

**ASPECTS OF SOME EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN  
THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION IN THE MK: 1976 –  
1988: A CASE STUDY OF 10 WOMEN.**

KONGKO LOUIS MAKAU

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THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION IN THE MK: 1976 –  
1988: A CASE STUDY OF 10 WOMEN.**

BY  
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the mini-dissertation submitted for the degree Magister Artium to the University of Johannesburg, apart from the help recognized, is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another university or institution of higher education for a degree.

K.L. Makau

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this piece of work to my mother Mohlago Melida Makau for her love, my upbringing and my raising despite all the odds that she came across. Le e hlabane Tlou, la swara thipa ka bogaleng. To my wife Mohlampe I thank you Mošopadi for your continued support and encouragement.

I would be serving an injustice if I do not salute all the sons and daughters, those alive and dead, who dedicated their youth age to fighting apartheid for the birth of a new society. Your blood and sweat was not in vain.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This piece of work would not have been a reality if it was not for the support of various people in different places: Ramncwana Babalwa (University of Fort Hare – NAHECS centre), Solwandle Babalwa, Yako Simphiwe (University of the Western Cape Mayibuye Centre), Zolile Mvunelo (UWC Mayibuye and ANC archives, Johannesburg), Bonani Somikazi ANC archives, and all the MK female (as well as male) cadres that gave their time to my interviews.

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Soli Deo Gloria

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ANC – African National Congress

AZASCO – Azanian Student Convention

AZASO – Azanian Student Organisation

COSAS – Congress of South African Students

FRELIMO –The Liberation Front of Mozambique

GDR – German Democratic Republic (East Germany)

MK – Umkhonto we Sizwe

MPLA – Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

PAC - Pan Africanist Congress of Azania

PWV – Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Vereeniging

SAAF – South African Air Force

SACP – South African Communist Party

SADF – South African Defence Force

SANDEF – South African National Defence Force

SASO – South African Student Organisation

UDF – United Democratic Front

UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

UNITA – National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola

UNO – United Nations Organisation

USSR – Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

WHO – World Health Organisation

ZANU PF – Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front

ZAPU PF - Zimbabwe African People's Union Patriotic Front



## **ABSTRACT**

The entry and subsequent active participation of women, who, largely were in their teens - of school going age, in the military affairs of the liberation armies of MK was a great contribution and sacrifice that the South African women ever ventured into in a quest to liberate their country politically from apartheid and was a watershed in the history of the military or army in this land, because, for the first time, such a step of joining an army did not go along with remuneration package whatsoever attached as an incentive.

These women saw the liberation armies as their last option in the face of the suppression, torture and cold blooded killings they had to deal with regularly from the apartheid security forces resulting from the protest actions by students, residents and workers against the unjust apartheid policies which denied the natives or original inhabitants of this land their undeniable inalienable rights and access to very basic necessities like franchise, education, housing etc.

This was a sacrifice in every definition in the sense that most of them had to abandon their schooling, their dreams, families, comfort of their homes to venture and forage into the unknown foreign land to prepare to take part in a war or open confrontation against the well trained, well equipped and sophisticated SADF. These women ventured into this with the full knowledge of the repercussions and risks that went along with their actions that they stood to suffer greatly, and yet, they saw that as the only viable solution to their own circumstances they faced rather and opted to take the risk than to stay in the highly unsafe townships and locations which were supposed to be their safe homes.

The year 1976 will always go down the history of South Africa as the pinnacle and turning point in the country's politics by the unwavering stand took by the students, males and females (boys and girls) alike in the education field to fight apartheid in all its forms. It was during this time that the borders of South Africa became sieve to its youth when they fled to neighbouring African states

to join the outlawed ANC in a special and only mission to unseat apartheid by way of military action, which, by then seemed the only option. In this mission,

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these women had to be like any liberation soldier whose main intention was to fight for his/her country and liberate its people from all forms of oppression.



## INTRODUCTION

*“War doesn’t discriminate! Why should you.”<sup>1)</sup>*

Umkhonto we Sizwe, (MK) the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), was formed in 1961 following the banning of the political organization within South Africa by the government of the day. From that time onwards MK became an underground operation, attacking the state installations by applying non-conventional methods; such as guerrilla warfare, sabotage and insurgency. MK operated from and had training camps in Mozambique, Swaziland, Angola, Zambia, Uganda and Tanzania, while Lesotho and Botswana served chiefly as exit points. MK’s main objective was to wage an armed struggle, in an effort to bring about political change within South Africa.

This study will investigate the vital role that women played in the ANC’s military wing during the period 1976 to 1988. The entry of those young women into MK posed new challenges which the leadership of the ANC never foresaw. This study will identify the nature of the problems encountered and investigate how such problems were addressed. These new (and mostly young) female entrants could not be turned away because, in their quest to fight the apartheid political system, their determination to join MK was equally great. So, it then became necessary that they also be embraced as combatants and comrades in arms. In addition, this study will investigate the way those women were treated, viewed and perceived by their male counterparts, as well as discover how those women viewed themselves as liberators and soldiers in MK.

The period from 1976 to 1988 is chosen as the focus for this study as it was the time that the struggle against the apartheid government took a decisive turn, starting with the 1976 Soweto uprisings. The political instability of the 1980s within South Africa was highlighted by the state of emergency of 1985/6, which underlines the aggravated state of the political climate of that time when many youths of school going age abandoned

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<sup>1</sup> Salut. vol. 7 no. 6, June 2000, p. 20.

schooling, their families and friends and left the country to join the outlawed and exiled movement.

This study, therefore, supplements previous studies that concentrated on the role played by men in MK, where they emerged as heroes, while the women combatants remained unsung heroines.

## **1. Problem Statement**

The research problem is the following:

***What were the survival strategies of women in MK?***

## **2. Methodology**

This study is based on a combination of both primary and secondary sources.

### **2.1 Interviews**

While the secondary sources were useful, oral interviews with the women who served as MK cadres formed an essential part of this research due to a general lack of literature on this topic. This, however, proved to be a daunting task, as not many women who had served in MK welcomed the idea of granting such an interview . each citing a personal reason as her excuse.

When conducting the interviews, the researcher used the representative sampling method, which made it possible to conduct a variety of interviews with women from different backgrounds, occupations, ages and years of service within the MK. Combinations of open-ended and specific questions were asked, to enable the researcher an opportunity to follow up on new lead issues that arose during the course of the interview.

### **2.2 Popular journals/magazines**

Although not of an academic nature, the journals of SANDF viz. Salut and South African Soldier contained some vital information for this study. In addition, they helped

to identify possible interviewees. C. Swart authored an article for South African Soldier entitled, Queen of her castle, which describes Colonel Portia Sibiya, why she decided to join MK, her training and the further military training she received as MK soldier before she could be integrated into the SANDF. F Siyongwana, in the article, A Woman for all seasons, described Admiral Khanyisile Litchfield-Tshabalala's activities as an MK cadre in Angola.

Further, the ANC archives, that are located in Chief Albert Luthuli House, provided literature that was published by the organisation itself, while its members were in exile. The publications that specifically dealt with women issues are Dawn and the Voice of Women (VOW). Both those journals provide an account and give insight into the role of women in MK and the ANC. From Dawn and Voice of Women (VOW), the women's role in MK is made clear by articles written by women themselves. Motshabi T. writes about her personal experience as MK soldier in: Women in MK . What I am Today is what the ANC and MK made me, in Voice of Women. Similarly, in Umkhonto we Sizwe's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Souvenir Magazine, Moloi Violet, in her article A woman's place is in MK, pays tribute to women in MK and also encourages women to continue their participation in that organization. Madlala Cynthia also describes her role as MK cadre in We saw mischief in every order. Ndlelu Duduzile, in Our fighting women, endorses the role that women played in MK. While Mokoena S, (Guerrilla Training) writes in detail about the training that was offered to women wishing to become an MK soldier.

### **2.3 Newspapers**

Newspapers reported, in the main, on the sabotage acts perpetrated by MK (for example the Church Street car bomb episode), the arrest of certain cadres (for example Marion Spargg) and maintained a running commentary of the court proceedings involving such combatants. It is from such reports that some of the roles those women played were revealed. For example, The Rand Daily Mail reported extensively on such issues, until its demise in 1984. While, between October 1976 and May 1986, newspapers such as The Star, Pretoria News, The Daily Dispatch and The Post reported on such issues more randomly.

## **2.4 Archival material**

Useful material from the Mayibuye Centre, of the Robben Island Museum (University of the Western Cape) proved to be relevant. This information was transcribed from the oral research done to preserve the experiences of the female cadres who participated in MK. University of Fort Hare also has well preserved archives that house useful original documents in the form of minutes of meetings that were held by MK cadres while in exile. Those documents also shed some evidence on the role of women in those meetings and other MK activities.

## **2.5 TRC Reports**

The Truth and Reconciliation reports (in its 6 publications) proved to be a valuable source of information. The stories of certain women in MK, who fell victim in encounters with the South African security forces during the period in question and beyond, are revealed. Information on specific roles played by women in MK came to light during the TRC sessions (for example Helénè Pastoors).

## **3. Literature discussion**

### **Books**

Jacklyn Cock did groundbreaking work on the role of women in the armed forces within the South African Defence Force (SADF) and MK. She made a comparison of the roles of white women - as the protected - and the black women - as the resisters . in her book Colonels and Cadres: War and Gender in SA. In this book, Cock discusses gender ideologies and discrimination that occurred between white and black women who served in the armed forces. As much of the information that was obtained from women through interviews, specifically dealing with MK was gathered in the late 1980s when the ANC was still a banned organization, valuable information could not be recorded in that book for political reasons. This research addresses some of the aspects of this deficiency.

Former ANC operative Raymond Suttner, in his chapter on Women in the ANC-led Underground Movement (which is found in the book Women in South African History, edited by Nomboniso Gasa) deals with the subject by looking at the political and military aspects of women in MK underground activities. Like Cock, he, on account of serious

lack of literature on the matter, had to conduct interviews with people who were MK combatants. These two are the most prominent secondary sources, since little else has been written on the subject.

Other sources consulted included literature that deals with the general history of the struggle for liberation in South Africa. One of these is the work of H Barrel, MK . The ANC's Armed Struggle. Barrel gives background history to the ANC in its struggle against apartheid and the book provides the basis for the understanding of the ANC and the armed struggle. Another is M Resha's work, Mangoana o Tsoara Thipa ka Bohaleng . My Life in the Struggle. In this autobiography Resha, an active ANC member who participated in the struggle of liberation in the 1950s, relates her personal experiences and encounters with the security forces as a black woman. Despite all the harassment and encounters with the apartheid security forces, she remained resolute to advance the struggle.

For a study that touches gender issues, it is important to also consult some feminist sources. For example J.S. Goldstein in War and Gender . How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa, examines universal gendering of role of women and exploitation of women in war among the host of gender related issues he addresses. In Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, M.J. Alexander and C.T. Mahonty, (Eds.), deal with the feminist theories and practices in Asia, Africa, and Europe. They further explore the activism of women in the important transforming society towards democratisation. B. Melman (Ed.): Borderlines . Genders and Identities in War and Peace 1870-1930 provides a gendered approach by bringing the relationships between gender, nationalism and colonialism and what both men and women experienced in the global modern war between 1870 and 1930.

### **Journals**

In the Military History Journal, The other armies: A brief historical overview of Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), 1961-1994 R. Williams gives a general overview of the history of MK and the information provided there proved vital for a deeper understanding of the history of MK, from its inception to its close. In addition, other literature relevant to this research topic includes two journals which, notably, deal with feminist issues, viz. Agenda and



Work in Progress. In Work in Progress, Thenjiwe Mtintso, in an interview with D. Pillay, was the first to speak out on the role of women and their experiences in MK, as recorded in the article %Women in MK . Thenjiwe Mtintso+. In Agenda, Thandi Modise also shared her experiences of being an MK soldier in an interview conducted with R. Curnow, as recorded in the article %Thandi Modise, a woman in war.+ Both those journals provided valuable information pertaining to the experiences of women in MK; factors that motivated women to join MK are discussed, as well as life in the training camps.

# CHAPTER 1

## TO GO OR NOT TO GO – WHY THEY LEFT?

*“Why should we wait here till we die? It’s no use going into the city, because we would starve to death in there; but if we stay here, we’ll die also. So let’s go the Syrian camp; the worst they can do is kill us, but maybe they will spare our lives.”<sup>2)</sup>*

The 1976 Soweto Uprisings stand out in South African history as a pinnacle event in the country’s politics. It was not necessarily the eruption of the uprisings of 1976 and 1980s that led to the exodus of the youth to join the armed struggle. Rather it was the ruthless manner in which the security forces reacted, the indiscriminate brutality, the detentions under the Internal Security Act and the tactics that they employed in a desperate effort to quell the uprisings and return law and order in the black communities.<sup>3)</sup>

Schooling came to an abrupt halt in most parts of the country and was replaced by running street battles between the security forces and the youth, who were calling themselves comrades. Those youths, whom the security forces referred to as *“lipgooiers”* (stone throwers), became targets for the security forces. In an effort to avoid arrest those youth were forced to go into hiding and voluntarily exiled themselves from their own homes. They operated and co-ordinated their activities from their hiding places, as their lives were now in danger because apprehension by security forces was likely to end with unimaginable consequences.<sup>4)</sup>

The reasons that led to the exodus of the many females from South Africa to join the MK, most often, are related to the political situation in the country at that time; which turned out to be unfavourable for those who were suspected by the security forces of being active in politics, and that included student politics. Following the 1976 uprisings, the government banned all organisations that were suspected to have had an influence

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<sup>2</sup> Good News Bible (Today’s English version) 2 Kings 7:3-4, p. 391.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein Hilda, For Their Triumph and for Their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa. p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Mummy Mxakato, Interview . Tuesday 13 May 2008.

on the uprisings. A similar pattern of repression was again evident in 1985 and 1986 when a nationwide State of Emergency was declared within South Africa.<sup>5)</sup>

While the effects of the 1976 uprisings were mainly experienced in the urban areas (i.e. black townships), the 1984-1986 uprisings engulfed most parts of the country. In the far flung areas of the then northern Transvaal self governing territories, such as Lebowa and Venda (now known as Limpopo Province), the uprising took the form of burning of people accused of practising witchcraft. This was part of the campaign to make the country ungovernable. As a result, youth in these areas also became involved in skirmishes with the security police. These skirmishes were also a cause in some of the youths deciding to flee the country to go for military training.<sup>6)</sup>

### **1. 1 In search of security**

The repressive reaction of the security forces to the uprisings of 1976 and the mid-1980s, together with the subsequent declaration of the general state of emergency, turned the townships into a battle zone. Young people were no longer staying at their homes and some sought refuge with their relatives in the rural areas.<sup>7)</sup> Educational institutions . universities, colleges and high schools . were not immune from the police repressive actions, as they were regarded as the breeding grounds for student political action, through structures like SASCO, AZASO, AZASCO and COSAS, who were supported by UDF. The greater involvement of security forces at those institutions, in the effort to stem the tide of growing student activism in educational institutions, also served to make those places unsafe for the students.<sup>8)</sup>

In the light of the circumstances discussed above, specific focus will now fall on how women reacted to these circumstances. Ayanda Dlodlo (alias Mable Gqiniya) was

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<sup>5</sup> Apartheid, The Facts, p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> Mummy Mxakato, Interview . Tuesday 13 May 2008 and Caesarina Kona Makhoere, Interview . Friday 23 May 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Caesarina Kona Makhoere, Interview . Friday 23 May 2008, Ayanda Dlodlo, Interview . Friday 10 January 2002 and Thundi,Booi Interview . Sunday 27 October 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Portia Sibiya (Col.), Interview . Tuesday 08 October 2002.

involved in student politics, in the SRC and SASCO, in Orlando West High. She was one of the women highly sought by police because she was presumed to be an instigator for the school boycotts in the area. After a close shave with the police in 1982, which she survived by hiding in a laundry basket in a neighbour's house, she felt that the only way left for her to survive was to leave the country.<sup>9)</sup>

The system of self governing states also had its fair share in the security of students who originally came from the Pretoria, Witwatersrand, Vereeniging region (now known as Gauteng Province). Students in universities in these states were viewed with general mistrust and suspicion, and were therefore targeted as being instigators; this was mostly evidenced in the Transkei (now part of Eastern Cape Province). This led to serious discomfort and a deep sense of insecurity among the students studying at those universities. With such insecurity, her search for personal security drove Portia Sibiya to abandon her studies towards a medical degree at the University of Transkei in Umtata, in 1985, to join MK.<sup>10)</sup>

One other factor that left most young people with a sense of insecurity was the unexplained disappearance of many comrades who went missing while in the hands of the security forces. Many of the affected families went for years with no answers being provided to their enquiries and could only hope that one day their loved ones would walk in the door to greet them again. The thought of being bundled into a police van, to never to see your family again, always sent a chilling feeling down the spine of most young people. Those young people, some of whom were women, consequently, reacted by risking their lives by crossing into Angola, to receive military training, and then return to South Africa to fight fire with fire. The actions of the security forces, where comrades were disappearing without trace, made their security uncertain, thus prompting many to leave the country and join MK.<sup>11)</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ayanda Dlodlo, Interview . Friday 10 January 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Portia Sibiya (Col.), Interview . Tuesday 08 October 2002 and Nomonde Vuthela, *Born at the right time+* South African Soldier, vol. 11 no. 8, August 2004, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Makhoere, Interview . Friday 23 May 2008.

### 1.1.1 Arrests, torture and police harassment

Gloria Meek, a member of South African Student Organization (SASO) was first detained in 1975. She decided to leave the country in 1976 because life became a hassle for her after she was required to report at John Vorster Square police station every day, at 6pm. At times, when she failed to report, she would sleep at different places as she knew the police would look for her. That, coupled with the torture she was subjected to while in jail, caused her to choose to leave the country. During an interview, Gloria cited that as the reason she opted to leave South Africa and join MK. %o didn't want to become a vegetable what we used to call some of these people who are detained and tortured all the times, up to a point when you are totally useless.<sup>12)</sup> In relating the torture, Gloria had this to say: %They used to beat me up. At one stage they even beat me up at the back of my head with a baton or a pistol; and they used to make me undress and stand naked in front of them for hours on end, sometimes from morning until late at night. I would stand there and I was expected to incriminate some of my fellow students that I was active in the Movement with.<sup>13)</sup> It was such incidences finally drove Gloria to decide to join MK, as she felt her presence in the country was not contributing anything to the struggle, but only leaving her with personal suffering.

Aside from the incidents referred to above, Gloria was also subjected to other forms of torture .

*“Well, there was one particular time when they had some bricks made out of metal, in the shape of bricks; two bricks, which they would plug into some electrical device, and these bricks would freeze ...<sup>14)</sup>*

She would be made to stand on those bricks for about twelve hours until she collapsed. She was further beaten and her hair pulled out at the roots. What was more humiliating was that all these were done to her while she was stark naked. The disturbing story of Gloria's experience was made worse by the fact that all this torture happened when she was three months pregnant. And when she had a miscarriage in the prison cell, as a

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<sup>12</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda, MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein Interviews Gloria Meek. p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

result of being tortured, she was made to clean up by herself. She received no medical treatment thereafter.<sup>15)</sup>

Mavis Nhlapo, from Soweto, left the country for fear of being detained or killed. Her 16 year old younger brother was killed by the police after the June 16 riots. She felt that her brother had died for the same cause she was fighting for; she summed that up by saying, %I continued to study under the educational system that he had been killed fighting against then I would not be fulfilling his wishes.+<sup>16)</sup> As was the practice of the security forces during that time, because of the political affiliations of the dead boy her family was put under constant intimidation and harassment. Mavis further retorts %You can imagine how it was; a child has been killed by the police and they try to make his family account for his death.+<sup>17)</sup> The Nhlapo family feared for the safety of the remaining children. Mavis, aged 21 at the time, had dropped out of Fort Hare University after she was expelled for political activities. She left South Africa in September 1976, together with her three surviving siblings, via the underground route and arrived in Lusaka, Zambia.<sup>18)</sup>

Makhoere Caesarina Kona (alias Rose Mokoena) had planned to leave the country in October 1976 after having witnessed the police brutality on her fellow students at Mamelodi Technical High School, outside Pretoria. Her attempt was aborted when she was arrested and charged with attempt to leave the country to receive military training. She met Thandi Modise (who was convicted for terrorist activities) in jail. When she heard that Thandi was a trained MK soldier, Makhoere Caesarina was encouraged to be like her one day; to become a fully fledged MK soldier, which would put her on par with her male combatants in the fight against apartheid. Upon her release from jail, after serving 6 years for her political activities, it was discovered that there was a plot to

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<sup>15</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein Interviews Gloria Meek. p. 54.

<sup>16</sup> P. Colligan, , Mobilizing South African Women (Interview with Mavis Nhlapo). Topical: Women 1980 . 1992 PAC UN/NY. UN Box 41. p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

kidnap and assassinate her. Makhoere was then advised by concerned comrades, including Dr. Fabian Ribeiro, to flee the country.<sup>19)</sup>

Other experiences relating to police harassment include those of Olga Magwazan. Olga was advised by her mother to leave the country together with her brothers, for fear of being arrested after both her parents were incarcerated; which resulted in her father's death while in detention. Olga abandoned her schooling during Form III, at the age of 18. She had also been continually harassed by the police who frequented her home and warned her not to participate in the student protests or else she would be arrested.<sup>20)</sup> Thenjiwe Mthintso also decided to leave South Africa in 1979 after having been subjected to series of detentions, interrogations and banning orders since 1976.<sup>21)</sup>

For Mabena Motlathlani Faith (alias Nthabiseng), it was a different matter. She was arrested in 1985, at the age of 14, while doing Form III at school. She was brutally beaten when police wanted her to confess to something she did not know about. She was left for dead and dropped in the bush between Orlando and New Canada while still unconscious. When she regained consciousness she found herself in Mozambique, having been rescued by people that . to this day . she knows nothing about. She was raised by a family in Mozambique, where she attended school at Jozina Machel School. She abandoned her schooling in 1987 to join MK.<sup>22)</sup>

The methods that were employed by male police force members to force the arrested women to confess were dehumanising to those women. The women who survived the torture at the hands of the police felt humiliated, which left permanent scars in their minds both as women and victims.

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<sup>19)</sup> C.K. Makhoere: No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid. pp. 12-13, Hilda Bernstein interview on the experience of exile: Transcripts, Nov. 19 Interview with Caesarina Gwanamakuru, p. 17 and Makhoere, Interview . Friday 23 May 2008. (Caesarina Gwanamakuru interviewed by Bernstein is the same Makhoere Caesarina Kona that was interviewed on 23/05/2008 who wrote a book No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid+while in exile.)

<sup>20)</sup> No author, WOM interviews Olga: Voice Of Women, Fourth quarter, 1977, p. 13.

<sup>21)</sup> No author, To Honour Women's day. Profiles of Leading Women in the South African and Namibian Liberation Struggles. p. 28.

<sup>22)</sup> Motlathlani Faith Mabena, Interview . Tuesday 14 April 2008.

### 1.1.2 Driven by anger

People who left the country to join MK were also filled with anger and vengeance against the apartheid system and its agents. When Thandi Modise was interviewed and asked whether she was recruited or joined MK on her own, she said %Both . it was difficult to wait, watching your brothers and school mates mauled down.+Her answer to the question of what made her decide to leave the country, she replied, %lot of anger, the killings and all these made me develop hatred. Nothing was too risky considering the sickening tyranny that was taking place in South Africa and in the Bantustans, like Bophutatswana.<sup>23)</sup> This clearly shows the anger that filled the young women of the time and drove them %to get to Angola and get AK 47 to come back home and fight.<sup>24)</sup>

When Pamela Daniels (alias Nombeko) was arrested in 1980, at the age of 12; her dream of becoming a lawyer one day were dashed. Upon her release on bail, she feared facing long prison sentence and she left the country. When she arrived in Tanzania she was offered an option of going to school on account of her age but, instead, she opted to receive military training. It was this anger that drove her, like many others, to join MK. She says that because of the anger and what she experienced in the township, she did not want anything to do with education, except to get an AK47 and come back to fight the enemy.<sup>25)</sup>

## 1.2 Recruitment

The experiences of 1976 Soweto Uprisings and subsequent ongoing suppressive action of the security forces within South Africa led to the establishment of underground units, which . by the 1980s - were well organized and operating throughout the country. Their primary task was to smuggle people that were sought by the security forces, whose lives were regarded to be at risk, out of South Africa. This resulted in the considerable number of young females who were later recruited to leave the country to join MK, doing so with less difficulty than was experienced by those who left the country in the early

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<sup>23</sup> Thandi Modise, Interview . Wednesday 30 October 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Mummy Mxakato, Interview . Tuesday 13 may 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Pamela Daniels, Interview . Monday 28 October 2002.



days of the struggle.<sup>26)</sup> Among those who were recruited by such underground structures included Mpxa Ntobeko, who was recruited into MK in 1985. After leaving the country through Botswana, she received her training in Uganda.<sup>27)</sup>

### 1.2.1 Role of the underground structures

Mavuso Thoko Theodore, one of the organisers for the June 16 march, left the country on 29 September 1976, after she was approached and told by the ANC underground structure that within South Africa her life was no longer safe. A small band of highly effective and efficient people made the necessary arrangements for her escape from the hands of the police.<sup>28)</sup>

In Mamelodi, Fabian Ribeiro, who was a member of the underground structure, was instrumental in organizing such escapes.<sup>29)</sup> In the Cape, women like Zwo Kota and Nomaindia Mfeketo were responsible for organising passports that were issued through the Transkei, to enable female comrades to leave the country safely and legally.<sup>30)</sup> While most of the women interviewed for this research left the country using such a passport, there were those who %skipped+ the country, as time to arrange such documentation was not available or they did not know who to approach to receive such documentation.<sup>31)</sup>

Apart from the above discussed medium, the ANC established a network of underground structures to recruit members from the factory floors, university campuses and high schools. Women were particularly active in these networks, as it was a politically strategic decision to have women organisers rather than men, who were already presumed as being prime suspects by the security forces.

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<sup>26)</sup> S.S.P. Dunjane, Interview . Sunday 25 May 2008.

<sup>27)</sup> M. Meyer (Maj.), %We are proud of you+. South African Soldier, vol. 8 no. 4, August 2001.

<sup>28)</sup> Mavuso Thoko Theodore, File MCA 6-313, Hilda Bernstein Interviews, p. 2.

<sup>29)</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23 May 2008.

<sup>30)</sup> Weziwe Rachel Ncome, Interview . Thursday 9 January 2003, Thundi Boo, Interview . 27 October 2002 and Makhoere, Interview . 23 May 2008.

<sup>31)</sup> Pamela Daniels, Interview . Monday 28 October 2002.

The 1976 Soweto Uprisings coincided with the release from prison of some leaders of the (then) less known MK; among who were: Joe Gqabi, Andrew Masondo, Indres Naidoo, Harry Gwala, Martin Ramokgadi and Jacob Zuma. After their release they began to rebuild the underground command units in Johannesburg and Durban.<sup>32)</sup> Women, just like men, responded well to the recruitment drive set by the ANC underground structures. This quickly established a strong network that enabled women to leave South Africa to join MK.

### 1.2.2 Radio Freedom

The ANC and MK established *Radio Freedom*, which used the broadcast facilities of various radio stations in Africa (which included those of Tanzania, Zambia, Angola, Ethiopia, and Madagascar) using Medium Wave (MW) and Short Wave (SW) transmitters. This was a 30 minute to one hour broadcast at night on weekdays. The station played a crucial role in counteracting the propaganda that was broadcast on SABC radio and TV stations by the South African government. Radio Freedom was used to inform the listeners about a broad spectrum of ANC and MK activities and those broadcasts made a constant appeal on South Africans to support the struggle against apartheid in any form possible. Radio Freedom proved useful to the ANC in exile, who used the medium to reach the large populace throughout the country to inform them of the existence of ANC and MK. The following message is typical the kind of messages the station would broadcast, to garner support and encourage South Africans to join the armed struggle:

*“This land of ours was taken away by bloodshed; we will regain it by bloodshed. Sons and daughters of Africa, you in your millions who have toiled to make this country rich, the ANC calls upon you: Never submit to white oppression; never give up the Freedom struggle. Find ways of organizing those around you—the African National Congress calls you to be ready—to be ready for war!”<sup>33)</sup>*

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<sup>32)</sup> Rocky Williams, *Military History Journal*, vol. 11 no. 5 and Barrel, H: *MK . The ANC’s Armed Struggle*. p.42.

<sup>33)</sup> No author, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1990*, vol. 5: *Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979*.

Some of the broadcasts taught people how to make petrol bombs and shoot; how to deal with people that were regarded as spies/informers (impimpi) and enemy agents. The broadcasts encouraged civilians to support the freedom fighters, by hiding them from the security forces and feeding them; thus making the path of the freedom fighters easy and that of the enemy hard.<sup>34)</sup> It was such broadcasts that helped the many young South Africans to decide to join the armed struggle in the defense of their country and people. When women heard voices of women broadcasting some of the programs of Radio Freedom, they felt motivated to join MK because already there were women who were participating at higher levels of the struggle for liberation.<sup>35)</sup>

### **1.2.3 ANC publications and literature**

Apart from Radio Freedom, the ANC had publications and literature like Sechaba through which comrades and compatriots were encouraged to take an active role in the struggle against the apartheid regime.<sup>36)</sup> It was through the influence from reading such publications that first introduced Mummy Mxakato (alias Mary Dlamini) to the ANC and its military wing from a very young age. These publications also encouraged South Africans of all walks of life to advance the struggle by joining MK irrespective of gender. Although these were banned literature, through the underground networks that were available reached women and it was on this basis that some became encouraged to join the MK.<sup>37)</sup>

### **1.3 Political education/consciousness**

Among the women who left South Africa to join MK were those who were politically conscious of the events in the country, those who had a clear understanding of the history of the ANC and why it operated in exile. Those were the women whose fathers, brothers or relatives were already in exile or in jail for taking part in politically related activities. That group viewed their joining MK as an action taken to advance the

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<sup>34)</sup> No author, From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, vol. 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979.

<sup>35)</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13 May 2008. (It is worth to mention that broadcasting then, was also male dominated even in the SABC. When the girls heard female presenters on Radio Freedom, they felt motivated to flee the country.)

<sup>36)</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13 May 2008.

<sup>37)</sup> Ibid.

liberation of South Africa. As those women were raised in politically active families, they left knowing what would be expected of them within the movement and the military camps. Mummy Mxakato was raised by her grandmother, who was an ANC stalwart who participated in the women's march of 9 August 1956. At the age of 12, as a member of COSAS, she was already active in student politics. In 1983, during a school boycott, police began their search for her as a presumed instigator. As a result Mummy went underground until arrangements were made that she could flee the country. All that she wanted to do was to join MK. Mummy's resolve to be an MK combatant caused her to defy all orders that she was too young to receive training. It was only after her 3-month stay in Charleston that she was finally admitted into MK, when Andrew Masondo, one of the leading MK commanders, visited Charleston and was convinced by her resolve to join the organization.<sup>38)</sup>

While the effects of the 1976 Soweto Uprisings were felt mostly in the urban areas (i.e. townships), the 1984-1986 uprisings swelled to include the rural areas. In the far flung areas of the then northern Transvaal self-governing territories such as Lebowa and Venda, political action took the form of burning of people accused of practising witchcraft. Those acts were an extension of the urban revolt, having the intention of making the country ungovernable. In those rural areas the security forces dealt with the uprisings with the same might and force that they did in the townships. It was the confrontations and continual police harassment, detentions and killings by the security forces that popularised MK and led to females from the rural areas deciding to leave South Africa and join MK to lend their support to the armed struggle.

It is worth mentioning, though, not all the females who left the country were politically motivated in their action. A few left the country to follow their boyfriends, while others were invited by their departing boyfriends, who were leaving the country for political reasons.<sup>39)</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13 May 2008.

<sup>39</sup> M.L. Mashike, Down-sizing and Right-sizing: An analysis of the demobilisation in the South African National Defence Force, p. 309. (This reason was never raised by any of the people interviewed.)

From the above it would be clear that it was, in particular, the political situation in the country during the period 1976 - 1986 that was the chief motivator for women to decide to leave their homes to join MK; they felt that no one's safety was guaranteed within the country and they felt enraged by that situation. Women, who mostly were still of school going-age, found it their responsibility, too, to stand up and do something. They reacted to the situation by deciding to flee the country in order to receive military training, that would enable them to come and fight the system, rather than surrender.<sup>40)</sup>

With the increased police brutality and their hold on the township streets, the options left open to them were fading fast. They either felt they had to stay and fight the system from their place of hiding, to then face the consequences, of which most of their comrades or known school mates or brothers/sisters were already statistics) or face the equally daunting task and risk the country. With the limited choices available, many youths . whose number included women . left the country, some of whom were only 12 years of age.<sup>41)</sup> At first that exodus was not noticed by the authorities.

It need to be noted, though, that throughout the history of the ANC's armed struggle and MK, the number of women actively involved in the struggle was always lower than that of the men. The estimation of the female composition in MK was never higher than 15 to 20 percent. According to Moloji Violet, the reason for the low enlisting of females in MK could be attributed to the fact that women had greater responsibilities in raising children and running families, which limited their participation in the armed struggle.<sup>42)</sup>

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<sup>40)</sup> W.R. Ncome, Interview . Thursday 9 January 2003, Daniels, Interview . 28 October 2002.

<sup>41)</sup> Daniels, Interview . 28 October 2002.

<sup>42)</sup> Violet Moloji, *Woman's place is in MK: Umkhonto we Sizwe . MK 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Souvenir magazine, December 16 1961, p. 6.*

# CHAPTER 2

## CHALLENGES FACED

*“The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight.”<sup>43)</sup>*

The women, who left South Africa, did not find life in MK easy. MK was not a regular army but a guerrilla force. Those women faced challenges and huge problems constantly from the time they decided to leave the country, live in the training camps, and upon completion of their military training. But, because their will was so resolutely set, they managed to be part of MK, despite all the odds they faced in that traditionally male dominated arena.

### 2.1 Leaving the country

One major test for most of these women (which applied basically everyone there) was that of knowing how to leave South Africa and join MK outside the country, in order to receive military training. This became a major problem, as the security forces were constantly on the alert for evidence of such actions after discovering that there was an exodus of the youth from the country for such purposes. Security on the borders and at the border gates was very tight, with intensive patrols and roadblocks day and night. There were only two options available to those wishing to leave South Africa: either to be smuggled out by the underground structure/person responsible for such action or to organise a passport to leave the country ~~legally~~.<sup>44)</sup> The conduit points were Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique, (with few using Zimbabwe after its independence).<sup>45)</sup>

Those who made it their plan to leave South Africa, had to organise themselves into a group of more than two, leave no message for the family, and connect with the

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<sup>43)</sup> Umkhonto we Sizwe Manifesto 16/12/1961.

<sup>44)</sup> Thandi Modise, Interview . Wednesday 30 October 2002, W.R. Ncame, Interview . Thursday 9 January 2003 and Portia Sibiyi (Col.), Interview . Tuesday 08 October 2002.

<sup>45)</sup> P. Daniels, Interview . 28 October 2002, C.K. Makhoere, Interview . 23 May 2008 and P. Sibiyi, Interview 08 October 2002.

underground structure for transport that would take them to the border. There were always contacts on the other side of the border to welcome them.

Those who left without the knowledge of the underground structures had to seek a way to cross the border without passports. This was the action taken most often and was done on foot, and preferably at night, to avoid detection and apprehension by the security forces; they also had to risk their lives by crossing rivers which, at times, were infested with crocodiles.<sup>46)</sup> They then had to go to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or police stations in the neighbouring countries to seek refugee status before they could be handed to the ANC or PAC. On occasion when they arrived in the neighbouring states they would be arrested and threatened with deportation. This was more prevalent in Botswana. They were threatened that they would be handed to the South African police, making them feel that the Botswana police were merely doing them favour. At such time they had to negotiate and plead that they should rather be transferred to the ANC or the UNHCR.<sup>47)</sup>

The police in Botswana would even refer to them as *matlolatarata*.<sup>48)</sup> Makhoere had an interesting story to tell to avoid being detected and apprehended on her journey to Botswana on a Transkei passport, as she was highly sought by the security police. She believes her safety in leaving the country undetected was credited to the *muti* that she got from Dr. Ramphasha, a traditional healer, which she constantly applied to the body while on her journey, as was ordered by the doctor, especially when she was nearing the border. In Zeerust, there was a heavy police presence but due to the *muti* that I got and applied, the police seemed to be asleep when I went past.<sup>49)</sup>

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<sup>46)</sup> P. Daniels, Interview . 28 October 2002.

<sup>47)</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23/05/2008.

<sup>48)</sup> *Ibid.* *Matlolatarata* is a Setswana derogatory name literally meaning people who cross the (barbered wire) fence, but in its context it referred to South Africans who crossed the border through the fence (and illegally) into Botswana seeking refuge. In Tanzania they were given a similar name and were called *makimpizi*. *Maleka Motsamai, Nkatshu Zamo and Mothathi Oupa* . Interview . 10/07/2008. This indicates that they also had to deal with the problem of called names as foreigners or refugees.

<sup>49)</sup> *Ibid.* *Muti* is a Zulu word for an African traditional medicine.

Those who entered through Mozambique in the 1970s were subjected to screening, as though they were suspects. This was because Mozambique had just got their independence and, at some point in that time, the recruits were required to stay at the border with the soldiers for two weeks and staying at the Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo) headquarters for a further two months for questioning.<sup>50)</sup>

All these incidences caused a great deal of discomfort to the women, particularly as there was always a danger of being abused, should they have been requested to provide favours by any man who was assisting them in their effort not to be deported back to South Africa.<sup>51)</sup>

## 2.2 Threat of being abused

MK had very clear policies to try and deal with offences committed by members, which also were aimed at protecting and creating a safe environment for the women members to operate under. In its Code of Conduct, under 'Grave crimes against the struggle', sexual abuse by any member against a fellow female comrade was regarded as a serious crime. The following were categorised as serious offences in this category:

2. (f) Abusing office by using one's position to obtain material or sexual or another undue advantage from members or others.
2. (k) Sexually assaulting or in any other way seriously offending the dignity of members.<sup>52)</sup>

Further, the code advocated equal treatment and respect for women, stated as follows:

5. (e) All members of Umkhonto We Sizwe are friends or comrades.
5. (f) Show respect to women folk.<sup>53)</sup>

Despite these policies and official standpoint of MK and the ANC on the treatment of women in the liberation army, there were complaints of abuse, but, sadly, such issues

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<sup>50</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek. p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Makhoere, Interview - 23/05/2008.

<sup>52</sup> Military Rules and Regulations. ANC SOMAFCO: Office of Director Box 77. Subject Files . MK Code of conduct. pp. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 2.



went unreported. Even at the TRC very little was achieved to address the matter. It is alleged that when such abuses occurred and involved those in authority, the victim was pressurized to remain silent. Ms Thenjiwe Mtintso described how "comrades who were contacts inside the country would come outside to report. They would put up a comrade in a particular place and comrades would sleep with them. And that's rape. That for me is rape".<sup>54)</sup> This silence occurred despite the clearly stipulated rule in the Military Rules and Regulations that complaints must be lodged orally or in a written form within 7 days, to his/her immediate commander or the next in command. (Military Rules and Regulations - Number 13(a).<sup>55)</sup>

*"There were again sayings like. 'comply and complain later' and 'protect the leadership'. The sad part of it is that even when you complained later, nobody listened., When you were not complying, you were labeled a state or enemy agent. Men in leadership positions would be in love with someone's wife and label the husband a "mdlwembe" (enemy agent) and went further to even influence the wife to divorce the husband because of the label of state agent."<sup>56)</sup>*

If a commander proposed love to you and you refused, there was a threat that rumor would be started and spread about you that you are %mdlwembe+.<sup>57)</sup> In a different interview, after her husband was killed by her comrades in the Angolan camps and had her only child sent to Tanzania where the child later died of malaria, one female cadre expressed how she was forced to sleep with men that she was not in love with.<sup>58)</sup>

The issue of imbalance in the ratio of male-female in the training camps, where females were fewer in number when compared to the males, has been acknowledged by everyone. There were intimate relationships which involved the rank and file, as well as those in leadership (administration in the camps). This situation created problems as there were times that the leadership used their authority and power to win the affections

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<sup>54)</sup> TRC Report Vol. Four Chapter Ten: Special Hearing: Women, p. 295, paragraph 48.

<sup>55)</sup> N.Gasa (ed.), Women in South African History. They remove boulders and cross rivers. p. 240.

<sup>56)</sup> W.R. Ncame, Interview . 22/02/2003 and Makhoere, Interview 23/05/2008.

%mdlwembe+ was a spiteful word meaning a state/enemy agent or spy refereeing to those that were labelled or suspected to have infiltrated the camps under the pretext that they were genuine comrades.

<sup>57)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 22/01/2003 and M.F. Mabena, Interview . Tuesday 14 April 2008.

<sup>58)</sup> M.L. Mashike, Down-sizing and Right-sizing: An analysis of the demobilisation in the South African National Defence Force, p. 346.

of the female combatants, such that Gertrude Shope acknowledged that the men were problematic.<sup>59)</sup> The allegations were, at some stage, so serious that it prompted Chris Hani (MK Commander) to come up with what became known as Rule 25. According to this rule, intimate relationships between commanders and new female recruits were viewed as being unfair and were, thus, discouraged.<sup>60)</sup> It is alleged that relationships between the senior personnel and female trainees was, over and above encouraged by the perception that it had some advantages or perks.<sup>61)</sup> Those female cadres who were in love with the senior personnel received some preferential treatment, while those who were not involved with one of them did not. This did not go down well with the rank and file male members and was one, among the long litany of grievances that the ANC leadership needed to address which had an influence in the 1984 mutiny.

The subject of sexual abuse was also one of the issues that the TRC had to hear about. However, not much was said by the women, despite the effort by the TRC to give them a platform in a special hearing, to open up and speak on abuses they encountered in the camps. It must be indicated that the allegations of sexual abuse, to some interviewees, was not a comfortable subject to they were prepared to discuss. There were others who rejected that such abuses ever occurred in MK.

As Thenjiwe Mtintso suggested, during the TRC hearings, men used sexual abuse to destroy the women's identity for having rejected their traditional role within their society, to assume roles that were, traditionally, reserved for men; to then engage in the struggle for liberation in an atmosphere where women were regarded as a protected species.<sup>62)</sup> In one of the special TRC hearings, Thenjiwe Mtintso also spoke about the difficulties that women faced in being asked to describe their suffering in the public arena. She congratulated those women who were prepared to come out in the open and speak of their personal experiences.<sup>63)</sup> She also gave an account of her own of being confronted

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<sup>59)</sup> N.Gasa, (ed.): Women in South African History. They remove boulders and cross rivers. p. 240 and S.M. Ndlovu, The ANC in exile, 1960-1970. The Road to Democracy in South Africa vol. 1 (1960-1970). p. 471.

<sup>60)</sup> N.Gasa, (ed.), Women in South African History. p. 241

<sup>61)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 22/01/2003 and Mabena Motlhatlhani Faith, Interview . Tuesday 14 April 2008. ~~Perks+~~referred to preferential treatment that women who were in love with the leadership/ commanders/ administrators received. They would receive the luxury stuff which others did not have access to considering that they were in the bush with no access to town.

<sup>62)</sup> TRC Report Vol. Four Chapter Ten: Special Hearing: Women, p. 295, paragraph 49.

<sup>63)</sup> Ibid., p. 294, paragraph 41.

by a male comrade, who, despite her high position within MK . she was a commander - said the following to her:

*"You know, it's going to get to the point that I am going to rape you and it is going to be very easy to rape you and I know there is no way that you are going to stand in front of all these people and say I raped you."*<sup>64)</sup>

The above serves to indicate how serious the issue of abuse against women within MK was, where even the position or rank of a female comrade was not taken into account in the way she was treated by her male counterparts. To them, she was viewed as nothing but a sex object.

In his reply to the allegations of sexual abuse before the TRC hearing, General Andrew Masondo had this to say:

*"In Angola there are at one time twenty-two women in a group of more than 1 000 people. There was an allegation that Commanders were misusing women. The law of supply and demand must have created some problems."*<sup>65)</sup>

At the same hearing, Thabo Mbeki acknowledged that male comrades committed certain "gender-specific offences" with regard to their woman comrades and that those who had perpetrated such acts were indeed punished by the movement; although no further details were given to the TRC.<sup>66)</sup>

Despite staging a special hearing to deal with gender issues that occurred to women specifically, it would seem the TRC did not achieve its aim of unearthing whole truths about sexual abuses - especially within the liberation movements. The TRC report summed up the matter with a remark by TRC Commissioner Hlengiwe Mkhize, who said that "the submission fail(ed) women" because of the unexpected silence that it received from the women.<sup>67)</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> TRC Report Vol. Four Chapter Ten: Special Hearing: Women, p. 295, paragraph 49.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307, paragraph 104.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295, paragraph 50.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

From the two submissions by General Andrew Masondo and Thabo Mbeki, it can be assumed that, indeed, there were cases of abuse of female cadres by their male counterparts; especially men who were in positions of power in the camps, such as administrators and security personnel (Imbokodo). The few who came forward to admit that there were abuses in the camps felt they were not treated well as being female comrades who were also committed to the cause of the struggle. One informant says she cried when she watched a tape in which General Masondo testified before the TRC and appeared to be justifying the sexual abuses that occurred in MK camps, when he referred to the matter as a matter of supply and demand. To her that statement implied that the women who joined MK served only as commodities, to supply and feed the male soldiers sexual desires; that they were not seen or appreciated as being soldiers of the liberation.<sup>68)</sup>

### **2.3 Male domination**

The greatest challenge those women had to contend with (especially the Class of 1976) was of undoing the long held perception that the military was exclusively a male domain, where women had no place to be. This was evident when, upon arrival in the frontline countries, they in most cases, the women concerned were accepted into the MK at their own insistence; they had to convince the ANC leadership that they could be soldiers.<sup>69)</sup>

The first experience of male domination was evident and exerted upon arrival in the frontline states. The women were advised by the ANC leadership to opt to go to school, instead of receiving military training. The women, in some instances were not taken seriously by their male counterparts or were even undermined. And, worse at times, they were seen as a threat for becoming soldiers - which was perceived as a male domain. The women, therefore, had to rely on other people, such as Chris Hani, to protect them from abuse and maltreatment in the camps.<sup>70)</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> M.F. Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

<sup>69</sup> Thandi Modise, Interview . 30 October 2002, M. Mxakato, Interview . 13 may 2008, W.R. Ncame, Interview . 9 January 2003

<sup>70</sup> N.Gasa, (ed.), Women in South African History, p. 240 and T. Modise, Interview 30/10/2002.

As a result, tensions between male and female soldiers always existed. In one incident the female soldiers complained of someone who was sneaking into their barracks at night and fondling them, in what became known as the %Brushman affair+<sup>71)</sup>. One night, when the women chased the culprit, he went into the men's barracks and the male comrades hid him. The men then decided to retaliate by not talking to women; in what became known as %anti-muhlere campaign.+<sup>72)</sup> The women involved in that incident were angered by it. The men also started to sing a traditional song in Xhosa %How does a cow see when it is going to be slaughtered+; however, they changed the lyrics to ridicule women . %How does a woman see when she is going to be fucked?+ Such problems prevailed and were never addressed by the leadership. This continuing situation, especially the fact that the leadership refused to take incidents that were reported seriously, was always of concern for Thandi.<sup>73)</sup>

That some men did not appreciate their presence in the camp left some of the women feeling psychologically abused. In giving testimony before the TRC, Thenjiwe Mtintso gave an account of how women were taunted by fellow (male) combatants, when she said:

*%This consistency of drawing away from your own activism, from your own commitment as an actor, was perhaps worse than torture, was worse than the physical assault, when even what you have stood for is reduced to prostitution, unpaid prostitution.+<sup>74)</sup>*

They were told that they joined MK because they could not find husbands in South Africa or that they did not want to look after their children (an apparent reference to the older women). This was really degrading to women and was not in consistence with the aims of the struggle.<sup>75)</sup>

It must be indicated that, with regard to certain issue raised, it does become difficult for one to generalise. Whereas some of the female recruits felt they were not well treated

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<sup>71)</sup> R. Curnow, %Thandi Modise, a woman in war+ Agenda no. 43, 2000, pp. 39-40. %Brushman affair+ was the term women cadres in the camp referred to the incident when an unknown male comrade sneaked into female residents at night and attempted to rape.

<sup>72)</sup> %Muhlere+ is a Portuguese word for a woman.

<sup>73)</sup> R. Curnow, %Thandi Modise, a woman in war+ Agenda no. 43, 2000, pp. 39-40.

<sup>74)</sup> TRC Report Vol. Four Chapter Ten: Special Hearing: Women, p. 304, paragraph 91.

<sup>75)</sup> Ibid.

by their male counterparts, others felt that they did not experience problems. Ayanda Dlodlo and Mummy Mxakato have expressed satisfaction in the way they were treated both within the camps and outside.<sup>76)</sup>

When women realised their limitations were created by the attitudes of the men, which made them feel pressured to work harder to prove themselves . an act which they felt was equivalent to their marginalization . they decided to take the matter into their own hands, by forming their own support teams from among their ranks. This move was criticized by the men, who viewed it as being divisive, reactionary and the cause of friction within the camps.<sup>77)</sup> This shows the extent to which the women within MK struggled to fit into that environment, which was both male dominated and made extra difficult for them.

## **2.4 Nostalgia and homesickness**

Of the women who joined MK, very few had informed their families of their intention to leave South Africa. The parents who were in exile were the only ones who knew of their daughters whereabouts because they were able to meet in exile. Having left home without telling their parents, siblings or friends of their plans to leave the country left most of those women feeling rather nostalgic. Their problem was compounded by lack of access to communication facilities within the camps. Even if they had communication facilities, for security reasons it would have been dangerous for them to have made contact with their families. This was in the interest of both the soldiers and their families back home. Most female cadres indicated that they missed home and thought of their mothers every night.<sup>78)</sup> Sibiya says to try and overcome the problem of feeling homesick she would sit and meditate, to find her inner self, or spend between an hour and a whole day locked in her room.<sup>79)</sup>

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<sup>76)</sup> Ayanda Dlodlo, Interview . Friday 10 January 2002 and Mxakato M, Interview 13/05/2008.

<sup>77)</sup> R. Curnow, %hhandi Modise, a woman in war+ Agenda No. 43, 2000, pp. 39 . 40.

<sup>78)</sup> N. Gasa, (ed.), Women in South African History. p. 250 and J. Cock, Colonels and cadres . War Gender in South Africa, p. 152.

<sup>79)</sup> Nomonde Vuthela, %Born at the right time+ SA Soldier, vol. 11 No. 8, August 2004. p.28.

## **2.5 Absence of parental guidance and family support**

For most of those who left home while still in their teens, as it was the case, had their interpersonal relationships with their parents and families adversely interrupted. Some, like Ncame Rachel Weziwe, admit that they missed parental care and guidance; and cited the example of sex education as being one of the things they lacked as a result. This was evident with the high pregnancy levels that were registered within MK during 1988 and 1989.<sup>80)</sup>

The Commissars, who served as social workers, caregivers and counsellors played a significant role to assist the recruits in coping in the absence of their parents and family support structures, especially in times of need. In certain cases, arrangements were made with their parents to be flown to Botswana, where they met. It would be a happy reunion, as it would be a first meeting after many years of anxiety on both sides after their daughters just vanished without saying a word; such reunions were highly emotional.<sup>81)</sup>

There were even those women who left children at home, which severed their maternal role; if one takes into account the maternal bond that normally exists between the mother and her child. This action continued even when the cadres whose children were with them in exile had to be deployed on official assignments and leave their children in Tanzania to be attended to by someone else.<sup>82)</sup>

## **2.6 Pregnancies**

Women who fell pregnant in the training camps were not allowed to stay in the camps. They left the camps and went to Tanzania, where they were taken care of, and raised their children with no option of returning to the military. Later, women wanted this policy to be changed. But the idea of allowing those who left the camps to return to the military was not favoured by the leadership, for reasons that were only known to the leadership themselves.<sup>83)</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> W.R. Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> N. Gasa, (ed.), *Women in South African History*. p. 240.

<sup>83</sup> W.R. Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and M. Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

In Mazimbu, a facility which was later to become known as Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, was established which catered for education from pre-school up to secondary level. A crèche/nursery school that was known by the name Charlotte Maxeke was part of the facilities provided within Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College.<sup>84)</sup>

Because of the uncomfortable conditions in Tanzania, most of the women living there viewed this policy as a punitive measure and not a gesture of goodwill toward them. They felt that environment in Dark City (Mazimbu) was not conducive to raise their children. Secondly, their stay in Tanzania meant that they were regarded as civilians. This was accompanied by some level of frustration, as it signalled an end to their political activity in exile. Those women viewed this as being unfair because their male counterparts who fathered their children continued with their political activities. They began to insist that they be allowed back into MK. The leadership of the ANC then reviewed the policy and acceded to their request because, they realised, the women who become pregnant were, indeed, still part of MK. Thus, they acknowledged that their policy was causing dissatisfaction among the women affected by it. As soon as facilities to cater for the needs of the children still in Tanzania were made available, women who had become pregnant were allowed to continue with their military training.<sup>85)</sup>

## **2.7 Hard living conditions**

To most women who joined MK, the conditions in the training camps were not what they anticipated. When one considers that most of those women came from an urban background, the conditions were too harsh for them. The scorching Angolan sun and weather required endurance and caused some of them to lose their youthful complexion in the process.

The harsh camp life and conditions were also not too welcoming to them. They had to adjust their sleeping pattern to suit life in the military. They were required to wake up at

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<sup>84</sup> Ndalilo Urio, Dr., Interview . Wednesday 9 July 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. and N. Gasa, (ed.), Women in South African History. p. 242.



04H30, do exercises for 30 minutes, wash - within a limited period - and then prepare themselves for the day's work. The conditions of training also posed problems for females, when they developed blisters and sores, that later formed into scabs.<sup>86)</sup>

When relocating to new camps - after the camp was destroyed by an air raid from the SADF - they were also required to chop down trees, clear bushes and dig trenches.<sup>87)</sup> As a result of those harsh conditions, many wished their time of training to pass quickly, and return to South Africa, to see their resolve to fight the apartheid government and liberate the people of that country, to return to normal civilian life. It was their commitment to the struggle, coupled with the passage of time and the knowledge that they would be in the camps only for a short while that made them continue with their training. However, according to some of the interviewees, there were women who did decide to fall pregnant just to get out of the camps.<sup>88)</sup>

## 2.8 Issues of age gaps

Most of the people who joined MK were young, either attending secondary school or university, whose ages fell between 14 and 22 years. Only a few women over the age of 25 joined MK. Thenjiwe Mthintso was older than the average entrant when she joined in 1979 (aged 29 years), while Makhoere Ceasarina Kona joined MK in 1985 (aged 26 years) and went for training in 1986 at the age of 27. Makhoere indicates that there was a motto which was followed in MK, that of *amkhontweni si ya lingana*<sup>89)</sup>. Nevertheless, when a 27-year-old adult was supposed to be regarded as an equal with the 14-year-old teenager posed a challenge to those who were older. This, one interviewee admitted, would lead to disrespect by the younger comrades toward the older comrades; this situation caused discomfort to those who were older.<sup>90)</sup>

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<sup>86)</sup> Mavuso Thoko Theodore, File MCA 6 . 313. Hilda Bernstein interviews. p.10 and Meek, Gloria /Make Belinda, MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek. p. 66.

<sup>87)</sup> Meek, Gloria /Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek. p. 66.

<sup>88)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

<sup>89)</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23/05/2008, *amkhontweni si ya lingana*+literally means we are all equal in MK, there is no young nor old, (they all received same treatment)..

<sup>90)</sup> Ibid., and To Honour women's day. Profiles of Leading women in the South African and Namibian liberation struggles. p. 24.

The younger ones were known as the young lions; they had not yet matured and were militant. While those who were mature wanted to focus on necessary preparations for a brighter future. This, therefore, meant that their priorities differed drastically and was the main reason the tensions developed between the young and old.<sup>91)</sup>

It is important to understand and consider that, the reasons that led women into MK differed at different stages of the struggle. The older generation of the 1960s fought for a living wage and a change in the pass laws. This took the form of bus boycotts. Generally their issues thus focused on work related matters and labour issues.

By 1976, the nature of the struggle had changed; the next generation focused their attention on physical fighting and school boycotts, the education charter campaign, the destruction of the Bantu Education system. By 1985, the focus of the attention of the next generation of fighters was on burning people alive who were considered not being on the side of the struggle,, consumer boycotts, and calls for the resignation of councillors who were seen as supporters of the apartheid system. The different views with regard to the struggle were too wide to be bridged and the difference in views of the three generations of protestors was quite evident; but, on account of their allegiance to the movement, those differences never came out into the open as conflicts.<sup>92)</sup> Along with the changes in the nature of the protests, the brutality of the actions taken by the police, as experienced by the three groups, also underwent corresponding change. The 1985 group was the most brutalised (an aspect that contributed to the development of their militant attitude), when compared to that of the groups from the 1960s and 1976.<sup>93)</sup>

## **2.9 Health conditions**

Life in the training camps was not rosy either. As females, the health conditions were not safe for them in certain instances. One major health problem was that of water. Water was drawn from a river infested with crocodiles. They also had to do their laundry

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<sup>91</sup> Mabena, Interview 14/04/2008.

<sup>92</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>93</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

in the river, while having an AK 47 assault rifle close at hand.<sup>94)</sup> Because of using unpurified water drawn from rivers and dams the women were frequently infected by water-borne diseases. When the camp commanders started to realise the seriousness of this problem, they advised the women to boil the water before they were to use it; later this was made a general rule. This, of course, meant that the day of the women trainees started much earlier than that of the male counterparts, as they had to wake up earlier than they used to, make fires and boil water before they could use it.)

At times there was a serious shortage of water. This was especially true for the first group. They had to use one cup to wash their bodies. They later developed a plan to contribute members' cup into a tin where they would all wash; and after everybody had washed, then wash their underwear. One cup was saved for them to brush their teeth (they dipped the toothbrush into the water and sipped once to rinse). And that would be a day's bath routine over. Hygienically, this was not safe for the women. At times they were also required to use the same water they bathed in to do various things, like to wash their clothing.<sup>95)</sup> Toilet facilities were of poor quality. They used pit latrines, which were also not hygienic, as compared to those they left back home.<sup>96)</sup>

The imbalance between men and women in the camps had a great impact when it came to relationships; as there were a number of instances where a number of males would be involved with one female. There was a major shortage of contraceptives (such as condoms) as the priority within the movement was that of military training. Some donors, though, did assist with items that were essential and contributory to the advancement of the struggle, they also provided some contraceptives, to a minimal level. This made women vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases from partaking in unprotected sex. On account of those factors such diseases spread quickly but, despite being treated in the camps by the medics, re-infection soon followed. The few more serious cases were treated in hospitals. Most women interviewed commented that it

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<sup>94</sup> J. Cock, Colonels and Cadres . War and Gender in South Africa, p. 152.

<sup>95</sup> M.F. Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008, Mavuso T.T., File MCA 6 313, Hilda Bernstein interviews, p. 8 and Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda, MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek. p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> Cock: Colonels and Cadres, p. 152.

was by the grace of God that there was no HIV/AIDS then, else that would have proved to be a disaster.<sup>97)</sup>

Food provisioning was another serious problem faced within the camps, in that they were introduced to new kinds of foodstuffs. Even though they had hoped with time they would be able to adjust and enjoy their meals, it was not to be. They detested the food, especially the powdered eggs, which was well-known for attracting flies. At times, the beans that were fed were worm-infested which, according to one cadre, often made up to half the supply; however, they were not allowed to complain.<sup>98)</sup>

A meal normally consisted of tinned food (donated by the USSR and GDR) and other foods such as: beans, rice, milk, and pork.<sup>99)</sup> Some of the food that they ate included what was known as %Infeme+.<sup>100)</sup> This was usually cooked with chillies and was the favourite of the inmates. At times they were served buffalo and warthog meat that had been hunted by the trainees themselves. Rice was the staple food in the camps. Porridge, a staple food for many back home, was not served. Vegetables and bananas were grown in the camps, to supplement their daily diet.<sup>101)</sup>

There were a number of incidents of food poisoning, which led to diarrhoea among the camp mates.<sup>102)</sup> Almost every group experienced this at some point. In every instance where there was food poisoning the blame was on %state agents+, that someone in their midst was responsible. It was in these instances where females would be blamed by the males as being state agents, who had been sent to infiltrate their ranks by the apartheid regime. If the problem of food poisoning was discovered by a female, she would not raise the alarm for fear that she would be labelled the one responsible.<sup>103)</sup> This

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<sup>97)</sup> Daniels, Interview . 28/1-/2002, Ncame, Interview 09/01/2003, P. Sibiya (Col.), Interview . 08/10/2002 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

<sup>98)</sup> S.S.P.Dunjane, Interview . 25/05/2008, Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 .  
1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek, pp.11-12, and Mavuso Thoko Theodore, File MCA 6 .  
313. Hilda Bernstein interviews, p. 13.

<sup>99)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100)</sup> Infeme+was a name given to baboon and monkey meat which was hunted by the inmates themselves.

<sup>101)</sup> H. Barrel, The ANC's Armed Struggle, p. 44.

<sup>102)</sup> Cock, Colonels and Cadres, p.152.

<sup>103)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 22/01/2003 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

contributed to make life difficult for women in the camps, to live in silence for fear of being labelled *indlwembe*.

Diseases, such as malaria, wreaked havoc among the recruits. Owing to the shortage of facilities and/or supplies in the camps, those who fell ill were transferred and treated at another location. For example, when Gloria fell sick of malaria, she was transferred to Luanda.<sup>104)</sup> Ayanda Dlodlo also suffered from cerebral malaria and resigned herself to death. She was assisted by one male comrade, who was later to become her husband, and she was transferred to Mozambique where she was treated. The World Health Organisation also took care of her while she was in a hospital in Mozambique.<sup>105)</sup>

## 2.10 Shortages of supplies

Among the numerous challenges that the female soldiers had to deal with included that of a shortage of clothing. When they left South Africa they could not carry luggage, since their departure was illegal and any luggage would draw suspicions that could have had some serious repercussions. So they left all their clothing behind.<sup>106)</sup> They had no money to start a new life and, as a result, they had to rely on support and assistance from other people. After arriving in the camps they had to rely on the supplies received in the camps. There were times that they had to burn tyres, to use the ash to polish their boots because they did not have the money to buy the shoe polish.<sup>107)</sup> Lack of communication facilities in the camps made communication with the outside world impossible and they could not go to town even if they longed to.<sup>108)</sup>

From the above, it is evident that the ANC members in exile were largely dependent on foreign aid for their programmes and supplies. That aid ranged from clothing, expertise (personnel), armaments to food.<sup>109)</sup> Being dependent on donor funding, it goes without

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<sup>104)</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek, p. 70.

<sup>105)</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

<sup>106)</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek, p. 59.

<sup>107)</sup> Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002.

<sup>108)</sup> Ibid., Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008

<sup>109)</sup> Peoples Army . Peoples War: ANC SOMAFKO MK Publications 1971 . 1986, Box 44, p. 8. Items that were requested to be donated included clothing, recreational items, tape recorders, cassettes, medical kits, books, novels and financial donation.

saying that the normal running of the programmes was largely influenced by the receipt of such donations. The women were the most affected, because most donations were made to suit the needs of male soldiers, as the donors believed that the army they were donating supplies to, comprised only of men.

The arrival of the women was met by a number of issues, which the male dominated leadership never anticipated. They could, therefore, not provide for the specific needs of the females; such as cosmetics, perfumes, sanitary pads and underwear. In this regard, Thandi Modise has this to say:

*“Sometimes, I think I’ve blocked it out. I don’t know what we used for pads, sanitary pads, I really don’t remember. I know MaTambo has been on TV saying they organised (sanitary pads), definitely not the camps I’ve been in. Definitely not. I can’t remember whether we were using them... because at some point I know our shirts didn’t have sleeves, whether we were cutting them off (the sleeves) and using them as pads, I just can’t remember...”<sup>110</sup>*

So, it would seem the problem of catering for the needs of the female soldiers was never addressed. Those who joined MK in 1985, some years after Thandi Modise, shared the same experiences. One indicated that they found a big cotton wool roll in one of the stores which they, out of their own, improvised to use for sanitary pads. In the case of shortages of underwear, they had to use men’s underwear. Due to the shortages, at times their underwear would disappear from the wash line; it was never known whether they were stolen by fellow female inmates or males.<sup>111</sup> There was a serious shortage in the supply of female contraceptives (the pill) and even the few that they did receive were either defective or were past their expiry date. As a result, pregnancies were reported even when they thought they were using contraceptives.<sup>112</sup> Their active involvement and rise to positions of command encouraged the MK to perceive the need to transform and start catering for the needs of the women - as

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<sup>110</sup> R. Curnow, “Thandi Modise, a woman in war” *Agenda* No. 43, 2000, p. 38.

<sup>111</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

soldiers and fellow combatants. As time passed, provisions were gradually adjusted to cater also for the needs of the women in MK.<sup>113)</sup>

## 2.11 Problems with language

As already noted, a sizeable number of the youth who left the country, were still of school-going age and, therefore, their schooling was disrupted. Among them there were those who were not yet at the level of mastering English, the main medium of instruction, both in the neighbouring states and in the training camps. When one considers the range of African languages spoken in South African, it becomes clear that there would have been problems of communication for those who had limited usage of English, other than their mother tongue. To address this, literacy classes were introduced over and above their normal curriculum. Those classes were offered for the men in the afternoons and for women in the evenings; that arrangement seemed to pay off in empowering the women.<sup>114)</sup>

Gloria Meek indicated that being a Coloured, she did not know any vernacular. When she was appointed Commander of the female group, since some of the recruits did not speak or understood English, she felt disempowered and frustrated, and would have preferred it if someone else had been appointed to that position.<sup>115)</sup>

## 2.12 Leadership

Another challenge came from the actions of the administrators themselves. The ANC did not want people in their ranks who were personally strong enough to stand up and speak out when something wrong was done, especially by the camp leadership. The slogan 'You need to protect the leadership' was advocated among the membership. Anyone who was vocal sparked enmity between themselves and the top brass; this caused many female cadres to feel worried and unhappy, as they did not want to be

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<sup>113</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

<sup>114</sup> Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002, Sibiyi, Interview . 08/10/2002, Modise, Interview . 30/10/2002 and D Pillay, 'Women in MK' *Work in Progress*, No. 80, 1992, p. 19.

<sup>115</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda: MCA 7 . 1597. *Hilda Bernstein Interviews Gloria Meek*, p. 65.

labelled as being spies and enemy agents. Because of that attitude, relations within the camps were often strained. Those so treated eventually resented having joined MK.<sup>116)</sup>

For example, according to one interviewee, there was one young woman who was involved with a member of the security personnel who fell pregnant and also contracted malaria. She was administered *chloroquine*, a medication that is not supposed to be administered to pregnant women also suffering from malaria; she was then sent to hospital. That was a fatal act but the women who witnessed it were afraid to speak out; yet they knew that action would lead to the death of that woman. As expected, that patient did subsequently die and she was buried in Luanda. What further saddened the interviewee is that the burial presented multiple problems. Firstly, she was concerned that, when the time was right, it would be difficult for the deceased woman's family to retrieve her remains - the grave was not marked and, because of the civil war that had been fought in Angola, the graveyard was full of such unmarked graves. Secondly, those who buried the woman's remains used a recycled grave in the commoners section, which contained many bodies. In contrast to this, there was a section in that cemetery for the dignitaries where some of the ANC members were buried and the graves were properly marked. This implied that there was inequality within the ANC camp, which was - within its own right - fighting against inequality by the apartheid government back home in South Africa. To her this meant that even in death there was a class inequality, as commoners were assigned their own section. After that experience she continually prayed that she should not die in exile and suffer the same fate, when her body could not be retrieved for repatriation to her home country at a later date. If the camp leadership had taken the necessary precautions at the start of this episode the life of that young cadre would have been saved.<sup>117)</sup> From the commissions that the ANC set it was, without doubt, evident that the male camp commanders and instructors abused their power and the young female cadres were the ones who suffered the most at their hand.<sup>118)</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23/05/2008.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> M.L. Mashike, Down-Sizing and Right-sizing: Analysis of the Demobilisation Process in the South African National Defence Force, p. 346.



### 2.13 Lack of counselling

One other issue that had psychological effects on the women soldiers was when the SADF raided one camp in particular inside Angola. Although the Commissars were available to offer help in the form of counselling, it seemed there was a need for special counselling, to help affected members to deal with the effects that raid had on them. Gloria Meek describes one scene that she experienced when the SAAF attacked their camp as follows:

*One comrade's head was totally gone and you couldn't even pick up their bodies, because you would try to pick them up and they would come off, so they had to be picked with spades. And the other comrade was shot in the chest and in the back and he was also a mince meat.<sup>119)</sup>*

That experience affected her badly. This is one memory she will forever carry within her heart.<sup>120)</sup>

In conclusion, from the challenges highlighted in this chapter, the women were faced with serious hardships. There were times when they were equated to adversaries by their male comrades. The women coped by grouping themselves to look after their common interests and empower themselves to face their problems, especially as women. Some did not wholly discard what they regarded as the social responsibilities of women and got married in the camps. This action effectively led to the discontinuance of their political objective as soldiers. Women worked especially hard to remain in the camps; even after some had left because of having become pregnant, they still remembered what had caused them to leave their home country in the first case and they persisted in challenging the ANC leadership to change its long standing policy that any woman who fell pregnant would no longer be permitted to serve in MK. That policy was finally reviewed and those women were allowed back into the camp, to further their political goals. That change was a victory to them. Such challenges tested the stuff those women were made of, to prove their worth to be members of the army. Most of the male comrades, with their long held perception that the military was meant only for

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<sup>119</sup> Meek, Hilda Bernstein Interviews Gloria Meek, p. 68.

<sup>120</sup> The same sentiment was shared by Daniels Pamela, that it would have been important for them to have been offered some form of counselling when they returned home.

men, did not give the women a chance, yet most of the women did survive the challenges set for them.

# CHAPTER 3

## TRAINING

*"We move with the pace of the slowest."<sup>121)</sup>*

Like any other military establishment, training remained the core element for dealing with the recruits in MK. The intention was to equip the soldiers with the skills and agility, to be equal to the task that goes with that of an army. It must be stressed that there was no separate training for females.

When the recruits arrived in the ANC camps they were offered a choice . to further their studies or join MK. Despite being encouraged to rather further their studies, most of the females were determined, as discussed in Chapter 1, to join MK, their objective being to receive training and return to South Africa to fight. Those who chose to join MK were then transferred to Angola, where the ANC had its training camps. While those who preferred to go to school were transferred to other departments within the ANC that dealt with such issues.<sup>122)</sup>

Between 1976 and 1988 MK training took place in Angola and was conducted by Cuban and Russian instructors. The medium of instruction was English, although, in certain instances, African languages were used to accommodate those with lower educational qualifications, especially when MK instructors were in charge. The Cuban and Russian instructors were, in later years, replaced by MK instructors who had graduated through the ranks, with some of them having even completed a formal instructors course. Though, Cuban and Russian instructors remained to provide continued training for special circumstances. Basic military training was offered over a 6-month period, which was followed by specialization training over a 3 to 4-month period.<sup>123)</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003 and Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003 and Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002.

<sup>123</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002 and T. Boo, Interview . 27/10/2002.

The first training camp to be set up in Angola was Nova Catenga (which was evacuated after the SADF raid in 1979). Other camps that were set up to the north of Luanda were Quibaxe, Funda and Fazenda. As a result of the increase in the intake of young recruits, Pongo and Malanje were established during the 1980s, in Caculana (which was later called Barney Molokoane<sup>124</sup>). Later Pongo was selected to be upgraded to become a specialised training camp where cadres were prepared for infiltration into South Africa. Cadres who received specialised training were identified by the leadership to carry out the mission.<sup>125</sup>

### 3.1 Orientation

It was imperative that all the new entrants into the MK should receive some basic information and elementary education with regard to the mission of the liberation movement. Prior to the high influx of youth, the ANC had a camp in Dakawa in Tanzania, where the main purpose of activities was to orientate the new entrants, something they certainly lacked when they left South Africa.<sup>126</sup>

From Dakawa, all new recruits who opted to receive military training were taken to a transit camp called Viana, in Angola. While at that camp every recruit had to submit his/her biography to the administration. The General Secretariat was administered by Alfred Nzo. They were then divided into various sections, called platoons. It was during that phase that recruits were introduced to the army viz.; they were taught the vocabulary of the army (e.g. what is a Commander), their duties and responsibilities, about army and camp life, what the movement expected of them. The training programme was explained to them, including the timetable. Recruits were also taught about life in exile and given political education. The political education included an understanding of the history of the ANC, formation of MK, and the role of women in the history of the struggle for liberation. This phase was meant to prepare the recruits psychologically for their task. There was not a specific duration for this phase, as the duration of the stay at the transit camp depended on the number of fresh recruits

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<sup>124</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23/05/2008.

<sup>125</sup> J. Cilliers and M. Reinhardt (eds.), About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence, p. 89.

<sup>126</sup> Ndalilio Urio, Interview . Wednesday 09 July 2008.

arriving and the stage at which the intensive training in the other camps was at.) As trained soldiers left the training camps, fresh recruits were brought in from the transit camp.<sup>127)</sup>

### 3.2 Intensive training

The intensive training phase upgraded the physical endurance and strength of the recruits, through physical training, and equipped them with the necessary skills needed for combat.

Initially that training lasted for a period of 6 to 9 months; however, in 1985, the duration of that phase was increased to 10 months to ensure quality training. The training comprised of a 6-hour day that started at 08H00 and ended at 14H00.<sup>128)</sup> Training in military competence was compulsory. There was, however, a 2-week intensive training course offered to those members who were needed to be deployed urgently for underground work within South Africa. This course included teaching on the assembling and handling of a gun and hand grenades, and target practice. The training in these camps was conducted by Russian and Cuban instructors.<sup>129)</sup>

The women cadres from earlier intakes, who had already been trained, were always upheld by male soldiers as examples that women are capable of doing as well as well as the men. The mentioning of their names that %before you, there was so and so and this is what the person did as a soldier+ served as a motivating factor to the new recruits. The women, however, were under pressure to excel in everything, to prove themselves, to show that they could also achieve in that male dominated domain. Women who excelled even served as an inspiration to male comrades. The entry of such unexpected numbers of women into MK, although it took the leadership by

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<sup>127</sup> Ncame, Interview . 22/01/2003.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002, Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002 and H. Barrel, MK . The ANC's Armed Struggle. p. 43.

<sup>129</sup> Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008 and Barrel: MK . The ANC's Armed Struggle. p. 42.

surprise, was . eventually . greatly valued and appreciated, as it broke the long held perception that the recruits could only be men.<sup>130)</sup>

(a) Physical training and marching drills

This training was done early in the morning between 04H50 . 05H20 and it involved, among others, running and karate. The purpose of running was to increase general fitness and endurance; it included road running, jumping, drilling, mountain climbing and military combat work<sup>131)</sup>. Some of the female recruits found the physical training most challenging; they were not all coping with certain events, such as the road running and obstacle course, mountain climbing and jumping . the women tired more quickly than the men.<sup>132)</sup> It was here that a slogan was coined the soldiers themselves for while training: %We move with the pace of the slowest+.<sup>133)</sup> For others, this helped them discover latent talents, like being a natural long distance runner.<sup>134)</sup> At times training was carried out under harsh conditions, such as on hard grass or among thorny bushes. They used to crawl, their arms and knees scorched because of crawling in the hard grass would bleed and eventually develop scabs. When the women developed patches on their arms and knees the male cadres would laugh at them.<sup>135)</sup> According to Thenjiwe Mtintso, if a woman fell during training, the male comrades would shout %hey mzana, stand up+ - which to her was belittling and implied that she was lazy. However, when a male comrade fell they would say %hey soldier,+with pride and confidence<sup>136)</sup>. The women were not discouraged because of their determination and commitment to the struggle; conversely, they felt encouraged to prove that the struggle was equally theirs, as it was for men.

It was important for recruits to be taught the basics of karate, for use in instances where the use of a gun in combat would endanger the combatant (e.g. when

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<sup>130</sup> M. Mxakato, Interview . Tuesday 13 May 2008.

<sup>131</sup> Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002, Ncame, Interview . 22/01/2003, Sibiyi, Interview 08/10/2002 and Mabena, Interview 14/04/2008.

<sup>132</sup> Cock, Colonels and Cadres, p. 150.

<sup>133</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>134</sup> Sibiyi, Interview . 08/10/2002.

<sup>135</sup> Meek, Hilda Bernstein interviews Gloria Meek. p. 66.

<sup>136</sup> D. Pillay,; %Women in MK+ Work in Progress, No. 80, 1992, p. 18.

entering a building with a security personnel manning the entrance.<sup>137)</sup> The karate lessons for females required that they also be super-fit; which, as a spin-off, eventually served them in instances when they needed to protect themselves from their male comrades, who tried to take advantage of them making unwanted advances toward them.<sup>138)</sup>

Trainees were also given instruction on marching drills, salute and obedience to orders. The military discipline, which was based on the MK code of conduct, was also taught and when this was done it was often accompanied by slogans declaring loyalty.<sup>139)</sup> One of the slogans was *'Who do we serve?'* (which was shouted by the commander, with the trainees responding) *'We serve the people of South Africa.'*<sup>140)</sup>

Most of the women interviewed admitted that they had previously associated physical training as only being for the men. When they discovered that they were also required to do it as part of their military training they had to deal with their fears on the matter. S. Mokoena wrote:

*'Before training I could not run long distances because I thought that I was going to develop calves, and my legs would be like those of a man. The only thing that I was interested in was Yoga, simply because the bourgeoisie were giving the impression that it trims one's body and figure.'*<sup>141)</sup>

This assertion concludes that the women had misconceptions about physical training, which were quickly changed after they joined MK.

## (b) Tactics

This involved: manoeuvres, crawling, living underground, building of trenches, mastering the terrain, learning to survive under conditions when there was no food,

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<sup>137</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>138</sup> Curnow: *'Chandi Modise, a woman in war'* Agenda No. 43, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>139</sup> Cilliers, and M. Reinhardt: About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 90.

<sup>140</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008

<sup>141</sup> S. Mokoena, *'Guerrilla Training'* Dawn. Monthly Journal of Umkhonto we Sizwe. Vo. 2 No. 5, November 1978, p. 17.

overcoming high obstacles, being invisible survival in the bush and swimming.<sup>142)</sup> Those survival tactics would form an integral part of guerrilla warfare, which they were preparing themselves for, and were taught as a separate subject.

(c) Maps, compass and topography

The recruits were taught a basic introduction to map and compass reading, as well as instruction on reading topographic maps and navigation. They were taught to draw sketches/maps of targets to be attacked and/or the location of dead letter boxes (DLBs). The DLBs were signs that only trained guerrillas would be able to identify and read; they contained vital information to be used during a mission or together with armaments, providing instructions as to where the limpet mines had been planted.<sup>143)</sup>

(d) Explosives

The recruits were instructed on the correct handling and planting of different types of Soviet-made explosives, such as limpet-, antipersonnel- and landmines. They were also taught what initiatives they could take when explosives were not at their disposal.<sup>144)</sup>

(e) Communication

The recruits were taught procedures for radio handling, radio communication, message coding and decoding. They were also taught to set up secret communication networks. In this area the women did especially well and most of them were eventually deployed for this purpose upon completion of their training. The women argue that they did well in communication because they are naturally better communicators.<sup>145)</sup>

(f) First aid

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<sup>142)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002 and Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002.

<sup>143)</sup> Cilliers, and Reinhardt, About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 90.

<sup>144)</sup> Ibid. and Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>145)</sup> Booi, Interview . 27/20/2002 and N. Mazibuko, Spring Offensive, p. 56.



All the elements of first aid were taught; that included wound handling, the different kinds of wounds (including gunshot), and evacuating an injured combatant from the battlefield. The women who are caring by nature admitted to having had a preference for this course and excelled in it.<sup>146)</sup>

#### (g) Firearms

The recruits were trained in the handling and use of firearms of different calibre, automatic and semi-automatic weapons, pistols, handguns and assault rifles (especially the AK 47). The training included the handling and use of firearms that were used by the enemy, such as R1 and R4, artillery, mortars, as well as the general maintenance of such weapons. The training included both offensive and defensive use of hand grenades and rocket propelled grenades, as they were generally preferred in attack situations.<sup>147)</sup> The final test in weapon handling involved the disassembling and reassembling of a weapon within minutes with no break in between; and the time taken to fulfil this task was calculated and recorded. Most of the women excelled at this aspect, which excited them, as it boosted their confidence.<sup>148)</sup>

#### (h) Artillery

This training involved the handling and use of mortars and rocket launchers. This was a field that presented an option of further specialisation but, before exercising an option, each trainee had to have entry level knowledge of all aspects within this field of specialisation. The ANC training camps did not have proper training facilities in this regard, which was the reason why those who wanted to specialise in this training had to relocate.<sup>149)</sup>

#### (i) Target shooting

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<sup>146</sup> Dlodlo, Interview 10/01/2003 and Cilliers, and Reinhardt, About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 90.

<sup>147</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002, Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002, Cilliers, and Reinhardt, About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 89 and Barrel, MK . The ANC's Armed Struggle. p. 43.

<sup>148</sup> Mavuso Thoko, File MCA6 . 313, Hilda Bernstein Interviews, p. 12.

<sup>149</sup> Cilliers, and Reinhardt, About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 90.

The recruits were also given lessons in the shooting range, to increase their shooting skill.<sup>150)</sup> Successive groups produced good sharp shooters (snipers) and were always commended on this by their commanders. One machine gun was also named %The Thandi+(after Thandi Modise) because of her accurate shooting skill. In comparison to their male counterparts and like Thandi Modise, the women always presented a better record for becoming snipers, which served to motivate both the male and female cadres.<sup>151)</sup>

(j) Military combat and sabotage techniques

This involved training in intelligence and counter intelligence, to enable cadres to establish and operate in underground structures. Since MK was preparing to use sabotage in its fight against the apartheid government in South Africa, various aspects of sabotage against the enemy targets was stressed. That included the identification of the target and planting of the explosives. Another important aspect of this training was that of reconnaissance, to equip the trainees with enough skills for any task they may be required to carry out as guerrilla fighters.<sup>152)</sup>

### 3.3 Specialised training

In contrast to intensive training, specialised training was offered to handpicked recruits. During the period 1976-1988 hundreds of young recruits were sent abroad for training in subjects such as: advanced engineering, intelligence and artillery; and a number of women were included among that elite group.<sup>153)</sup> Most of those training courses were offered in Europe; in the USSR and GDR. In the Soviet Union cadres followed specialised or advanced courses in anti-aircraft, engineering skills, revolutionary politics and the strategic doctrine on Military Combat Work (MCW). In East Germany cadres mainly followed courses in subjects that would equip them for the task of MK camp instructors and commando work. In Cuba cadres were taught urban and guerrilla

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<sup>150</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002, Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002 and H. Barrel, Mk . The ANC's Armed Struggle, p. 43.

<sup>151</sup> Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002 and Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008.

<sup>152</sup> Cilliers and Reinhardt, About turn: The Transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence, p. 90.

<sup>153</sup> R. Williams, Military History Journal, vol. 11 No. 5.

tactics. And, lastly, there were cadres who were sent to other countries in Africa, such as Tanzania and Zambia, for advanced instruction courses.<sup>154)</sup> The recruits for those courses or training programmes were selected by the leadership; only on rare occasions did a recruit volunteer for such training.<sup>155)</sup> Ayanda underwent specialised training in military intelligence in the Soviet Union, in 1985 and 1986.<sup>156)</sup> Portia underwent Officers Instructors Course in the GDR, in 1987, as well as a special Platoon and Company Commanders Course at New Camp, in Angola. She also received a Diploma in Political Science from the Party School in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1990.<sup>157)</sup> The women who attended such courses enjoyed them, as they could broaden their military knowledge.<sup>158)</sup>

### 3.4 Education in politics

The ANC viewed the armed struggle they waged in South Africa as being an extension of their politics and, in line with that view point, had realised that education in politics helped to broaden the line of knowledge and thinking among the general population within the country.<sup>159)</sup>

The influx of the young people into MK following the 1976 riots and the subsequent (even larger) influx during the 1980s introduced a new crop of radically minded youth into the organisation, who were filled with anger and vengeance. The leadership realised that those youth arrived at the MK camps in a militant state of mind, believing they would be quickly issued an AK47 rifle, to then come back into South Africa to fight. The leadership had to ensure those new recruits received re-education in South Africa's politics before they could be equipped with military skills. Such education included teachings about Leninism and Marxism, modern South African history, as well as politics in the international arena.<sup>160)</sup> The main intention being to 'conscientize' the

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<sup>154)</sup> Barrel, MK . The ANC's Armed Struggle, p. 43.

<sup>155)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003.

<sup>156)</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

<sup>157)</sup> Charmaine Swart (Sgt.), 'Queen of her castle' SA Soldier, vol. 9 no. 6 June 2002, p. 25.

<sup>158)</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003 and Sibiya, Interview . 08/10/2002.

<sup>159)</sup> Mountain Keopaditse, 'Political and Military Training of our Army' Dawn. Monthly Journal of Umkhonto we Sizwe, vol. 7 no. 4, April 1983, p. 7 and Mavuso Thoko, File MCA^ - 313, Hilda Bernstein Interviews, p. 13.

<sup>160)</sup> Cilliers and Reichardt, About turn: The transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence. p. 90.

trainees to understand the history of the ANC and what the ANC was really fighting for, the history of MK, reasons for the formation of MK and the principles MK stood for. It was important to the ANC that the cadres were moulded to have a love for South Africa and its people that extended beyond the armed struggle,

*“to have a very deep political understanding of our struggle, to know what we are fighting for, to believe in it very deeply and to carry it in our consciousness constantly in the course of our struggle”.*<sup>161)</sup>

Education in politics was done in the training camps, which fell under the responsibility of the political instructors and the political commissars. Education in politics included, *inter alia*, aspects such as the history and policies of the ANC, the definition of the enemy, the rights of the working class, and experiences of other revolutionary organizations in the struggle against colonialism.<sup>162)</sup> This instruction in politics also taught them to be united, see one another as fellow country-men and comrades. The ANC view of politics included the teaching that *“a woman is first a comrade and then a woman.”*<sup>163)</sup>

Along with education in politics, discipline and knowledge was instilled among the recruits, to develop political maturity amongst the males and encourage them to treat their female comrades with dignity and respect. Indeed, the education in politics did help to defuse the militancy of the young lions as they were called, who, therefore, were prepared to be deployed wherever the movement needed them.<sup>164)</sup> The ANC leadership wished its soldiers to be disciplined, equipped to carry out their mission and have respect toward the people they wanted to liberate. While the supreme rule among the cadres was an attitude of discipline, they were also taught never to point a gun at a comrade (even when the barrel was empty). Lastly, ill discipline and disobeying of orders were punishable offences.<sup>165)</sup>

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<sup>161)</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008.

<sup>162)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163)</sup> Ibid. and M. Keopaditse, *Political and Military Training of our Arm*: Dawn. Monthly Journal of Umkhonto we Sizwe, vol. 7 no. 4, April 1983, p. 8.

<sup>164)</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008.

<sup>165)</sup> Mavuso, File MCA6-313, Hilda Bernstein Interviews, p. 13.

# CHAPTER 4

## DEPLOYMENT

*“It was a natural consequence. Women were the next group to be mobilised to become full participants of the struggle. Not only as cooks, nurses etc, but as politicians and guerrillas.”<sup>166)</sup>*

Unlike other liberation movements in Africa, the South African liberation movements were in a disadvantage position, because of various factors. The geographical position of South Africa meant that any attack by the liberation movements would have to come from the north. Secondly, the countries to the north of South Africa, although hostile to the apartheid regime, were not in a state to allow their territory to serve as a springboard for such attacks. Countries like Zimbabwe only attained their independence in the 1980s and had to rebuild the country from the ravages of their own liberation efforts. Swaziland, being landlocked, could not offer effective support to MK. In 1984, South Africa and Mozambique signed a bilateral agreement, which forbid their respective territories to be used for any hostile activities towards each other. The MK bases in Botswana, Lesotho, Angola and Mozambique had been occasionally raided by the SADF. The ANC had their headquarters in Tanzania and the training camps in Angola. These factors prevented a successful direct attack by MK on South Africa.

To perpetuate their plan to overthrow the apartheid regime the leadership of MK realised they had to find other methods for waging the war; they then decided on the strategy of infiltrating South Africa through the frontline states. The women, after completion of their basic military training, were utilised mainly to infiltrate into South Africa and conduct reconnaissance missions, smuggle guns and act as decoys, as they were regarded as being competent to carry out such missions.<sup>167)</sup>

Deployment of women for physical combat was an issue that was greatly debated within the MK. The women felt they were being overlooked for carrying out missions. That led

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<sup>166</sup> Curnow, %Thandi Modise, a woman in war+ Agenda No. 43, 2000, p. 43.

<sup>167</sup> Modise, Interview . 30/10/2002, The Star, 4 November 1986 and Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008.

Chris Hani to argue women were not treated as fairly as their male counterparts. He challenged that stand and advocated that both the men and the women received the same training . as combatants . and as such, it would only be fair to deploy everyone to the tasks they had been trained for. From that moment forward he was openly against the arranging of different deployments for men and women, with the latter being deployed to the roles traditionally assigned to women, such as communication, medicorps and clerical duty in the office. The women also argued that, since they were the better snipers, they should be deployed to tasks that were relevant to their competencies.<sup>168)</sup>

#### **4.1 Combat**

When it came to waging military campaigns against apartheid (within South Africa), only a small number of women were assigned to infiltrate South Africa, to perform supporting roles. They were not necessarily involved in the direct combat, as the ANC leadership still deemed such involvement too dangerous for women. The male soldiers, therefore, shouldered the responsibility of launching subversive attacks against military and electrical installations, railroad lines, and other soft and hard targets; while the majority of the women soldiers were ordered to organize recreational and cultural activities.<sup>169)</sup>

Some of those female soldiers feel, even today, that the non-deployment of women in such active roles was a reflection of the male attitude towards women. They felt that was not commensurate with the hard physical input the women were required to deliver during their period of training, and, also, it hindered the opportunity for the women to prove their capability in real combat situations.

Some of the MK women soldiers did engage in direct combat in the Northern Front in Angola. They assisted the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from 1987, until the relocation of the MK camps from Angola to Tanzania and Uganda. The

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<sup>168</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003 and V. Moloi, *Women's place is in MK+ Umkhonto we Sizwe . MK 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Souvenir magazine, December 16 1961 . December 16 1991*, p.6.

<sup>169</sup> Mxakato, Interview 13/05/2008 and N. Gasa, *Women in South African History*, p. 243.

roles they performed included patrols, convoys and attacks on UNITA positions. In Angola they would, at times, be engaged against the National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA). On one occasion, Pat Machaka (pseudo name), one of the fighting women, was killed when their convoy was ambushed by UNITA. The male cadres were about to retreat when Pat Machaka decided to fight on. The entire convoy stood their ground and heavy fighting ensued. When Pat was shot and killed her death served to encourage her fellow cadres and, that her death may not have been in vain, they vowed not to retreat. They fought gallantly and bravely, until UNITA retreated.<sup>170)</sup>

#### **4.2 Covert operations**

Thandi Modise became the first trained MK woman soldier to be deployed into South Africa. She successfully entered the country and carried out her assigned mission, which . among others . was to identify targets, draw plans of the targets and enlist new recruits. However, her activities were interrupted when she was arrested in October 1979 and charged under Terrorism Act. She stood accused of undergoing military training with intention of upsetting law and order in South Africa and propagating the aims and objectives of a banned organisation. They found in her possession a machine gun, ammunition and explosives. She was further charged with conspiracy to commit arson, as well as arson as a co-accused with Moses Nkosi and Aron Mogale, and was subsequently sentenced to prison.<sup>171)</sup>

Memela Totsie was another key figure who carried out MK operations within South Africa. She did a number of tasks, including the smuggling of arms into the country. In addition, she did reconnaissance work and prepared the route for infiltration by the members of Operation Vula. Further, she was responsible for hiding weapons using the DLB method; she drew up maps of where the weapons were stored, to later be picked up by fellow fighters. A key mission that she carried out successfully was that of smuggling of Sphiwe Nyanda (alias Gebula) and Mac Maharaj into South Africa, when it was difficult for them to infiltrate the country on their own.<sup>172)</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Mxakato, Interview . 13/05/2008.

<sup>171</sup> To Honour Womens day. Profiles of leading women in the SA and Namibian liberation struggle pp. 25-26 and Cock, Colonels and Cadres, p. 150.

<sup>172</sup> N.Gasa,(ed.), Women in South African History. They remove boulders and cross rivers. pp. 244-246.

Helen Pastoors was also responsible for smuggling weapons and providing the car that was used in the Church Street (Pretoria) bombing incident; it was detonated on Friday 20 May 1983, killing 16 and leaving at least 146 people injured.<sup>173)</sup> She was also responsible for reconnaissance in %Operation Mango+. a planned escape route out of South Africa. She was arrested in June 1985 and charged for having had knowledge of arms caches in Muldersdrift and Riverside Road in Natal, her participation in establishing a weapons storage depot near Halfway House and her failure to report terrorist activities. She was effectively sentenced to 10 years in jail for all those charges.<sup>174)</sup>

Marion Spargg, who was assigned to special operations of MK, was also sent into South Africa and succeeded in planting bombs at various police stations, in furtherance of her assigned missions. She placed 2 small limpet mines in a toilet in the Cambridge Police Station, East London, on 19 February 1986, 2 limpet mines in the toilets of John Vorster Square, Johannesburg, on 4 March 1986 and, on the same day, a limpet mine in the Hillbrow Police Station, Johannesburg.<sup>175)</sup> She was found guilty of treason and sentenced to 20 years in prison, and a further 5 years on two counts of arson and a further 3 accounts of attempted arson; which effectively sentenced her to a jail term of 25 years.<sup>176)</sup>

Greta Apelgryn (now Zahina Narkedien) was involved in the Why Not Bar/Magoo Bar bombing with Robert McBride and M. Lecordier. She made it possible that a specific parking bay be available for her accomplices by first parking her car there. Her accomplices were to plant a bomb in their own car and then park it in the appointed parking bay, which Greta vacated upon their arrival. She then drove her car to another appointed spot, to wait for them. She was later arrested and charged on various charges for her role in the Magoo Bar bombing.<sup>177)</sup>

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<sup>173)</sup> Rand Daily Mail, May 21 1983, Pretoria News, 21 May 1983.

<sup>174)</sup> The Star, Monday 19 May 1986.

<sup>175)</sup> N. Gasa, (ed.), Women in South African History, pp. 244-246, The Star, 4 November 1986 and Pretoria News, 4 November 1986.

<sup>176)</sup> The Star, 6 November 1986 and Pretoria News, 6 November 1986.

<sup>177)</sup> TRC Report, Volume Six Section 3 Chapter Two, page 281, paragraph 67.



Ayanda Dlodlo was assigned to the Natal Missionary in Swaziland, to succeed Johny Sexwale as its Military Intelligence Operative, where she was later appointed as its chief. To strengthen her unit she went to Angola to recruit a few newly graduated female combatants. Her reasons for recruiting women specifically were: they were easier to camouflage and easier to deal with; further, she wished to empower those women by utilising them and, in so doing, present them with an opportunity to show their metal. MK achievements were always accredited to men. Her decision delivered some successes that, as she came from the Transvaal, she was nicknamed 'Madame wa se Transvaal.' However, soon a series of problems developed in the section of her unit that was under the direct command of Siphwe Nyanda. Those problems related to various aborted missions and costly mistakes that were committed by the cadres themselves and/or their commanders, whose operations were intercepted by the South African security forces, with those involved being killed.<sup>178)</sup>

Those missions were planned and initiated while she was on another mission in Angola. The first ambushed team consisted of 2 MK female soldiers, Umakhosi, another female soldier and an Indian comrade. That incident was followed by the massacre of a second team of 10 MK soldiers also from her unit. Those soldiers were on their way to South Africa for the 12-year commemoration of the June 16 Soweto Uprisings. Those incidences happened on or around 8 and 10 June 1988.<sup>179)</sup>

When Ayanda enquired from Portia Ndwandwe (Zandi) who was 2nd in command to her, what had happened to Umakhosi, Portia told her that Umakhosi was sent on a reconnaissance mission and was expected to relay back the information related to the level of safety of that route. This was so that the second larger team could be safely dispatched into the country. When Umakhosi failed to return word to them about the safety of the route, they assumed the route was clear and safe and then sent the second team on their way.<sup>180)</sup>

Consequently, serious problems of mistrust developed within that unit. As the commander of the unit, Ayanda had to account to O.R. Tambo, the Chief Commanding

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<sup>178</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

officer of MK, as to why the lives of so many comrades could be unnecessarily lost. Tambo was not happy with the timing of those missions, as from May 15 onwards it would have been too risky to have cadres entering the country, as the South African security forces would have been on high alert, noting the approaching anniversary of June 16. At that time, it became evident that the Natal Missionary in Swaziland had been infiltrated by the enemy. Ayanda ordered an immediate investigation into the circumstances surrounding the deaths of those comrades. She indicates that, at that time, there were attempts to have her assassinated.<sup>181)</sup>

Immediately the attempt on her life failed, Portia Ndwadwe disappeared. She left her small baby unattended to respond to a knock on the door. The circumstances surrounding her disappearance only came to light during the TRC hearing, when it was heard that she was abducted and killed by the security forces. For the first time during the TRC hearings her boy (Thabani) was united with his grandparents. After the hearing Portia's earthly remains were exhumed and she given a proper funeral by the family.<sup>182)</sup>

With the situation of mistrust that had developed in her unit, Ayanda was expelled from the military intelligence and was redeployed to work under Chris Hani. She was later arrested and was then deported to Lusaka by the Swazi police. Ayanda argues that, since the Natal Missionary in Swaziland was the only unit that had ever been led by a woman and/or comprised a greater number of women than any of the other unit, the problems that developed and led to deaths of the combatants in the hands of the police could well have been the end result of an inside job, intended to discredit her leadership ability - as a woman within MK structures.<sup>183)</sup>

### **4.3 Other roles**

Most of the women who did not go for further training upon completion of their basic military training were posted in the front line states. Most often the tasks that were allocated to them were those which, traditionally, were regarded as a woman's tasks such as reconnaissance. That action led to some dissatisfaction among women

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<sup>181</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, and TRC Report, Volume Six, Section 4 Chapter 2 . Report of the Human Rights Violations Committee . Exhumations. Pp. 550-551, paragraphs 4-5.

<sup>183</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

soldiers, who rather wanted to come back into South Africa and physically fight for the cause. The reply to their questions included that the army had its war plans, which superseded individual interests. Even within the compulsory fields or courses offered during training, tasks were allocated according to individual competencies. The soldiers had no apparent say in the matter of their deployment; though, according to some of the women soldiers, that procedure was not always applied transparently.<sup>184)</sup>

Upon graduating in the June 16 Detachment, Gloria Meek was deployed as a clerk in the administration at the camp. She complained that she was not trained to act as an administrative clerk and was frustrated and disappointed in having to learn typing skills and sit before a type writer. While she did some work for O.R. Tambo as well as the Secretary General's offices, she resigned from MK in 1982 out of sheer dissatisfaction with her deployment and went to Luanda; the task she was performing was not commensurate with what she had trained for as a soldier.<sup>185)</sup> The same happened to Mavuso Thoko Theodore, who was deployed as a secretary at a hospital; after her arrival there she was sent on a 15-month clerical course during the holidays, for in-service training. She was later transferred to work under O.R. Tambo, as his personal secretary, and travelled together with him when he travelled on official business. Although she was pleased to have an opportunity to work together with the president of the ANC, she was not totally happy, as she always felt her aim of coming back home to fight for the cause was never realised.<sup>186)</sup>

For those who were sent into South Africa, they were assigned roles to support the male combatants. Those tasks included: ensuring the underground structures were maintained effectively, serve as couriers to smuggle weapons through the borders, communication, clearing routes for infiltration, planning and distribution of weapons, reconnaissance work and setting targets, harbouring male combatants, transporting them and the recruitment of new members.<sup>187)</sup>

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<sup>184)</sup> Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003.

<sup>185)</sup> Meek, Gloria/Make Belinda, MCA 7 . 1597. Hilda Bernstein Interviews Gloria Meek, p. 67.

<sup>186)</sup> Mavuso Thoko, File MCA6-313, Hilda Bernstein Interviews, p. 15.

<sup>187)</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, Dlodlo, Interview . 10/01/2003 and Mxakato, Interview 13/05/2008 and D. Pillay, Women in MK: Work in Progress No. 80, p. 18.

On the whole, the larger percentage of women who trained as soldiers with MK did not see their dream of going to Angola, receive military training and returning home to South Africa again to engage in the armed struggle come true. They were trained as soldiers of the revolution but never had an opportunity to fight the enemy as they had imagined and planned. They were left frustrated and felt a great deal of disappointment when they were assigned to tasks that were not related in any way to their military training. These women viewed such a practice as grossly unfair to them, as they had proven themselves to being equal to the task of physical combat during their military training. Despite that they were capable of carrying out any duty that may be required of them, as disciplined cadres. Since those days, nothing has happened to convince any of them that the women were not capable of executing those tasks equally well as the men. They felt they were sidelined by the MK leadership, who suspected that they (the women) would not be equal to the task; that they were offered the menial tasks . just because they were women. The issue of deployment was one of the key issues that both male and female cadres raised as one of the grievances that contributed to the 1984 mutiny.<sup>188)</sup>

The group that benefited most were those sent for further training in the specialised fields, as that stood them in good stead to be integrated into the new SANDF when it was formed following the integration of the forces after 1994.<sup>189)</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> C.K. Makhoere, , Interview . 23/05/2008, W.R. Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003, P.Daniels, Interview . 28/10/2002 and S.S.P. Dunjane, Interview . 25/05/2008.

<sup>189</sup> Makhoere, Interview . 23/05/2008 and M.F.Mabena, Interview . 14/04/2008.

# CONCLUSION

*“Ours was not for personal glory nor distinction but for a noble cause of our time – the liberation of the people of South Africa and the entire humanity”<sup>190)</sup>*

The period under discussion (1976 to 1988) produced a generation of frustrated, angered and brutalised women who did not see submission to male domination as an option they could accept. Encouraged by the fiery speeches and slogans of their leaders, they felt inspired to face the South African security forces. The end result of experiencing the brutality that was unleashed on them by the security force was they felt compelled to seek refuge for their political struggle in MK, arriving as very dependent, home-oriented beings. However, they emerged from their military training as confident, independent, adventurous, emotionally mature beings.

The African National Congress had a long history of active women participation in its activities since its inception, prior to 1976. The significance of the role of women was evident with the establishment of the women’s wing alongside the mother body. It was however, the political activities between 1976 and the 1980s that ushered in a new era in the history of South Africa that served to elevate the role that women played in society and broke the traditional and perceived roles of men and women, having, previously, always been treated as second class citizens. That period prepared the way for women to assume new roles within the democratic new South Africa of today in fields like the military, politics and economy to mention but a few.

The political circumstances that resulted from the 1976 Soweto Uprisings became a factor that drove a number of females (both young and old) to seek military training with MK. The social upheavals that engulfed the country in the 1980s drove even more young women to decide to leave South Africa in their quest to add their efforts to the liberation that country. The brutality which the women of South Africa never foresaw but experienced still sends a shiver down their spine. They felt disempowered and dehumanised by the conditions they were subjected to while in prison; the pain of losing

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<sup>190</sup> Engraving on the Memorial stone . ANC graveyard . Mazimbu . Morogoro . United Republic of Tanzania.

loved ones, friends and acquaintances while those people were in the hands of the South African Police Force; the fear of long prison sentences; and they worried about the unexplained disappearance of family and friends, with no one to account for those disappearances. Surrounded by such circumstances they found themselves feeling they were ~~between~~ a rock and a hard place. that life presented them with impossible conditions to contend with.

This research study investigated the question: What were the survival strategies of women in MK? In reply, this research demonstrated that the women who joined MK were, indeed, faced with multiple challenges that they were required to deal with in the pursuance of their dream. Life in the camp proved to be extremely harsh to them and they encountered certain problems related to hygiene factors that affected them as women. To solve such problems they had to improvise and substitute and meet their basic necessities with whatever they found on hand that was useful to the purpose, that their lives, as women, did not adversely affect the smooth running of the camps where they found themselves.

Life in the camps was also made difficult by the fear of being labelled ~~%ndlwembe+~~ (enemy agent) that the women were subjected to. This labelling would have come from various issues, such as turning down an amorous advance by a male comrade or raising a voice of dissatisfaction, especially, with concern to things the men were doing that upset them as women. It was left to the individual to decide on how she would handle such situations, to not be labelled an enemy agent. Such a labelling would make an individual feel isolated, live a life in misery; she could even find herself being subjected to interrogation by the security department, with dire some consequences.

Another challenge the women faced was to change the perception and attitudes of their male comrades, who still had a negative attitude towards accepting women in roles that were traditionally regarded as only being for males. The challenge here was twofold: firstly, to be accepted as being equal to the physical task and, secondly, being equally zealous in their compatriotic fervour in the struggle for liberation within South Africa. It

would seem that some of the men who were in a position of power struggled to view the women as being their sisters in arms. Instead, they saw them as commodities to satisfy their sexual desires. It took the courage and effort of Chris Hani to lay down the law that protected women in MK from such abuse. This was evident in that when women cadres became pregnant, the policy was to automatically remove them from active political roles in the camps and relocate them elsewhere ostensibly because there were no facilities for mothers in the camps. At first, Women protested strongly against the policy and wanted to be accepted back into service within MK after lactation or as soon as they were fit enough to resume their military roles. It was after a long struggle that their protest was finally heard by the leadership and their wish was granted.

In order for them to survive the harsh camp life and the robust physical training, they had to adapt speedily to the circumstances they found themselves in. They had to work hard to earn respect from their male counterparts and comrades. The bias and the sexually based inequalities in the camps contributed to very few women promoted to the ranks of the commanders, which meant that women were not adequately represented in the decision making structures of the movement. The disadvantage of that situation was that the concerns of women members were never brought to the attention of the hierarchy and they continued to be subservient to male leadership.

After the completion of the military training, deployment of the soldiers was the decision and prerogative of the MK leadership. Few women soldiers were deployed to return to South Africa to assist in operations and that became an area of discontentment for the women soldiers. Thus the women often felt marginalized, as being made to feel incompetent or to not be up to the job (military combat); as the jobs they were most often assigned to were those of secretarial and medics. During 1984 many MK soldiers, both male and female, mutinied against the MK leadership's decision-making policies; the chief reason for that experience was their policy of deployment, as they all felt they were not deployed to best effect . to advance their main aim, Instead they found themselves involved in the war in Angola, against UNITA.

Though the years of their youth were spent without the much needed support of their family and friends, they remained resolute to participate in the struggle for liberation and made sacrifices worthy of improving the life of humanity in South Africa. Their active participation and commitment to the cause caught the attention of the then President of the ANC, O.R. Tambo, who declared 1984 to be The Year of the Women, whom he regarded as being the *pillars of the nation*<sup>191</sup>, in recognition of, and dedication to, the special military role that women played in the emancipation of the country and its people.

The women's role in MK, and other liberation armies, changed the complexion and pace of the struggle in South Africa. Their involvement, *inter alia*, heralded new considerations and attitudes within the ANC leadership to view women as compatriots, rather than something to be owned. Those women insisted on co-owning the struggle; they were not only victims of the apartheid political system, but also . because they were women . lived under the oppressive attitudes of their men folk. Their participation in the struggle consolidated gender equality in MK, and forced them to recognise and elevate women to the status that was never accorded to them by society before. Some of those women proved they were equally capable, and at times more brave, than their male counterparts when the heat of battle.

In closing, this research study traced the reasons behind the involvement of young women in MK at the height of the apartheid political era. Further, it illustrates that the struggle for liberation, which . after the banning of the ANC by the South African Nationalist Party in 1960 . took the form of an armed struggle, which was not a struggle that was carried out by men only. Those women, with the limitations they may have had, refused to just play a mere supportive role; they were at the forefront of the armed struggle within the operations and activities of MK. With their heroic efforts amid all the challenges they endured, they changed the traditional role of women in so far as the

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<sup>191</sup> Ncame, Interview . 09/01/2003



military is concerned, thereby making the unspoken statement: "War doesn't discriminate! Why should you."<sup>192)</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Salut vol. 7 no. 6, June 2000, p. 20.

## **Appendices**

1. MK recruiting poster . **Page 65**

Women Arise and Act . Join Umkhonto we Sizwe. %The need for unity is the need for people's power. It is the power against ignorance and general abuse. The search for active unity is the task for both men and women alike. Forward with the year of the women!+

Source: Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, File: SW1-3-13

2. Radio freedom logo. **Page 66**

%Voice of the African National Congress and the People's Army Umkhonto We Sizwe+

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio\\_Freedom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_Freedom)

3. Dakawa High School . Tanzania. **Page 67**

The facility which was used as an orientation centre for recruits before being transferred to the training camps. The facility (settlements of Mazimbu and Dakawa) were handed to the people of Tanzania as monuments of solidarity and friendship by the Chairman of the ANC . Oliver Tambo on 9 July 1992. The facility is currently used as the girls' comprehensive school.

**Source:** Photos by Makau Kongko Louis, Dakawa . Tanzania, 10-07-2008.

4. MK cadres attending a class. **Page 68**

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cadres of the Soweto generation undergoing training in the bush.

**Source:** Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town.

5. An armed MK female soldier. **Page 69**

**Source:** <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mk/images/mksoldya.gif>

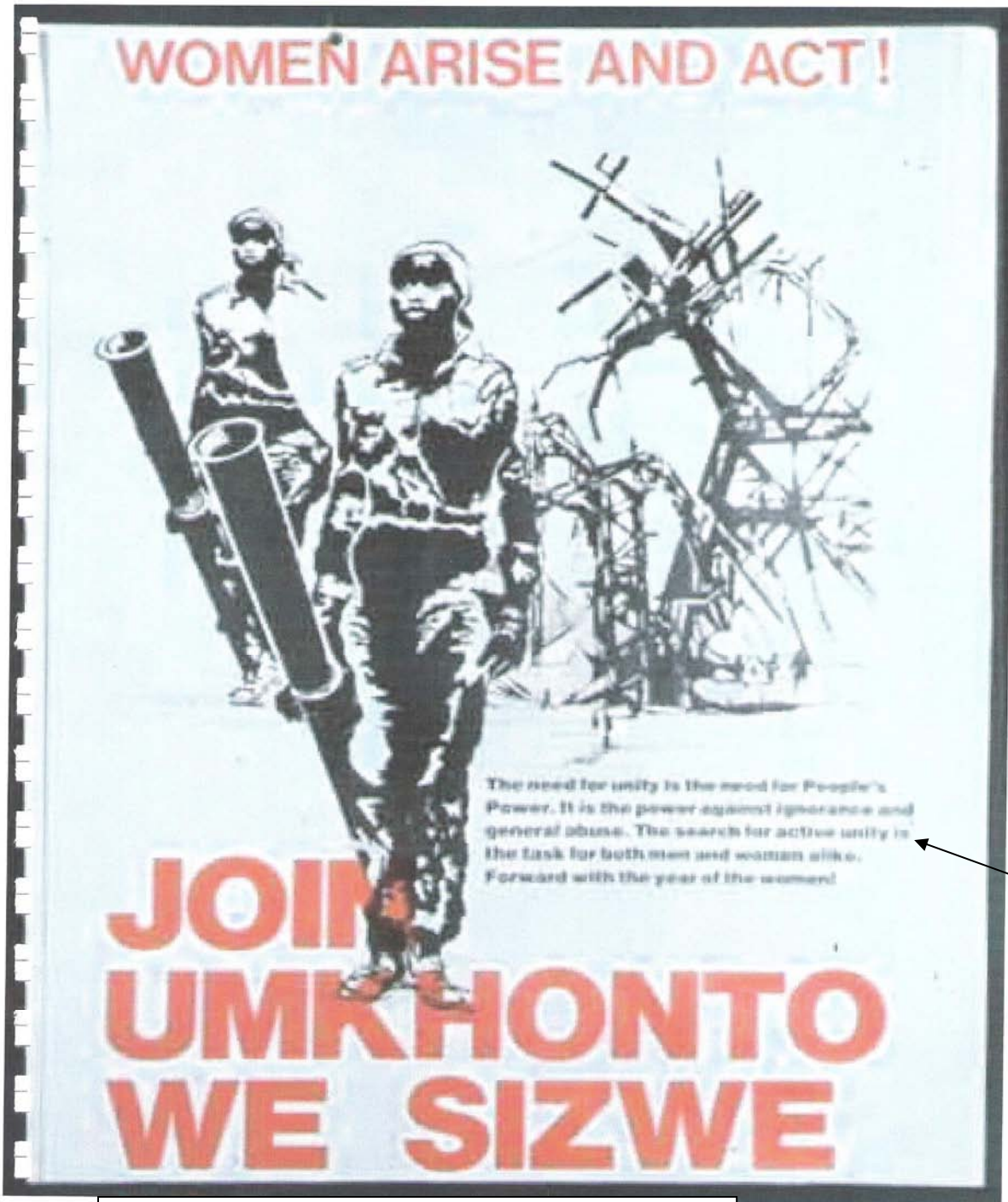
6. Solomon Mahlangu Nursery School at the Sokoine University of Agriculture .  
Solomon Mahlangu campus in Mazimbu - Tanzania **Page 70**

The facility has been retained as a nursery school. It was then called Charlotte Maxeke nursery school at SOMAFSCO which catered for early childhood development to children of all ANC exiles including MK women soldiers who fell pregnant while in the training camps residing at the Mazimbu settlement called Dark City.

**Source:** Pictures by Makau Kongko Louis, Mazimbu, Tanzania, 09-07-2008.

Appendice 1

MK Recruitment poster

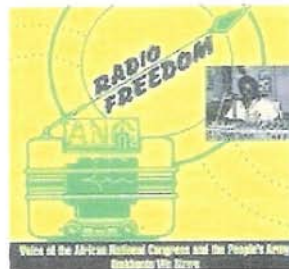


The need for unity is the need for People's Power. It is the power against ignorance and general abuse. The search for active unity is the task for both men and women alike. Forward with the year of the women!

The need for unity is the need for People's Power. It is the power against ignorance and general abuse. The search for active unity is the task for both men and women alike. Forward with the year of the women!

## Appendice 2

### Radio Freedom logo



### Appendice 3

Photos of Dakawa High School which was used as an orientation centre - Tanzania



**Appendice 4**

**MK cadres attending a class**



**Appendice 5**

**An armed MK female cadre**





**Appendice 6**

**Solomon Mahlangu Nursery school at Mazimbu**



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