s served on the Urban Foundation as one of the founder Board Members in the Transvaal as well as Board Member at national level since 1982; and she was the Black Consumer Union’s first president. In 1976 she was detained for five months under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act. Right after Ellen’s release from detention, she was asked to take part in the litigation in a suit against eleven students who stood on trial facing very heavy sentences under the Terrorism Act. This was one of her toughest life decisions.
because of how fragile a position she was in after just having been released from prison. It was her first court testimony and it went well resulting in the release of some children and shorter sentences for the others. Yet, after her testimony a parent hugged her and said to her “You are not an ordinary woman, you pleaded like a man, only a man could speak the way you did” (Kuzwayo 227). She suffered a similar insult when, applying for a passport, she had to ask her eldest son for his permission to go overseas because he was her closest male next of kin. It is quite obvious by these two previous situations that a lot of prejudice against women still existed during this time and that their abilities were still constantly in question.

In her biography, Ellen tells the stories of many other prominent black women resistance figures that she knew. These women were extraordinary people who did so much for the movement. There was Annie Silinga who refused to carry a pass her entire life until she died in 1983. As a result of this, she was imprisoned many times and denied rights to any pension or welfare benefits. There was also Albertina Sisulu, wife of the general secretary of the ANC, Walter Max Sisulu. Albertina was sentenced in 1964 to life imprisonment under the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1958, she was arrested for leading a crowd of black women who destroyed their passes outside the market squares offices in Johannesburg. In 1963, after her release from prison, she was detained for making a powerful speech in Sophiatown. Her husband’s arrest left her alone to care for their five children, hold a full time job, and still fight politically. Born in 1916, Dr. Mary Susan Malahela Xakana was the first black woman doctor in South Africa. She destroyed the idea that science was out of reach for black women. She went to the University of Witwatersrand where she graduated as a medical doctor in 1947. She also volunteered for the YWCA of Transvaal. She started the YWCA Dobonsville Club and, at its inception, was chosen as its president. Many black women followed in her medical footsteps from 1947-1982. Mamazana Desiree Mkheli was the first black woman to qualify as a lawyer in South Africa in 1967.

These women were all very prominent figures in their resistance against apartheid, but two of the most effective leaders of this time were Lilian Ngoyi and Winnie Mandela. A great deal is already known about Winnie Mandela so it is not necessary to go into details about her fight. Yet not a lot is known about Lilian Ngoyi. When Lilian Ngoyi died March 13, 1980, at the age of 68, her death was mourned by many. While she was alive, she served as the first President of the ANC Women’s League and as second president of the FSAW. She played a vital role in helping in the fight against pass laws by leading 20,000 women on the August 9, 1956 march. At the end of 1956, she was arrested and charged with High Treason together with 155 other leaders of the movement against apartheid. She was prosecuted by many, a plight that broke her health but not her spirit. “She could give one many details about the history of the ANC in the liberation struggle, facts which could leave one clear about which factors made the ANC the powerful liberatory force it was” (Ma-Ngoyi The Heroine).

There were also many white female leaders who aided in the resistance against apartheid. Yet their struggle differed a great deal from that of the black women’s. This difference, as already stated, also resulted in very different movements and very different prominent figures. The white women of Africa lived very differently from the black women of Africa. They lived in much finer homes, they had sufficient food, they were treated with more equality by their male counterparts than the black women were, and they were given the opportunity to obtain a much higher level of education. They had more freedom to express their views and they had more power to get these views across. Even when they were arrested or had to leave their families for reasons to do with their fight,
they did not have to worry as much about the children they left behind as the black women had to. Yet, resisting apartheid was also not easy for the white women of this time. Those who fought against apartheid were completely shunned by the community. They hardly spent anytime with their families and, as seen in the movie A World Apart, their struggles had very detrimental effects on their children who were often shunned right alongside their parents. At times it could also be a very discouraging fight. Those times mostly came with the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement. These white women were often fighting for a group of people who didn’t want their help. Yet many still struggled on against a system that they knew was wrong and which they were determined to get rid of.

One organization that helped aid the white women in their resistance to apartheid was Black Sash. Black Sash was established in 1956 under the presidency of Sheena Duncan and soon reached a peak of 10,000 members. It started the night that thousands of white women with black sashes draped over their shoulders marched to protest the desecration of individual rights by the ruling National Party. These women stood vigil all night long and sang songs. Black Sash mainly fought against the forced resettlements of black people. The group opened many “advice offices” to help people with a variety of tasks, such as looking for passports, looking for homes, or trying to learn how to read. The government did not ban this group because women ran it, and they did not think that women could be effective. Many people saw this group as abrasive and aggressive so they shied away from it. By 1980, its membership was dead because so many people thought that it was too radical and too threatening.

There were also many prominent white women figures that helped in the fight against apartheid. Most surprisingly was Eleanor Roosevelt who “emerged as a conspicuous national voice calling for an end to racial discrimination and segregation” (Fredrickson 213). She tried to persuade her husband to change his political views on apartheid but to no avail. Yet her voice was still heard. Two of the most well known white leaders against apartheid are Helen Joseph and Nadine Gordimer.

Helen Joseph was born in Sussex, England in 1905. She dedicated forty years of herself single-mindedly to opposing apartheid. For her dedication she won the ANC’s highest award, the Isitwalandwe/Seaparnakoe Medal. In 1951 she took a job with the militant Garment Workers Union. She was a founding member of the ANC’s white ally, the Congress of Democrats. She played a very important role in the formation of the FSAM. She also headed the August 8, 1956, march of 20,000 women to Pretoria’s Union Buildings. Also, in December of 1956, she was arrested on a charge of high treason and was banned in 1957. She was the first person to be placed under house arrest. “She had no natural children, but took into her care, as her own, the children of those who were sent to prison or into exile: Nelson and Winnie Mandela’s Zinzi and Zenani; Bram and Molly Fischer’s Ilsa; Eli and Violet Wienberg’s Sheila” (Helen Joseph). Many apartheid leaders feared her because she was such a strong and influential leader.

Nadine Gordimer is probably the most well known white woman who helped in the resistance against apartheid. She was born on November 20, 1923 in a small mining town near Johannesburg in South Africa. She was the daughter of immigrant Jewish parents. She studied at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Her first published work appeared in June 1937 at the age of thirteen. Since 1949, she has published seven volumes of short stories and nine novels. “The novels of Nadine Gordimer have given imaginative and moral shape to the recent history of South Africa” (Dillemuth). She is a very good observer of the society around her as seen in her work. She also describes the politics of her time very well and what it was like to live through them. She is very honest in her
Many of her stories are about "independent, politically engaged women" (Ettin 16) who are actively working against government oppression of the African majority. She speaks out against the system through her stories and also through her essays and speeches, yet she vehemently denies being a feminist.

One sees her talent and ability when they read her short story, Why Did Bram Fischer Choose Jail? In this story, she masterfully describes the life of Bram Fischer and his own struggle against apartheid. One also gets a good idea of her talent from her novel, July’s People. This novel does an amazing job of showing the life of black people, not only in the cities, but also in the country, and how much they differed. It also does a good job of describing the events during the Crisis of the 80’s and how these events affected those white people who believed that apartheid was wrong. Three of her books have been banned in South Africa yet “she has not been jailed, put under house arrest, or restricted in her public or social activities; nor has she been driven into exile” (Ettin 13). This gives her a lot of freedom to keep on fighting.

She is very committed to being an African. With many opportunities to leave “she has avowed to stay in order to assume an African identity” (Ettin 12). Even though she is fighting for blacks, she does feel a lot of resentment from them because she is writing about lives she can not completely share. This makes her both an insider (born in Africa) and an outsider (does not know all the aspects of her country). She realizes and understands these tensions, and says “We [black women and white women] may share the same convictions, but after we’ve finished talking about it in a sisterly fashion, I remain the privileged writer and she goes back home to where her children are being attacked” (Ettin 25). Yet even though her fight is hard, her achievements must still be commended when considering that she is part of the biggest minority group in Africa: that group of white women who are against apartheid.

Any effort and achievement against apartheid during this time by any woman, whether she was black or white, was a commendable one. Both groups of women suffered from a much greater deal of inferiority and inequality than did the men of this time. This made it very hard for them to make any steps in the fight against apartheid. Yet many women still accomplished tremendous things through their resistance. The white women of South Africa lived very differently from that of the black women. This difference resulted in two very different resistance movements led by many characteristically different women. When one puts aside these differences, however, one is left with a movement towards the same goal that, ultimately, had a tremendous effect on the destruction of the horribly immoral system of apartheid which South Africa had been under for generations and generations.
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