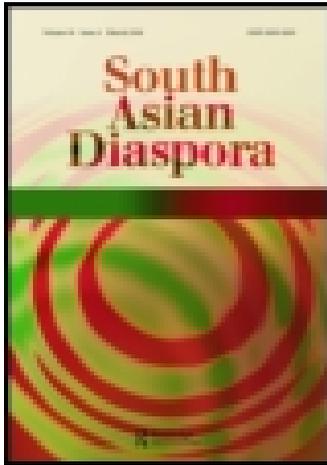


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Women and national liberation in South Africa: an oral history perspective

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The historiography of the national liberation struggle in South Africa is dominated by the feats of heroic male activists, in which women's activism and the impact of the anti-apartheid struggle on women and families are largely occluded. The past decade has witnessed the growth of a more inclusive 'struggle' historiography due to the mushrooming of women's biographies and autobiographies. This article is based on interviews with five women whose partners were involved in anti-apartheid activism and who were either banned, forced into exile or incarcerated on Robben Island. Focusing on 'ordinary' women who had to see to the subsistence of family and household for extended periods contributes to a more inclusive narrative of anti-apartheid struggles. These gendered biographies highlight the multiple forms of oppression to which women were subjected and their multiple roles in the anti-apartheid struggle, and stress that gender should be a key part of one's analytical toolbox.

Keywords: apartheid; Robben Island; South Africa; oral history; gender; Natal Indian Congress

Women have been in the forefront of struggles against white minority rule in South Africa since at least the early twentieth century. While iconic moments such as the 1913 Women's Pass Protests in Bloemfontein and the 9 August 1956 march by 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the seat of government, are usually highlighted when women's involvement in political struggles is discussed, women played pivotal roles in multiple ways to end apartheid even though this rarely resulted in them obtaining positions of leadership in the major anti-apartheid political movements. Walker (1982) and Wells (1994), among early studies, argued that the women's involvement in politics was subordinated to the political imperatives and agendas of men with the result that women's issues were neglected. Others like Mama (1997) contend that women's political involvement should not be totally discounted as it opened social and economic spaces that were liberating for many.

While women, like men, were subject to the common experience of race exploitation, identities like race do not operate in a vacuum but intersect with gender, class,

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ethnicity, culture and so on. Scott (1999, 30) believes that ‘interest in class, race, and gender signaled . . . a scholar’s commitment to a history that included stories of the oppressed’. But Scott wants us to go beyond relating these stories and connect women’s activism to political and economic history in order to establish a ‘connection between past history and current historical practice. How does gender work in human social relationships?’ (Scott 1999, 31). Scott argues that the needs of the state result in the gendering of society through the legitimization of ‘domination, strength, central authority, and ruling power as masculine’ as well as through policies that may restrict women’s political participation, prohibit abortion, legislate dress codes for women and so on (Scott 1999, 47). Gender is associated with power, and to ‘vindicate political power’, the male/female opposition is presented as ‘part of the natural or divine order’ (Scott 1999, 49).

Studies of the anti-apartheid struggle and even struggles against colonialism, and neoliberal economic systems or the Arab Spring in the contemporary moment will be enriched by including gender as a category of analysis. A gendered perspective may render bare the differential locations and experiences of women within structural power systems. Women, in the South African context, struggled in their own right against racial oppression, often because it led to their marginalization economically, but they also took up issues which they saw as affecting them specifically as women, including their sexuality.

Representation of women activists: the South African context

While studies on anti-apartheid activists and activism have mushroomed over the past two decades, many of these are hagiographic and celebratory and tend to focus mainly on ‘heroic’ male figures or on specific liberation movements (e.g. Kathrada 2004; Meer 2002; Naidoo 2010).¹ Despite women’s involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, their participation has not received the same level of attention as that given to men. Feminist activist Meer (1997, 6) wrote that women on the left were ‘fed-up with the personal politics of men’ who ‘were able to make their mark in the liberation struggle because they had women to keep the home fires burning, to care for children and even at times, bring home a significant share of the bread’. Unterhalter (2000, 174) argues that South African liberation historiography

maintains a notion of women’s invisibility or homogeneity [W]omen may be ungendered equal comrades, they may be heroines who inspire, but somehow do not live the struggle. They may be the wounded, or the innocent, or the supportive relatives. In all of these guises they have no autonomy, no different political interests, and no struggle. Their views are always expressed or interpreted by men.

Unterhalter’s assertion about the printed word is matched in the memorialization of the anti-apartheid struggle. Construction of the Monument to the Women of South Africa in Pretoria in 2000 to honour women’s contribution to the liberation struggle seemed to mark an important shift in their recognition. But as Marschall points out:

The visual experience of the National Monument for the Women of South Africa is highly disappointing. In plain daylight the stone is nothing more than a simple, ordinary object – unglamorous and hardly noticeable. It was immediately ridiculed by the media for its inconspicuousness and its iconographic references. . . . Worst of all, the site chosen for the monument precludes the monument from public accessibility since the introduction

of new security measures shortly after its unveiling Unless security clearance is obtained prior to the visit, tourists, the general public and even the very women whom this monument is dedicated to are effectively excluded from viewing it. (2010, 257–258)

If the state of public memorialization is unsatisfactory, the same cannot be said about ‘struggle’ historiography where the gap has been partly filled by women’s biographies and autobiographies. Important works in the apartheid era included, for example, Mashinini (1989), Magona (1992) and Kuzwayo (1985) reclaimed some space for and acknowledgement of women’s activism as they wrote passionately about combining their activist work with ‘mothering’ duties. Other women such as Cachalia (2013), du Preez-Bezdrob (2005), Sisulu and Sisulu (2003), Slovo (1997), Meer (2001) and Ramphela (1999) further emphasized the role of women as well as the sexism and patriarchy that they confronted during the anti-apartheid struggle. The likes of Jaffer (2003) and Govender (2007) went further by including personal issues such as marriage, depression and family life in their memoirs. Britton (2005), Geisler (2004), Hassim (2006) and Russell (2003), among others, also cover the lives of women involved in the anti-apartheid struggles as well as in politics in the post-apartheid period. They look at the attempts of women parliamentarians to transform gender relations within and outside parliament; the role of women and women’s political organizations in shaping South Africa’s transition to democracy and influencing policy formulation; as well as complex issues of motherhood, prison life, exile and trade unionism.

These publications notwithstanding the gender and class bias remain. The women whose stories are published are all ‘iconic’ public figures. In addition, studies on Indian women tend to focus mainly on the middle classes, thus maintaining a strong class bias (Govinden 2008; Vahed and Waetjen 2009; Vahed and Waetjen 2010; Rajab 2011). This paper, based on oral history and a life history approach (see Chamberlayne 2012), examines the experiences of five KwaZulu-Natal-based women – Elsie Nair, Tim Naidoo, Sam Moodley, Nina Hassim and Therese Venkathathnam² – who were involved in the ‘struggle’ in various ways. They share one thing in common – all of their partners were imprisoned on Robben Island. Robben Island prisoners have had their stories told (Desai 2012) but the cost of their imprisonment for their partners and family has received scant attention. The choice of women was arbitrary, and the result of interviews generated in the course of writing a biography of Dr Monty Naicker, who qualified as a medical doctor in Edinburgh and took over the leadership of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in the 1940s (Desai and Vahed 2010).

While interviewing women for the Monty Naicker book, it became apparent that they often bore the brunt of the anti-apartheid struggle. While arbitrarily chosen, the women differ in terms of generation, class, education and political orientation. Their perspectives allow us to explore individual lives in relation to the broader political movements and the struggle against apartheid. There is no claim that they are necessarily representative ‘of the times’. Their narratives do, however, help us to understand how some women tried to make sense of life under apartheid, and also provide a lens through which to track the impact of apartheid and anti-apartheid struggles on individual South Africans.

This paper consists, broadly, of two parts. The first half examines how the women got involved in political activism and the kinds of protest that they engaged in, while the second part examines the consequences of their involvement for self and family. Key questions include: How did the women feel about their husbands’ political

involvement and arrest, their own involvement in the trial process and visits to Robben Island? How did the women survive materially while their partners were incarcerated? What impact did these experiences have on the women? How were personal relationships affected by long absences? How are these biographies gendered? How did the domestic space acquire a new political meaning and significance as a result of the political situation? How did domestic responsibilities align with the anti-apartheid struggle?

India and its diaspora in South Africa

The genesis of the Indian diaspora in South Africa dates to the importation of indentured labour to Natal between 1860 and 1911 and the free Indian migrants who followed in their wake. The struggle of Indians for political rights in South Africa received international attention from the earliest period because it was headed by Mohandas K. Gandhi who formed the NIC in 1894 and spent the time from 1893 to 1914 in South Africa. It was here that he formulated his strategy of Satyagraha or non-violent resistance. The struggle that Gandhi led culminated in a massive campaign in 1913 which received much publicity in England and India and resulted in the Imperial government getting involved to help find a workable solution (see Bhana and Vahed 2005).

While Gandhi departed for South Africa in 1914, race discrimination continued to govern the lives of Indians in South Africa. The official policy of the South African government until the 1960s was that Indians were a foreign element who should be repatriated. South Africa appeared to be unique among countries with sizeable Indian populations in the Indian government took a direct interest in their welfare. Round Table Conferences were held with the South African government in 1926/1927 and again in 1932/1933. An Indian Agent-General was appointed to serve as a liaison between Indians and the South African government. One result was that until the 1940s, Indians fought their political struggles separately from the indigenous Africans and in fact shunned all attempts at Non-European or Black Unity (Vahed 1997).³

This strategy of keeping the struggle of Indian separate from that of the majority indigenous population changed when a younger, professional and more radical leadership with links to trades unions took control of the NIC under the leadership of Dr G.M. Monty Naicker, and the Transvaal Indian Congress under the leadership of Dr Yusuf Dadoo and began to forge links with the African National Congress (ANC). However, Naicker and Dadoo also valued the leadership of India and visited Gandhi in India from March to May 1947 to seek his counsel on the path forward. They were also inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru. It was not only Indian but also powerful future African leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Albert Luthuli who were inspired by Gandhi, Nehru and India's decolonization struggles (Desai and Vahed 2010, 206–231). The Indian government also indicted South Africa's racial policies before the United Nations (UN) from November 1946 through the 1950s (Desai and Vahed 2010, 320–333).

The 1950s was witness to non-violent high-profile political campaigns such as the Defiance Campaign of 1952 (Vahed 2013a), women's rights struggles headed by the Federation of South African Women, the Treason Trial that lasted from 1956 to 1961 and the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 when 67 protestors were gunned down. Repressive state clampdown from 1960 led to the banning of individuals and

organizations, as well as the imprisonment and exile of large numbers of activists. One of the responses of the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) was to embrace the armed struggle. Many of those who constituted the 'Indian diaspora' in South Africa were involved in all facets of the anti-apartheid struggle, both within and outside the country (Desai and Vahed 2010, 354–371). The period from the late 1960s and early 1970s would witness the emergence of a powerful Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), a revitalized workers' movement, and a revived NIC which brought the Indian masses into the mass democratic movement (Desai and Vahed 2014). Through all this, India maintained a special and vigilant interest in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

Biographic narratives of the women

The five women originated from different class, educational, regional backgrounds as well as political traditions. Elsie Nair was born to a working-class family in Newcastle in 1927, attended the local primary school but left school at the age of 15 to seek work in Durban. She got a job at a clothing factory and learnt to sew and worked as a dress-maker to supplement her income. She met future husband, trade unionist and iconic anti-apartheid activist Billy Nair, during his visits to her neighbour Poomani Moodley, who was a fellow trade unionist. One day, she recalled, he just 'walked into my room and hugged me. And that was the start'. Their friendship evolved into love and marriage in December 1960. Barely three years later, Nair was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment for his role in the first wave of Umkhonto bombings in South Africa. In-between, these years were filled with being on the run, late night undercover operations and imprisonment under new State of Emergency regulations.

Tim Naidoo was born in Riverside, north of Durban, in 1933. She was the youngest of 11 children. Tim's parents divorced when she was four and 'the first thing I remember is us living in one bedroom because all the children opted to go with my mother'. Her brother M.D. Naidoo, who would also spend time on Robben Island, and an older brother were forced to leave school and work to support the family. Tim's mother died in 1940 and she was brought up by a sister in Umkomaas: 'We were as poor as church mouse. I was the last girl to pay my fees, but she made sure I matriculated.' Tim finished schooling in 1951 and took up a teaching post while studying part-time at Natal University's classes for 'Non-Europeans'. She was finding it difficult to cope with doing casual work and studying, and jumped at the opportunity to become a trainee nurse in London. There she would marry Mac Maharaj.

Nina Hassim was shaped by her family's politicization. She was born in Cape Town in 1936 to Amina Gool and Hans Friederich, a German Jew who had fled Nazism and settled in Cape Town. Her maternal uncle and aunt, Dr Goolam Gool and Jane Gool, were also activists. Nina's parents' marriage eventually broke, and Nina and her mum Amina lived in District Six. She attended Trafalgar High, which she described as 'the foremost political school'. Her contemporaries included the likes of well-known activists Neville Alexander and Dullah Omar. The school had a 'Unity Movement Corner' where intense lunchtime debates took place. Nina studied science at UCT and through meetings of the Unity Movement she met Kader Hassim, whom she married in 1961. They settled in his home town of Pietermaritzburg.

Therese Venkathratnum was born in 1938 to Appadu and Soobama Naidoo. She grew up in Seaview, south of Durban, but her family was subsequently forcibly relocated to Arena Park, Chatsworth, in the early 1960s as a result of Group Areas. She

attended school until standard eight. Therese describes herself as coming ‘from a fairly poor background. My father was a tailor and my mum was a housewife and she used to do sewing to supplement the income’. She was aware of political protests ‘but I didn’t get involved politically as such’ until she married Sunny Venkathratnum, a Unity Movement activist, who grew up in the same local area as her.

Sam Moodley, the youngest of the interviewees, was born in the coal mining town of Dundee in Northern Natal on 20 November 1948. She came from a family of six children. Her father V.P. Pillay was a taxi driver and later a clerk at a lawyer’s office. Dundee was a hotbed of Unity Movement politics, and Sam’s school years were instrumental in her political development. Sam matriculated from Dundee High and enrolled at the University for Indians which had been established on Salisbury Island in Durban, in 1966. There she was to be drawn into the BCM and met her future partner Strini Moodley.

In all five cases, movement and relocation and meeting new acquaintances and engaging with political ideas helped to forge new social networks that sometimes replaced traditional family roles and impacted on conscientization and politicization. In general, it would be fair to say that with the possible exception of Nina, the other four women were raised in communities that were fairly conservative with respect to gender roles. The fact of Nina and Sam going to university is an example of the changing expectations and opportunities for women, while the other women’s public participation also increased as a result of their political activities.

Politicization: family, schooling and marriage

Family, education and marriage shaped the participation of women in the national liberation movement. Under a fairly strict and usually patriarchal social order among Indians, identification with acts of resistance of family members raised women’s own political consciousness. Family was important in Tim Naidoo’s case. Her brothers M.D. and M.J. Naidoo were both activists. M.D. Naidoo was a trade unionist and member of the NIC and South African Communist Party (SACP) from the early 1940s. He represented South African Indians at the UN in 1947 before going to London to study law. M.D. Naidoo was involved in the NIC for around half a century. Both brothers were served with banning orders from the 1950s, and M.D. spent five years on Robben Island. Tim was politically but had practical concerns:

MD was involved all the time so I’ve always been, how shall I say, a fly on the wall. I was in the mix of it but out of it. I had to support myself – being politically aware was fine, wanting to do things was fine, but who’s going to pay my rent or give me a plate of food? Nobody, I had nobody.

Marriage drew Tim into active engagement. She reached London in 1958 and within a few months of her arrival married Mac Maharaj, whom she had known as a student at the Non-European University in Durban from 1953. Maharaj writes in his biography that Tim’s family ‘didn’t think highly of me or my lifestyle. They thought I had no career prospects’ (O’Malley 2007, 74). Each went independently to London in 1957 where they resumed their relationship. Maharaj was studying law and active in the SACP and ANC. Maharaj writes that he and Tim went ‘together to all the meetings whenever it was possible. She was very supportive of my party activities’. Tim recalls the rallies: ‘I got a photograph, 1961 outside South Africa House – “Free

Pondoland” or something – outside, in the freezing cold. I was free and I’d go do my bit screaming in the cold – usually these things happened in the winter.’

Tim and Maharaj lived apart as she was studying in Aylesbury. She moved to Maharaj’s London flat in March 1961 but within a few days he was sent to East Germany for training. Maharaj reflects that ‘that would be the story of my marriage. I was either gone or going somewhere’ (O’Malley 2007, 86). Around the time that the armed struggle was being launched, Maharaj left for South Africa in May 1962 and Tim in April 1963. She got a job at the St Aidans Hospital in Durban while Maharaj was in Johannesburg. On 6 July 1963, he was arrested under the Terrorism Act. Tim, who had gone to Johannesburg, was also arrested and imprisoned at Marshall Square for three months even though, during questioning, she claims she presented herself as:

just a stupid, Hindu woman. When the men talk in the other room, I’m in the bedroom, I don’t know what they talking about. They didn’t know what I was about because at that time they’d only handled Indian prostitutes. Now, where the hell do I fit in?

Maharaj and Tim were questioned jointly on one occasion by a police officer named Van Rensburgh. Maharaj writes of this episode:

I am asking how she is; have they assaulted her? She says yes. So I say to him, ‘There you are.’ Now he pretends he’s innocent. ‘Who did that to you? I’ll take it up.’ She says some guy called Erasmus has been abusive and slapped her around. (O’Malley 2007, 133)⁴

Tim was freed after three and half months in prison.

Unlike Tim Naidoo, Elsie Nair described her family as ‘apolitical’. She accepted Billy Nair’s political work but did not discuss it with him directly: ‘I understood what his life was, you know, his politics. It was for me to get used to that because I’ve got no idea about it. But slowly I learnt because I used to go to the meetings.’ Visiting Billy Nair at the offices of the South African Congress of Trade Unions alerted her to his concern for the downtrodden:

I always visited that when we got used to one another. Go and sit there or make tea for them, you know, things like that The office was a workers office, people looking for job or complaints from the working place. Billy took up those cases– how workers are treated and how they are paid and all those things.

Marriage and Nair’s constant arrests and terms of imprisonment and bannings meant that Elsie developed a deeper understanding of the struggle but the need to survive limited her own political involvement.

Marriage was also important in Therese’s politicization. As the eldest child she left school in standard eight to support her family. She completed a course in shorthand and typing and taught typing at the ML Sultan Technikon. Her husband Sunny, who was a student at the Non-European section of Natal University in the 1950s, was involved in protest action against a racially segregated university being built on Salisbury Island (Vahed 2013b). Therese helped Sunny prepare protest pamphlets and was dismissed in 1960, while pregnant with their first child, when the authorities found copies of the pamphlets in her office. From 1963, Sunny was banned for successive periods of five years which meant being confined to the tiny apartment in which they lived with their three children. This was a difficult period for Therese who wondered:

How far is this going to go with us being harassed all the time? . . . We had raids with the cops coming there all hours of the morning, night, banging on the door, searching. It was part of our life that you don't know when they going to pounce on you.

State harassment increased Therese's determination to resist apartheid.

Unlike Therese and Elsie, Nina grew up in a highly politicized family and confronted inequality and repression from an early age. When Nina was 11 and in standard 4, the leftist political newspaper *Torch* faced a libel suit which would have put it out of circulation. She voluntarily went door to door to raise money to save the newspaper which published a tribute to her. Nina and her husband Kader were active in the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM).⁵ Kader was banned in 1964 and his banning order was extended for a further five years in 1969.

Their life was thrown into further turmoil when Kader was detained on 17 February 1970 under the Terrorism Act, together with Sunny Venkatratnam and other members of the Unity Movement. They were charged with providing assistance to four members of their organization who had returned from exile in Zambia to undertake 'organizational work' in South Africa. The detainees were formally charged in Pietermaritzburg prison on 16 June 1971 for conspiracy to overthrow the state. Kader was sentenced to an effective eight years on Robben Island.

At the time of Sunny's arrest, Therese was helping him in the family butchery. She had two children and was pregnant with their third. For three months, she had no news of Sunny's whereabouts as he was held under the Ninety Days law. When she eventually met Sunny, 'he was under great pressure because they were telling him, look, if you don't tell us what we want to know, we will make sure that your child is born in our offices'. Therese, who had worked previously for defence attorney Navi Pillay, who would serve as the UN Commissioner of Human Rights from 2008 to 2014, became, in her words, 'the "backroom boy" doing all the dirty work, preparing statements, doing research . . . communicating with people – Helen Suzman, Amnesty International. We tried to give it as much publicity as possible all over the world'. Sunny was sentenced to an effective six years on Robben Island.

Sam Moodley described herself as 'politically conscious' before arriving at the newly built university for Indians on Salisbury Island, Durban, because of the influence of the Unity Movement in Dundee:

The impact was [Ahmed] Limbada himself – he was our doctor, I mean that was *our* doctor, he was a local doctor. It was sad when he had to leave [into exile]. There was Cassim Kikia. We were really perturbed at the fact that they had left the country. And my father did not want us to know any more than the fact that they had left.

The last comment is telling and points to the chilling effect that the apartheid regime had on silencing all speech. Sam completed a BA degree in 1969. Her university years brought with them new political awakenings. Sam became involved in the BCM which emerged as a force in the mid-1960s under the leadership of Steve Biko. She had initially joined the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), which was dominated by white middle-class students. It was in 1968 that her political life changed:

That was the day when the black students walked out of NUSAS – the July Conference of 1968 – walked out because at that point, black people could not be in an area for more than 72 hours, and here were black students staying on the campus and NUSAS

applied for a permit and after 72 hours they had to leave. Now, students said, this is not on and we stood outside and said, you are not really serious, you are not listening to us. As NUSAS, you ought to be fighting against this law but you are being damn all paternalistic. It was the initial start of SASO [South African Students Organisation].

SASO and the BCM, Kruger tells us, drew on Frantz Fanon's analysis of the mentality of the colonized, Paolo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, and the arguments for Black autonomy of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and other African-American leaders, the likes of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and the Africanist tradition of the ANC and PAC (Kruger 1999, 124) as they sought to liberate Black minds.

Following her marriage to BC activist, Strini Moodley, Sam completed her degree and took up a teaching position at a school in Chatsworth. In terms of the conditions of service, married women had to reapply for teaching posts annually. At the end of 1972, the Department refused to renew Sam's appointment. While no official reason was given, officials made it clear to her that it was because of her political involvement. Sam was banned for five years in August 1973, a week after the birth of her son Niven. As Strini was also banned, it meant that they were not allowed to communicate, not even at home. Strini was part of a group of BC activists who organized the 'Viva Frelimo Rally' at Curries Fountain on 25 September 1974 in solidarity with the new government in Mozambique which had achieved its independence from Portugal.

Sam could not work as a result of her banning order and was studying Social Work through the long-distance University of South Africa (UNISA). On the night of 10 October, the police arrested Strini for his involvement in the rally. She was due to write her final examination the following day and was forced to miss the paper. The detained BC members were charged under the Terrorism Act on 31 January 1975 with seeking to overthrow the government by a violent revolution, sowing the seeds of hatred between Whites and Blacks, and distributing subversive literature. The trial of the nine BC members began in Pretoria on 25 August 1975, and they were all found guilty in December 1975.⁶ Strini Moodley was sentenced to five years on Robben Island. Despite many requests, the authorities did not grant Sam permission to attend the trial in Pretoria because of her banning order. She was allowed three short visits to the court.

Political involvement impacted on the women and their families in various ways. This is explored in greater detail in the next section.

Self and family

Work and survival

Women bore a heavy burden for the activism of partners as they assumed the responsibilities of family providers. Women like Elsie Nair displayed both quiet assertiveness and self-reliance. Billy Nair emphasized during our interview that without Elsie's involvement 'during all my battles, I would not have been living'. Elsie worked as a supervisor at a clothing factory during the day and sewed for private clients at night, often working up to midnight to make ends meet. 'Otherwise we would not have been able to survive', Billy said. The assistance promised by the ANC did not materialize immediately because the organization was 'in serious [financial] difficulties. Large numbers of people were detained, arrested and so on . . . Elsie continued to be self-supporting'.

Elsie described her years while Billy was on Robben Island as 'hardship': 'I carried on working, that's what I liked about my company . . . they didn't get rid of me because

of my friends' politics.' Aside from dressmaking Elsie sublet a room in her flat 'so these few people used to help me pay my rent. It gave me a push, working one side, doing this one side, while Billy was in and out of jail'. She also got a job as a cashier at a tea room in Clairwood where she worked from 7 to 10 o'clock each night. It was tough but she 'got used to it and it helped me because I had to earn money, I have to see to everything. It was a struggle but it meant good for the people of South Africa'. Billy made regular 'demands' on Elsie: 'Please send me five pounds to keep me going inside . . . buying cigarettes, sweets and this and that. Even Christmas . . . we'll make demands. So if she can send money, she'll send this over?' Elsie financed Billy's studies. He completed his BA and B.Com degrees and part of his LLB (The Bachelor of Laws, Latin: Legum Baccalaureus) through UNISA while on Robben Island.

Mac Maharaj was arrested in July 1964 and charged with sabotage. According to Tim, she was told [presumably by members of Umkhonto] not to attend the trial by 'so-called friends, the very same friends who later on condemned me for not doing it. I was told, the ANC's taking care of that [trial]'. Maharaj writes that while he was in prison during the trial:

Tim was able to visit me, but it was not a private visit . . . Tim's presence there was really moral support and the sharing of confidences; we told each other that we would stand together, we would fight, that she was behind me. She was never able to tell me what she had gone through at Marchall Square, where she was assaulted. Nor afterward. An opportunity never arose. (O'Malley 2007, 143)

This last remark is indicative of the lack of communication between Tim and Maharaj from early on in their marriage. Maharaj was sentenced to 12 years on Robben Island. Tim got a job at a hospital in Cape Town. Maharaj was a category D prisoner and Tim was permitted one-hour-long non-contact visit every quarter. In terms of South African law, Indians required a permit to live, work or visit the Cape and the Security Branch deported her to Natal (O'Malley 2007, 209). After a period of unemployment, Tim found a job at the newly opened King George V Psychiatric Hospital. She found the work 'a struggle, I can tell you I panicked because I'd never ever seen such patients – they were either catatonic or they were aggressive'. Tim lived frugally on her meagre salary and found the going very tough. She initially moved 'from outhouse to outhouse' before sharing a flat with her brother George. She was constantly harassed by the Security Branch, briefly arrested in 1967, and saw her brother M.D. sentenced to imprisonment on Robben Island.

At the end of 1973, with Maharaj still to serve two years of his sentence, Tim returned to London. While many, including Maharaj himself, felt that she was betraying him, she could no longer stand the social, political, financial and emotional burden. She found life equally challenging in London where she initially stayed with her sister Suria:

It was the survival of the fittest. I used to leave home – shift work – sometimes you leave home half past ten, quarter to eleven for the half past twelve shift; you come home quarter to eleven. You haven't got time for meetings and you do a late shift and a morning shift, you got just enough time to eat and sleep, get up at five o'clock, take two buses to get to work.

Despite the condemnation she received for 'betraying' Maharaj, Tim, reflecting on her decision four decades later, believes that she made the right choice as she was heading

for a nervous breakdown because of the emotional stress resulting from her attempts to balance her work, run a household and take care of Maharaj on Robben Island. This included arranging fees for his studies, providing an allowance and visiting Cape Town. Visits were difficult. It cost her a month's salary for the air ticket, she had to go through the nightmare of getting a permit to travel out of Natal, and the actual visits were consumed by mundane administrative matters around Maharaj's studies, including the payment of his fees and purchase of books.

Maharaj was released from Robben Island in December 1976 and went into exile in July 1977, joining Tim in London on 8 August. She was renting a one room apartment and working two jobs to pay the rent and support herself and Maharaj. Tim would tell O'Malley (2007, 210):

Mac was a changed person. He expected me to have a house. He didn't understand why I hadn't earned more money. He looked around my one-room flat and said, "For God's sake, how can I bring my friends and entertain them here". He never once inquired about how life had been for me during the twelve years he had been in jail. All he was concerned about was himself. He took no consideration of the cost or the effort it involved to get to Robben Island to see him.

Maharaj was redeployed to Lusaka. Tim hoped to apply for a position as a nurse at an ANC clinic at the Solomon Mhlangu College in Tanzania but gave up on that idea as Maharaj was to be based in Mozambique, Swaziland and Botswana. In the 20 years of their marriage, Tim and Maharaj had spent just 18 months together. Maharaj, meanwhile, met his future wife Zarina in London when he returned in 1977, and subsequently in Maputo in April 1978. Zarina writes in her autobiography: 'There was also the question of his marriage to Tim . . . I therefore felt completely restrained in his company despite my attraction to him – and, as I knew then, his to me' (Maharaj 2006, 105). Tim and Mac divorced in 1978. Tim remained in London until 1993 when she returned to South Africa on the eve of South Africa's non-racial democracy. She died in Durban in 2011, largely in anonymity and hardly known to anyone outside political circles. Zarina Maharaj, in contrast, is a well-recognized public figure.

Nina was working as a technician in Pietermaritzburg when she decided on a career change and enrolled for a Pharmacy degree at University of Durban-Westville in 1969. Shortly after Kader's arrest, Nina was herself arrested and kept in solitary confinement for several months. She recalled: 'They came here and threatened me and told me that they are giving me a chance, and then they took me away. I was detained at Hilton police station and spent about fifty odd days [there].' Nina described solitary confinement as 'torture in itself':

[It was] mental torture and standing for hours on end and lifting your arms and keeping your arms up and not drooping and all that . . . Then there is always the fear of physical danger to you. You are a woman all alone with three or four men and the way they do it, you know, the one used to play with pins. And I often used to think, now is he trying to tell me he is going to put pins there, you know, and with their guns and things.

Self-preservation was uppermost in Nina's mind:

One of the other most painful things was to blot my mind out to my husband, to my children, to everything. I had known of somebody who had broken down in detention. So the main thing that I was going to do was preserve myself . . . It was self-preservation, that when you come out of here, you must be able to walk with your shoulders back, walk tall.

After her release Nina lived with her maternal aunt, Ghadija Christopher, in Durban. There was little time for self-pity as she had to pull herself together to take care of her studies, her children, her home and Kader's defence. Once the trial started, Nina's mother came from Cape Town to assist her. Some of the defendants were from out of Pietermaritzburg and stayed with Nina. 'Various people came and stayed or if they weren't staying here, they would come during the day or evening. There was a coming and going all the time.' For those who did not stay with her:

each day a different family would make something for their tea. I would get up early in the morning, make a little thing for Kader's lunch and also make the tea and the coffee. Our lives were really immersed in that. It is not a pleasant thing to sit through court.

Nina worked part-time to support herself and their two children.

After completing her degree, Nina got a job at a pharmacy in Pietermaritzburg before opening a small business in 1974, which she ran for 17 years. She visited Robben Island, educated their two children, paid for Kader's studies and provided his pocket money. She is proud of this achievement:

I want to say that I never got any money except for the defence of Kader. I supported myself throughout, and I am actually very proud that I didn't get money from anybody ... that independence I am very proud of.

Kader used his pocket money to buy things like toothpaste, pens and paper for his studies.

During Strini Moodley's trial, Sam left their tiny flat and went to stay with her sister:

I got no money, I can't stay here. We had that one-bedroom flat – I used to sleep in the lounge and Leela in the bedroom. There was no employment – there was now no income so I couldn't see Strini at all except for the time when he appeared, not in the dock, in the box [in Pretoria], I only managed to see him twice or thrice.

As a banned person, Sam had to report to the Sydenham police station every Monday and was confined to the flat on weekends and on public holidays. She found a way to survive, 'I used to knit, sell hats, scarves in winter.' Desperate for work, she went 'to every single lawyer in town saying to them, even if it was making tea, whether I was a messenger, the best known of all the political lawyers – none of them had the courage to give me a job'. Eventually, a friend employed her to sell insurance. 'The cops harassed him, they gave him hell.' Sam found it difficult to earn a living as most potential clients could only meet at night or on weekends when Sam was not permitted to be out of her house due to her banning order.

Sam gave up the Social Work course and enrolled for a course on teaching the deaf. Her son's pediatrician Dr B.T. Naidoo obtained a position for her at the AM Moolla Spes Nova School for the disabled as a speech therapist. A three-person delegation led by Dr Naidoo had to obtain government permission for Sam to teach at the school, as being in a 'place of education' was in contravention of her banning order. On her first day at work, Sam recalls, 'the cops were there, they decided to take me away, big hubbub at school and all that, principal – first time he'd seen this kind of thing – he was horrified'. Her lawyer Ashwin Trikamjee got an interdict to prevent 'the cops from interfering with me while I'm on duty at the school'. Until her banning order was lifted in 1978, Sam had to go to the magistrate in Durban each month for permission to continue teaching.

In addition to the practical and important issue of earning a livelihood, the women also had to run the household, raise their children and make time to visit their partners in Cape Town, continuing to fulfil mothering roles in relation to their children.

Visiting the Island

Prisoners on Robben Island were initially permitted two visits per annum. This was increased in subsequent years but women in KwaZulu-Natal, living 2000 miles away, were unable to visit more often because of the cost. Elsie Nair visited at Christmas only because of the cost and the visit was partly fulfilling:

I worked and saved so at the end of the year I'll have money to go. I stayed with a number of people in Cape Town. They were very good. When I went there they kept me, you know The reunion [with Billy] was very nice. The only thing, you know, they were prisoners, they used to bring them up and the place was guarded, there were gates – and Mandela was there too. So you'll find them all lined up, you can't talk to them, you can just say hello, how are you, how's friends and things like that, but no shaking hands, nothing. They would be behind the bars. In fact, they were so strict, say, for instance, you trying to think what to say, you know, you looking at him, they want to know that maybe you were making signs. There's nothing you can do about it. At least you're seeing the person you married. Quite a lot of women used to get there, you know, so we all were known as 'these are Robben Islanders' [laughs].

Tim, like Elsie, could only afford one visit. As she explains:

My salary was R65 a month. Going to Cape Town, airfare was R68. I had to live on that money that I earned. Sometimes Defense Aid wouldn't send study money because the chain was broken, they were late so I didn't get money for that year and Mac [Maharaj] would be writing me letters that I haven't arranged his study money.

Tim described the journey to Robben Island as

awful, awful because we used to have the wives of the wardens going or coming and they would take over the helm and rock the boat and scream in Afrikaans, *opgou julle, opgou julle*, ['throw up' or vomit] so that they wanted us all to make fools of ourselves by vomiting all over the place. They used to enjoy it and it wasn't like today's boats, it was like bloody fishing boats, you sat out on the front there, freezing with cold and getting wet with the spray, and it [Robben Island] was a shed where we went to and you visited and then you took the next boat back.

By the time Sunny got to Robben Island in the early 1970s, prisoners were allowed a monthly visit. Therese usually went once a year because of the cost. Each time she had to go through the cumbersome process of applying for a permit as Indians could not travel to other provinces in South Africa until 1973. Typically, she would

buy a ticket on account [credit], leave my children with the maid (domestic assistant) and fly over on a Friday to get there on a Saturday, morning visit for half-an-hour, stay over with Tony Wilcox – her husband Bobby was also Sunny's attorney – visit half an hour on a Sunday, and then fly back on Sunday evening to the children.

Several requests to the authorities to extend the time allowed (30 minutes) to out-of-town visitors were declined. Therese was also allowed one letter of 500 words per month, 'that was the limit and, of course, the letters are so heavily censored, sometimes

he'd [Sunny] come with a letter full of holes cut out, "window letter". Visitors had to converse with prisoners in

English, no vernacular because if you are going to talk in the vernacular during your visits, they'll get an interpreter, then they will stand behind him and one behind me and watch your face to see if you are giving any information.

Therese also found the boat journey very difficult but maintained enough energy to retain her dignity:

The first time I went, there was a guy waiting on top of the quayside and he says— first he wants the permit and then he looks at it and he says, oh hello Therese, you've come to visit Sunny. By then, you know, I hated them so I said, look, to you my name is Mrs Venkathratnum, we are not on first name terms, so please don't call me that. And he says, no, no, no, look, Venkathratnum is too difficult a word. I said, Sunny will be here for six years, you will learn to pronounce his name and until such time, I won't respond to you.

After each visit, Therese added:

I never cried – as much as I wanted to – but it's a hell of a thing, I didn't want him to see but it took me weeks to get over it and try to analyse what he said, how did he look, is he okay, look at his clothes – it used to really bother me a lot.

Sam visited Strini on Robben Island once a year. She also found the experience unpleasant as she was still under banning orders which meant that her movements were restricted:

Oh God, that was hectic. I had to report here [Durban], I had to go to Cape Town, I had to report there, I was under house arrest there. I could not leave the premises and they were there all the time. I would go on a Friday because the visit was Saturday and Sunday. Because there was no money, I would go once a year. My first visit was the most horrific. I really got ill, really, really. We sat underneath, there was this little stair. Generally, the guys, all these warders and their wives and all that used to be on the top and we had to go down a little stairway into the bottom section and those boats were not in a good condition – a wooden table kind of thing, wooden bench and they stored all their oil – tins of oil – and fuel, whatever, it was really fumes and all their big ropes and it's a really smelly, horrible position to be sitting under. Rough seas and you would be tossed and you had to hold on to the thing because, I mean, your biggest fear was what if you drowned because I never knew how to swim. I come out of the boat on that Saturday sick – puked and puked and puked the whole night. I had to do the next trip because I was never going to come back again for the year You go through so many things, you've signed at the police station, you've got to rush back, you've got to go back to the police station, get on the plane, get back home, get back to the police station, sign in, you know, that kind of thing, the stress under which you were.

The logistics of travelling presented many problems, as did the social problems that the women faced within the communities in which they lived.

Social problems

Fear in the community exacerbated the problems of activists' families. As Sam pointed out, people were afraid of employing anyone who was politically connected. Family and friends feared being seen with 'political' folk, according to Billy Nair, 'even visiting Elsie . . . so they kept their distance thinking that the world was now coming to an end'. Elsie concurs that the reaction of the 'community' compounded her situation:

It was so difficult when these people became scared of those that are involved Socially it was also difficult. I used to go to the bioscope sometime with friends but it was difficult because you have the families saying, 'see, their husband is in jail, now they are doing this and that,' was the talk. But you can't help it. Here, you were working hard to look after the man who's in jail and they want you just locked up in that house and stay there . . . you have to mix with friends, go out somewhere.

Elsie's problems were not only connected to the state's security structures. Even though she worked several shifts to supplement her financial income and support herself and Billy, she was scorned on the odd occasion when she decided to relax.

Tim faced similar problems from friends and relatives who were afraid of being connected to anyone involved in anti-apartheid activism:

The relatives, they crossed the road when they saw you in case they get painted . . . Once or twice poor old Omar Badsha [a well-known photo-journalist] used to come and take me to the cinema until somebody accused him of having an affair with me so he promptly disappeared from the scene. There was another friend Nanoo, he got me into the film society where he used to have these special films at Albert Cinema. But otherwise, just work and go home.

While some wives' experienced social ostracization, others have positive recollections of that period. Nina, for example, is grateful to her extended family as well as the local community in Pietermaritzburg. She mentioned one example to illustrate this:

One night my front door broke. Two old men came and they had had a drink. They put up the door. The door was crooked and I was quite mad. And then as I looked at it I said: No, it is crooked and I will remember their kindness with that crookedness for the rest of my life. The kindness that I was given as a person is impossible to relate, impossible, there was so much of care. It wasn't financial, it was just [that] I knew I was safe, that my children were not alienated, that we were not looked down upon.

Separations and personal relationships

The long separations affected personal relationships differently in each case. In the case of Sam and Tim, the outcome was strain between them and their partners, and both marriages eventually ended in divorce. We cannot second guess whether the outcome would have been different had it not been for the incarceration of partners, but the tension of separation, banning and periods of unemployment presented additional problems. When Sunny was due for release, although they had a 'very close relationship', Therese was worried 'how I was going to react or how he'll react after six years of being apart. It was a great worry for me that, can we accept each other again?' One of Therese's concern was that she had become 'very independent, very independent. That's what would worry me that I'm going to lose my independence but fortunately it didn't happen although it was very hard for the children to bond with him'.

Sunny was served with a banning order shortly after his release. As Therese points out,

so it was back to square one where I had to do everything for the kids, take them everywhere – Sunny can't go to the beach on a Sunday, can't go to the park, can't get visitors at home, can't answer the door if there's a knock. That went on for five years.

In 1988, Sunny was offered a scholarship by Columbia University and he and Theresa went to New York. While he undertook academic studies, Therese got a position as the Liaison Officer for the Amnesty Board of Directors until 1994. She described these as the most ‘fulfilling’ years of her life. When they returned to South Africa, Sunny joined the Political Science department at the University of Durban-Westville while Therese joined a legal firm in an administrative capacity. Therese died in Durban in 2012.

Elsie and Billy enjoyed a remarkable relationship that lasted almost half a century. When I interviewed them in 2008/2009, Billy was ailing and Elsie required frail care. Yet, the warmth was unmistakable. Elsie had no regrets that she and Billy had spent most of their married years apart:

I didn’t stop him from what he wanted to do. He did what he wanted to do, so I said, ‘you carry on if you think it’s going to help’, but it did make sense because he fought for the people. He fought for the struggle. Billy . . . wanted the country to be a country we all must live happy, doesn’t matter what race you are. South Africa must be open to all – those who [were] living in it. I think Billy and them were right. Wherever you live, you must look out for your country, build your country, having working places for the workers. Workers, when they work, they must be paid well. Billy and them handle those things, that was their job.

Billy Nair died in October 2008 and Elsie in January 2011. At Elsie Nair’s memorial service, then KwaZulu-Natal Premier, Dr Zweli Mkhize described her as ‘a woman of integrity and dignity who not only stood behind her husband fully but also a person who totally supported the struggles for a free and democratic South Africa’. Ebrahim Ismail, who served in Umkhonto with Billy Nair, said that Elsie was a wife who stood behind Billy. Elsie, he said,

never gave up on Muna (Billy Nair) despite his many years in jail, detention, and in the underground, She and hundreds of other wives and partners of political activists and leaders are the unsung heroines of the struggle. They supported their husbands even when the situation looked bleak. (Govender 2011)

Conclusion

This paper examined the lives of five women who were involved in various ways in the struggle against apartheid. That they were all married to men of Indian origin is due to the fact that they were interviewed for a project on the NIC and Dr Monty Naicker. It is not to detract from the fact that women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds suffered at the hands of the apartheid state. Their narratives must be located within the context of the auto/biographies of the increasing number of well-known women who are recording their experiences. A visit to the museum at Robben Island is bound to contain stories of their partners’ struggles but little or nothing about their partners who also suffered greatly. Examining such struggles will create a more inclusive narrative of anti-apartheid struggles.

These biographies are gendered. Women were positioned within the systems of multiple oppression and experienced race oppression as well as gender, class and other form of oppression. Political prisoners were, in Maya Rosenfeld’s terms, ‘present absentees’ (2004, 266). Their absence led to ‘changed gender and generational roles, in the concomitant changes in the interrelationships among family members, and in the forms of extrafamilial political and social contacts and activities that family

members pursue'. It was the women, under severe constraints, managed their partners', their own and their children's survival. They had no option but to normalize their lives by going out to work and taking care of domestic responsibilities such as nurturing and motherhood.

The sentiments of Ebrahim Ismail with regard to Elsie Nair point to the ways in which women were ideologically constructed as 'mothers', wives and heroines, which relegated their contributions to supportive roles and marginalized them in mainstream historiographies. This has devalued their contribution. The breakdown of several marriages as well as the impact on children, which included suicide in some instances (not named here out of respect for those involved), and estrangement from fathers because of years of separation, points to the deep impact of activism on families. This paper makes a small contribution in recognizing the multiple oppressions suffered by women and the multiple roles they played in the anti-apartheid struggle. Much more research needs to be done about women's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle, on the impact of long-term single parenthood, the plight of prisoners' children, relationships between parents and children, and other such issues.⁷ Gender should be included in all analyses of the anti-apartheid struggle and decolonization more generally, as well as in discussions of development in post-apartheid South Africa, not just as case studies but also as key part of one's analytical toolbox.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term Indian refers to persons of South Asian descent. Both under apartheid and in the post-apartheid period, official race categorization as well as everyday usage saw this group categorized or referred to as Indian. The other racial categories were/are White, Coloured and African (Black African in the post-apartheid period), with Asian used interchangeably with Indian. While employing these racial categories, the author accepts that race is a social construct.
2. Unless otherwise stated, the information is extracted from interviews with the women as referenced at the end of the paper. The semi-structured interviews focused on women's backgrounds, understanding of the relevance of the struggle, feelings about their involvement, development of their political understanding and the patterns of activism.
3. Initially the term Non-European was used to refer to Africans, Indians and Coloureds. The BCM rejected the term 'Non-European' as a negative of European and instead adopted the term Black.
4. The full names of Erasmus and Van Rensburg are not given.
5. The NEUM was founded by 'Trotskyist' activists in 1943. It aimed to build a united, black political front to overthrow the white minority government. The organization enjoyed major support among Coloureds in the Cape and some support among Africans in the Eastern Cape and Indians in Natal. Between 1946 and 1963, the NEUM published the *Torch* newspaper.
6. The nine were Saths Cooper, Terror Lekota, Muntu Myeza, Aubrey Mokoape, Nkwenkwe Vincent Nkomo, Pandelani Nefolovodhwe, Strini Moodley, Zitulele Cindi and Gilbert Sedeba.
7. An excellent study on the impact of 'political' parents on children is Slovo's (1997) memoir of her childhood. Her parents Joe Slovo and Ruth First were in the leadership of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and spent many years in exile. Gillian and her two sisters felt abandoned as their parents devoted themselves to the 'cause'.

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