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The Revolution Will Be Recognized: Black South African Women's Fight Against Patriarchy and Apartheid

Candace Lillie Bond
College of William and Mary

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The Revolution Will Be Recognized: *Black South African Women's Fight Against Patriarchy and Apartheid*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in **Interdisciplinary Studies** from
The College of William and Mary

By

Candace Lillie Bond

Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Leisa D. Meyer _____
Director

Robert Vinson _____

James D. La Fleur _____

Williamsburg, VA
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Preface

This thesis is personally significant because it tells the incredible story of how black South African women overcame traditional South African customs that viewed women as second class citizens, and white South African statutory laws that treated blacks as inferior, and black women in particular, as minors. This story is very similar to the struggles that African American women had to endure during slavery, reconstruction, and during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Throughout my life, I have been fortunate enough to listen to many strong African American women tell their personal accounts about enduring through various racial and gender related hardships. These stories have given me a sense of pride because I know that as a black woman, I belong to a long line of influential women who stopped at nothing to gain the many freedoms that I have often taken for granted. Apartheid ended only recently (1994) in South Africa. Therefore, the effects that the combination of black cultural traditions and apartheid had on black women have not yet been thoroughly investigated. This thesis examines these effects in relation to black South African women's struggles and resistances to the multiple forms of oppression they daily engaged.

INTRODUCTION

Voices of black South African women are often left out of historical accounts that describe the political and social workings of pre-colonial South African society, the apartheid regime, and the anti-apartheid resistance movement.¹ This absence symbolizes the historical silencing of women by traditional patriarchal indigenous South African society and the misogynist white South African government. During the anti-apartheid movement, indigenous South African women had to maneuver within two structurally patriarchal systems of power that men, both African and white, continuously fought to maintain through customary and statutory law. Indigenous African women are not adequately recognized for the struggles that they had to endure daily because of their race and gender because African women are members of the two most historically marginalized groups in South Africa: black Africans and women.

Scholarship on South African apartheid and the African anti-apartheid struggle tends to focus predominantly on the African male population because of the ways in which the migrant labor system simultaneously expanded the white South African economy while inhibiting African men's mobility, income, and social status. Apartheid affected women as well, but in distinct ways from men. Women had to adhere to a system that discriminated against them on account of their race and gender, thus apartheid and resistance to it must be viewed through a gendered lens. Black men resisted apartheid by forming top down organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC). Black women, on the other hand, resisted apartheid by

¹ I will be using the term "South Africa" throughout the rest of my thesis even though South Africa did not become an official state until after 1910. Before 1910 this area was officially known as the Cape Colony. Furthermore, when I discuss colonization and segregation I am strictly talking about the Cape Colony and many of the Africans I discuss in the resistance section do not have a distinct connection to the forms of colonization or slavery that I discuss in earlier sections. Also, when I use the term "African" I am referring to black South Africans.

undertaking grassroots efforts organized by the African National Congress Women's League. African women also organized across racial lines with Indian, white, and coloured women through the creation of the Federation of South African Women which was the most influential female dominated anti-apartheid organization during the 1950s. African women resisted apartheid for two primary reasons: in order to gain political and social rights and to change oppressive dynamics present in indigenous African society. Thus, African women involved themselves in the anti-apartheid resistance movement both to eradicate apartheid and to end sex discrimination within traditional black South African culture.

As early as 1652, white settlers, who hailed from Holland, began to enslave indigenous Africans, and the African population remained subordinate to whites until the end of the apartheid regime.² The Dutch did not claim an uninhabited land, and once in the Cape Colony, Dutch settlers enslaved the native population and formed a society based upon racial privilege. In 1804 the British gained control of the Cape Colony and throughout the twentieth century, a system more racially rigid eventually evolved into the racist institution known as apartheid. This regime negatively affected the lives of all non-white members of the South African population, especially blacks.

In an effort to control the African population in the Cape Colony, whites implemented racist discriminatory practices such as enslavement, segregation, and apartheid.³ However, the African population resisted these policies by fiercely upholding and refusing to eradicate certain

² Leonard Thompson. *The History of South Africa*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 33.

³ Colonization, slavery, segregation and apartheid were not rigidly distinct periods and all South Africans did not experience these institutions in the same way, I have separated them into categories strictly to emphasize how each institution furthered the oppression of African women.

indigenous South African customs, such as their customary form of governance. Chiefdoms were a patriarchal governance structure and maintaining this form of government ensured that African male leadership in South African culture continued.⁴ Chiefdoms excluded the political participation of women. Thus, indigenous sexist customs like chiefdoms historically oppressed African women before white settlers even entered South Africa. However, as soon as the Dutch arrived in South Africa, African women began to experience another form of oppression on account of their race. In fact, indigenous African society became more patriarchal the moment the Dutch entered. Therefore, starting in 1652, two layers of oppression challenged African women: patriarchal indigenous African society and a white invasion that eventually implemented apartheid.

The institution of apartheid negatively affected the lives of African women more than any other population in South Africa because it added another layer of oppression to the already present patriarchal indigenous African traditions that had historically subordinated women. During the 1940s and 1950s, African women simultaneously fought against both traditional African patriarchy and the white government-instituted apartheid in ways that enabled them to become leaders of the anti-apartheid movement. As shown during the resistance movement their fight against this “double oppression” gave them a unique perspective on the issue of apartheid and a much broader vision of equality than many of their male counterparts.

⁴ Ibid., 23.

SECTION I. *Indigenous South African Society,*

Patriarchy & Power

Recent scholarship recognizes that South Africa does in fact have a history before colonialism.⁵ In Winnie Mandela's autobiography, *Part of My Soul Went with Him*, she recalls her father teaching her South African history. He argued that South African history books were inaccurate because they only told history from the white Afrikaner perspective, but "the truth is: these white people invaded our country and stole the land from our grandfathers."⁶ It is also historically inaccurate to speak of only one native South African culture. In fact, there are many different groups present in South Africa, such as the Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho that have their own distinct traditions that predate Dutch Colonialism. Throughout my thesis when I use the term "indigenous African society" I do not intend to lessen the distinctions between the various African societies. I am instead analyzing each society's overarching communal traditions that descriptively link women to the domestic sphere, preventing them from achieving political or social autonomy.⁷

South African historian Leonard Thompson argues that "Indigenous black South Africans had their own communities with their own social customs"; they were "not a tabula rasa for white invaders or capitalists to civilize or to victimize."⁸ Thompson is thus suggesting that many of the indigenous African customs that were present during the era of Dutch-colonialism and apartheid were not directly produced by Dutch-colonialism. In fact, Dutch-colonialism

⁵ Thompson 1.

⁶ Mandela, Winnie. *Part of My Soul Went with Him*. New York: Norton & Company, 1984. (Edited by Anne Benjamin & Adapted by Mary Benson), 48.

⁷ Funso Afolayan. *Culture and Customs of South Africa*. (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 190.

⁸ Thompson 2.

intensified the indigenous African population's desire to uphold their own customs and traditions as a way to resist the ruling white supremacists.

Archeologists and historians have attempted to explore the history of indigenous South African peoples; however, it is challenging because most of pre-colonial South African history was not recorded in textual form. In fact, Leonard Thompson holds that "it was not until the twentieth century that many Africans began to write about their past."⁹ Instead, it was customary for Africans to render history orally through the art of storytelling.¹⁰

Indigenous South African cultures are not only and uniformly oppressive to women. Within African communities, for instance, it is predominantly women who are the storytellers, the ones who pass on normative cultural practices, the cultural reproducers.¹¹ Anthropologist Funso Afolayan explains that "Women, particularly grandmothers, were usually the storytellers motivated by a definite mandate to educate and instruct the young and old alike in the ways and lores of the group."¹² Throughout colonialism, slavery, segregation, and apartheid, it was the responsibility of African women, not men, to convey indigenous history and customs to new generations of Africans. Paradoxically, many of the cultural traditions that African women passed on often depicted men in positions of power and women in positions of subordination. In other words, women conveyed cultural traditions in an effort to uphold a sense of African community in the face of white invasion, but these cultural traditions often explicitly prohibited women from wielding formal political power. Thus, within South African communities, women held a form of power that ironically reinforced their position of lesser power relative to men.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Afolayan 213.

¹¹ Ibid., 90.

¹² Ibid.

Currently, African women continue to tell stories orally and textually and both forms should be studied in order to gain a fuller understanding of what life was like for African women during these periods. Laretta Ngcob's novel *And They Didn't Die* is a beautifully illustrated fictional account of rural black South African women protesting the apartheid state and African tradition from the 1950s through the 1980s. Literary scholar M. J. Daymond asserts that "in her work Ngcobo blends a celebration of the kind of 'strong, independent and silent' women who reared her with an analysis of the two interacting forms of power that control the Apartheid State and some aspects of Zulu custom."¹³ Fictional depictions of African society are important as resources because they can offer comment on and recall of South African history when other written materials are unavailable. Fiction and other popular cultural forms of texts are often used by scholars in various parts of the world, to address the histories and perspectives of women because their accounts have often been elided from historical narratives. In the U.S. for instance, according to literary theorist Kimberly Rae Connor, "In the nineteenth century, women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Rebecca Jackson, by formulating narratives of how black women had reckoned with the American scene, gave to African American women 'sacred stories'—paradigmatic forms wherewith they could comprehend their own reality and experience."¹⁴ In other words, fiction can be used to articulate the previously untold personal and communal experiences of African women that is absent from "official" historical records. It is especially important to consider fictional accounts by indigenous South African women

¹³ Laretta Ngcobo. *And They Didn't Die*. (New York: Feminist Press, 1999), 251.

¹⁴ Kimberly Rae Connor. *Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African-American Women*. (Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 9.

because writing novels was one of the only ways that they could share their perspective of South African history and resist the patriarchal society in which they lived.¹⁵

African scholar Funso Afolayan holds that pre-colonial indigenous South African society was considerably egalitarian or appreciably devoid of inequality.¹⁶ He even describes one of the earliest known groups, the San, as a culture not structured on a status based hierarchy.¹⁷

Immediately following Afolayan's assertion that pre-colonial South African society was devoid of inequality, however, he notes that such cultures *were* divided by gender.¹⁸ Afolayan's matter-of-fact mention of gender divisions in South African cultures, suggests that gender distinctions were intrinsic to pre-colonial indigenous South African society. I argue that these "traditional" gender divisions were the basis for female oppression in indigenous South African society.

The gender divisions that were present in pre-colonial South African society and are still very present in contemporary African society were, and are, about power. Since the pre-colonial period, indigenous women and men have performed tasks based upon their gender. This gender division was never equal, but hierarchical in the sense that women's tasks were subordinate to and less valued than men's.

Men were understood within South African culture as the primary providers for their families even though some women also farmed in order to contribute to the family. This male or masculine work of provision was initially defined by hunting in pre-colonial South African culture and then during the Dutch-colonial era, men's "providing" responsibilities were largely accomplished through their work as miners, and in contemporary South Africa men engage

¹⁵ Ngcobo 239.

¹⁶ Afolayan 26.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

predominantly in manufacturing jobs.¹⁹ Throughout these same periods women were responsible for the reproductive labor of cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, as well as collecting edible plants and tilling the fields.²⁰ It can also be assumed that women were responsible for preparing any of the meat that men killed while hunting. Markedly, women's responsibilities for maintaining their homes and caring for their children prevented them from operating too far outside of their homes and thus their interactions with other people were quite limited except for when they had to leave their homes to retrieve water or other nearby resources for their families.²¹ When women began to challenge the apartheid regime during the 1950s, they strategically used these water gathering interactions as routes to collective resistance.

Family was the most important pre-colonial South African unit.²² While family forms included parents and children, it was also customary for pre-colonial South Africans to be linked to kinship networks comprised of twenty to eighty people.²³ Among traditional South African cultures terms such as mother and father were not strictly biological; many people could represent one's father or mother.²⁴ As explained by Funso Afolayan, "A man calls anyone within his extended family old enough to be his father his *father*, instead of uncle; and anyone old enough to be his mother is called and treated as *mother*, instead of aunt."²⁵ Afolayan points out that "this phenomenon of multiple fatherhood has always been seen as a source of bafflement for white South African employers."²⁶ In other words, even when white's invaded the Cape Colony

¹⁹Afolayan 46-48.

²⁰Thompson 7.

²¹Ibid., 22.

²²Ibid., 7.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Afolayan 191.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

in 1652 and indigenous South Africans went to work for white employers, blacks still upheld their own social customs and did not completely accommodate to the white way of life.

Initiation Rituals:

Pre-colonial South African customs involving the teaching of children have influenced contemporary African communities and perpetuated the oppression of African women. For instance, in modern South Africa girls still learn how to perform tasks such as taking care of their younger siblings and housework at a young age.²⁷ Girls are also responsible for bringing cattle to the family at their marriage because it allows their birth families to contract new relationships with other lineages and families.²⁸ At the age of six, boys first began to interact with other boys and they often played competitive games with sticks.²⁹ Through playing games with other boys, “as well as bullying, teasing, and threats of punishment and ostracism, the ethos of courage, self-discipline, respect for elders and constituted authorities, generosity, resourcefulness, as well as leadership and management skills are cultivated and inculcated in the boys”³⁰ In addition, at a young age, boys learn the responsibilities of men of which providing was the most significant.³¹

Young girls and boys also learn about their specific gender’s responsibilities through ceremonial initiations. Boys and girls are taught by their elders of the same gender. For example, Nelson Mandela was initiated into manhood by his clan’s male elders.³² Similarly, girls are initiated by their female elders.³³ During initiation boys and girls both learn how to become

²⁷ Ibid., 194.

²⁸ Ibid .

²⁹ Afolayan 196.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 194.

³² Nelson Mandela 25.

³³ Afolayan 218.

normative men and women. As described by Afolayan, South African girls are taught “the importance of the woman’s role in the domestic spheres of marriage, childbearing, and farming.”³⁴ Furthermore, “while for the man the emphasis is on the ethos of courage and endurance, for the woman the focus is on humility and submission.”³⁵ Boys, in contrast, are taught to be leaders and protectors; they learn at a young age that they must provide for their female counterparts because women are to be subservient to them within South African culture.³⁶ Scholar Denise Kindschi Gosselin argues that “children are oriented early in life, according to their genders to either be victims or perpetrators: girls are taught to be passive and yielding to the ‘stronger’ male sex, whereas self-reliance or aggressiveness are male attributes that are unbecoming of females in the traditional sense.”³⁷ Thus, girls and boys learn very different gender roles at an early age and these gender roles are linked to the hierarchical (and unequal) positions they are to occupy in South African society as adults.

Girls are initiated upon the onset of their first menstrual cycle and “either alone or together with other girls undergoing the same transformation will be covered with a blanket and secluded in a special hut.”³⁸ Although many different indigenous South African groups have their own variations of initiation, in each, girls are “subjected to different forms of hardship, such as sitting for hours in icy water, eating unpalatable meals, being pinched and teased, and receiving considerable sexual instructions.”³⁹ This ritual usually concludes with a bath in the river.⁴⁰

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 196.

³⁷ Denise Kindschi Gosselin. *Heavy Hands: An Introduction to the Crimes of Domestic Violence*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 72.

³⁸ Funso 194.

³⁹ Funso 197.

⁴⁰ Ibid 197

Interestingly enough, young girls are purposely secluded from the rest of the society during their first menstruation. According to South African historian Sean Hanretta, within the Zulu state menstruation was seen as dangerous because it was a transitional time in which women were vulnerable.⁴¹ However, Zulu society was not necessarily concerned with the women's vulnerability for women's sake; instead, "it was believed that if a woman was disrupted during this sacred ritual the metaphorical gateway between the living and the 'other world' would open and the 'other world' could penetrate into daily life."⁴² In other words, if girls were not secluded during this ritual their power would pose a threat to their society.

Other scholars have also noted similar perceptions of menstruating women as dangerous to their culture. Historian Theda Perdue, for instance, writes of the Cherokee that "menstruating women, in particular, had great power, and men regarded them as dangerous; consequently, they kept their distance and knew nothing about the rites women performed to control and channel that power."⁴³ Within Cherokee culture, like the Zulu state described by Hanretta, women's power had to be contained; however there were also means for women to wield power and influence among the Cherokee that were not present in indigenous South African cultures. It must be remembered that indigenous South African society was patriarchal, so men ensured that young girls were secluded during this dangerous period because their power threatened the patriarchal structure of society. Since it was presumed that girls became possessed by the "other world" during menstruation, if girls were not secluded they might become more powerful than the highest ranked men. Thus, it seems possible that men secluded girls during their most

⁴¹ Sean Hanretta. "Women, Marginality and the Zulu State: Women's Institutions and Power in the Early Nineteenth Century." *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1998): 389-415, 396.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Theda Perdue. *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 4.

powerful period in order to ensure that they remained dominant and women continued to be their subordinates.

The initiation rites that boys undergo are very different from girls' initiation process. Nelson Mandela describes his Xhosa initiation in his autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom*. Mandela's initiation at age sixteen involved the practice of circumcision. According to Mandela, in "Xhosa tradition, an uncircumcised Xhosa man is a contradiction in terms, for he is not considered a man at all, but a boy. For the Xhosa people, circumcision represents the formal incorporation of males into society."⁴⁴ Mandela underwent this initiation with twenty-six other boys and they stayed in secluded lodges, isolated from society. They stayed in these huts for a few days before the ceremony, and during these nights they learned the ideal+s of manhood.

Nelson Mandela recounts that the

night before circumcision, there was a ceremony near our huts with singing and dancing. Women came from the nearby villages, and we danced to their singing and clapping. At dawn, when the stars were still in the sky, we began our preparations. We were escorted to the river to bathe in its cold waters, a ritual that signified our purification before the ceremony. The ceremony was at midday, and we were commanded to stand in a row in a clearing some distance from the river where a crowd of parents and relatives, including the regent, as well a handful of chiefs and counselors, had gathered. We were clad only in our blankets, and as the ceremony began, with drums pounding, we were ordered to sit on a blanket on the ground with our legs spread out in front of us. I was tense and anxious, uncertain of how I would react when the critical moment came. Flinching or crying out was a sign of weakness and stigmatized one's manhood. I was determined not to disgrace myself, the group, or my guardian. Circumcision is a trial of bravery and stoicism; no anesthetic is used; a man must suffer in silence.⁴⁵

Nelson Mandela successfully completed his initiation into manhood. Once the wounds of the initiated healed, they were coated in red ocher. Mandela recalls that "the tradition was that one should sleep with a woman, who later may become one's wife, and she rubs off the pigment with

⁴⁴ Nelson Mandela 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

her body.”⁴⁶ However, Mandela did not sleep with a woman and instead removed his red ocher himself.⁴⁷ That the final step of initiation includes sleeping with a woman could be interpreted in several ways. It might be positive because men learn the importance of marriage, but this final step could also be seen as oppressive to women because it was only tradition for each new man to *sleep* with a woman, and it was not tradition to marry them, it was just a possibility.

The Patriarchal Institution of Marriage:

Marriage was, and continues to be, a significant social institution within patriarchal indigenous South African society.⁴⁸ I argue that marriage is so highly regarded because men have historically used it to facilitate the oppression of women because once a woman marries she loses all rights and becomes the legal subordinate of her husband. In his work, Leonard Thompson describes marriages as accompanied by various rituals, dating as far back as the sixteenth century.⁴⁹ For example, when women marry they become “a subordinate outsider within their newly adopted homestead.”⁵⁰ In other words, marriage has historically functioned as a means of social control. In the words of Afolayan, “Among virtually all South Africa’s Bantu peoples marriage is the vital rite of passage toward social maturity. It is the ultimate goal to which every man and every woman must strive to reach. It is the only acceptable and appropriate status that every adult male or female must attain to be viewed with respect or honor in the community.”⁵¹ As long as women believe that they have to get married in order to become an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 29

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Afolayan 181.

⁴⁹ Thompson 23.

⁵⁰ Afolayan 203.

⁵¹ Ibid., 190.

accepted member of society, the patriarchal structure of marriage will continue to constrain their options.

During their marriage women are expected to live under the shadow and control of their husband and his extended family because the family's stability depends on the productivity and reproductively of the woman.⁵² The very day women stop performing household duties and plowing the fields at their fathers' houses, they move to performing the same tasks for their husbands' families. I contend that this patrivirilocal kinship system and women's subordinate status demonstrates women's relative powerlessness in South African culture. Funso Afolayan, however, does not believe that women's subordinate role was negative. He argues that "the women's subordination is a qualified one."⁵³ He goes on to explain that women actually "possessed a high degree of economic independence and autonomy, including real and major control over the agricultural process, obtaining and retaining access to their [women's] own productive land and the disposal of the yield of that land."⁵⁴ Although Afolayan is correct in his argument that women could have used their productive and reproductive abilities to their advantage, Funso Afolayan is still missing the point. Even when women were free to move about their homestead or free to retrieve water from a nearby stream, they were still maneuvering within a patriarchal society and the tasks that were ascribed to women were customary and not necessarily chosen, and of lesser value than those assigned to men. Inevitably, these rigidly defined gender roles filtered into the customs upheld by Africans during colonialism and apartheid and remained intact during the anti-apartheid resistance movement.

⁵² Ibid., 203.

⁵³ Afolayan 203.

⁵⁴ Afolayan 203.

Customarily, marriages were not just between a man and a woman, but between the family and kinship network of the groom and the family and kinship network of the bride.⁵⁵ Since women became the property of their husband at marriage, when a woman married, her husband, and his entire kinship network became intricately involved in her social network. This custom was still upheld during the twentieth century and remained intact during the anti-apartheid resistance movement as a way for men to monitor their wives daily activities and have influence over their wives' social networks. For instance, members of the ANC purposely chose Madie-Hall Zuma to be the first president of the African National Congress Women's League so that her husband, prominent ANC player, Jacob Zuma, and his social network, the ANC, could control the actions of the women's league.⁵⁶

Funso Afolayan explains three significant rituals that still occur among the Bantu-speaking people in contemporary South Africa that are continuations of pre-colonial marriage customs.⁵⁷ First, some Bantu-speaking cultures practice polygamy, but women were usually restricted to one husband. Thompson notes that wealthy men, usually chiefs, were able to be polygamous in the sixteenth century and an "exceptionally powerful chief might have as many as a hundred wives, one of whom was recognized as the 'great wife' and the mother of the heir."⁵⁸ Although polygamy was once preserved for the chiefs and elite men in African society, this practice was adopted by numerous men, regardless of their status, during the twentieth century. For example, during the migratory labor system, men used this traditional practice to their advantage and married women in the cities even though they still had wives in the reserves, which created a

⁵⁵ Thompson 23.

⁵⁶ Cherryl Walker. *Women and Resistance in South Africa*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982, 82.

⁵⁷ Afolayan 181.

⁵⁸ Thompson 23.

tension between African women in the reserves and in the cities. It is possible that African men intentionally practiced this tradition during apartheid in order to prevent black women from unionizing, and potentially increasing their autonomy in African society.

Another historical marriage tradition still present in African society that prohibits female agency is patrivirilocality, which simply means that the woman is required to join her husband after marriage, either at his homestead or at that of his father or brother. For example, in Laurretta Ngcobo's novel *And They Didn't Die*, which is set in apartheid South Africa during 1950s to the 1980s, the main character Jezile is required to leave her family to become a part of her husband's family.⁵⁹

In addition to these two oppressive rituals, marriage is not formally recognized by kin until after the transfer of the bridewealth or *lobola*, from the groom's family to the bride's.⁶⁰ In pre-colonial South African cultures through today, bridewealth has been important because it is the groom's way of compensating his future wife's parents for losing their daughter's help in the house and fields.⁶¹ In her autobiography, Winnie Mandela recalls following South African traditions when Nelson Mandela paid her father bridewealth to marry her, "Of course Nelson paid *lobola* for me; I never found out how much it was. It is not talked of in terms of money but in terms of cattle."⁶² Yet, she also describes her wedding as a mixture of a traditional and western style marriage. This mixture explained by Winnie Mandela shows that many traditional African customs that are oppressive to women, such as bridewealth, are still upheld in modern times.

⁵⁹Laurretta Ngcobo. *And They Didn't Die*. New York: Feminist Press, 1999, 56.

⁶⁰ Afolayan 182.

⁶¹ Ibid.,182.

⁶² Winnie Mandela 61.

Bridewealth is an oppressive customary practice because women are literally being traded between households as if they are cattle. Some scholars, notably Funso Afoyalan, argue that bridewealth is not oppressive and that it should be viewed positively because “in addition to establishing rights over the wife, bridewealth exchange legalizes the status of the woman’s children and their right to inheritance in their father’s house.”⁶³ In other words, Afoyalan is saying that bridewealth is not oppressive because it allows the man to gain full rights to his children in order to sustain the indigenous South African patrilineal system.⁶⁴ I argue in contrast that the rights bridewealth give to men are oppressive to women and mothers. Furthermore, the gift of *lobola* can be a factor in domestic violence against women because “this custom has the effect that the husband can consider his bride as his possession to use and abuse as he wants”⁶⁵ Psychologist Anna Elizabeth Van Der Hoven argues that a man can interpret the *lobola* to mean that he bought the right to treat his wife any way that he sees fit.⁶⁶ Ultimately, the exchange of bridewealth is oppressive to women because they must adhere to this custom if they want to marry and become honorable members of society.⁶⁷

Afolayan explains that the rights that a man receives from the bridewealth or *lobola* over his wife are twofold: he receives “rights over the woman as a wife (rights *uxorem*): the rights of sexual access which is now the exclusive preserve of her husband, his family and whoever they may designate or permit.”⁶⁸ This right is significant because as the husband gains this right [the right to have full control over his wife’s sexuality] the woman loses this right. Moreover, “a

⁶³ Afolayan 189.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 193.

⁶⁵ Anna Elizabeth Van der Hoven. “Perceptions of Domestic Violence in South Africa.” *Domestic Violence: A Global View*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002, 130.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Afolayan 183.

husband's rights *uxorem* includes his right to have control over all of his wife's labor and productive powers both domestically and in the fields."⁶⁹ Since this right was still upheld in African communities during the height of the migratory labor system in the early twentieth century, whenever married women migrated to the cities to find work, they could not independently earn wages because the money that they incurred from their jobs legally belonged to their husbands.

A husband's "second set of rights relate to a woman's procreative powers, and they are customarily termed *in genetricem* rights."⁷⁰ This right "gives the husband and his family legal control over all children born to the woman for as long as she is legally married to the man and this right can only be reversed through divorce, which usually involves the return of the bridewealth from the bride's family to the husbands."⁷¹ An example of the costs of divorce to some women is shown in Laurtta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* when Jezile's children are taken away from her. In this novel, the main character Jezile's husband Siyalo goes to prison for stealing milk from a white man's farm. While he is in prison, Jezile is left with the burden of raising her children alone. In African society, the children of a married couple legally belonged to the father and his family, not the mother.⁷² At the end of the novel, Jezile could only watch as her husband's clan entered her house "without saying one word to her; they did not falter in any way: custom was their guiding code—unyielding primeval adjudicators, administering primordial laws."⁷³ According to customary law, there was nothing that Jezile could do to keep her children, besides divorce, which Jezile did not even consider, and as a result, she was forced

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid..

⁷¹ Ibid., 182.

⁷² Ibid., 187.

⁷³ Ngcobo 226.

to just watch them leave. According to historian Harriet Sibisi divorce does not typically occur in indigenous South African society because women do not have any legal claim over their children.⁷⁴ Thus, if a woman divorces her husband, she automatically loses the rights to her children. Paradoxically, many women, such as Jezile, did not divorce their husbands, but still lost their children.

As shown by this example, children are a crucial aspect of marriage.⁷⁵ Afolayan explains, “Among the Bantu, marriage is not consummated until the birth of at least one child.”⁷⁶ African society considers childbearing to be the most crucial part of marriage because having a child ensures that the father’s lineage will continue in the future.⁷⁷ Since women can only reproduce children, childbirth should give women a sense of autonomy and power in black South African society. However, the patriarchal nature of black society prevents women from gaining any power because in this society the purpose of childbirth is to establish lineage, which is largely important for the sake of the child’s father’s clan because African society is patrilineal and not matrilineal.

The lineage system’s inequities structure the unequal power that women and men had in relation to marriage and their children. Although it is important for couples to have children, both girls and boys, it is even more crucial that couples have boys, because girls are not able to carry on the family name, and if there are not any male heirs, the family name will die.⁷⁸

Women can find power through childbirth simply because they are the only sex that has the capacity to give birth. In other words, women achieve power and agency through motherhood,

⁷⁴ Harriet Sibisi. “How African Women Cope with Migrant Labor in South Africa.” *Signs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change (Autumn 1997): 167-177, 168.

⁷⁵ Afolayan 194.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 187.

and they employed this power during the anti-apartheid resistance movement. However, childbirth is also a very complex practice because women are given the responsibility to birth children that will continue their husband's lineage, and not their own. African society has placed this responsibility on women, and if women do not have children, or do not produce a male heir, they are shamed. Barren women also fear that their inability to procreate will distance them from the larger patriarchal society because a woman's main role is defined through motherhood, and if a woman was not able to fulfill this duty, she has no place in society. For example, in the beginning of Ngcobo's novel, Jezile is looked down upon by her community because she was not able to conceive easily. Jezile discusses this pain throughout the beginning of the story "...no one really knew how deeply affected Jezile was by her failure to have a baby."⁷⁹ African women experience pressure to have children immediately after they enter into marriage. In one regard, a woman who had the ability to have children could find power and value through childbearing, but a woman who was not able to conceive became more powerless and less valued in her marriage.

As I have demonstrated throughout this section, many patriarchal pre-colonial indigenous South African customs were vigorously maintained by indigenous communities after colonialism, through apartheid, and even during the anti-apartheid resistance movement with the result that African men could maintain their superior status within African culture in relation to women. In the words of Leonard Thompson, "One cannot fathom the vigor of black resistance to the apartheid state without knowledge of pre-colonial African ideas about the social and economic obligations of rulers and rights of subjects and the basis of political legitimacy."⁸⁰ African men fought against apartheid, in part, to regain their pre-colonial customs. Dutch-

⁷⁹ Ngcobo 3.

⁸⁰ Thompson 2.

colonialism did not erode African traditions; instead, the white invaders enhanced the African male desire to uphold their own patriarchal rituals such as bridewealth and initiation rituals. Although governance, in the form of chiefdoms, was the most important indigenous South African custom that was upheld, in some ways this custom was also one of the most constraining of women considering that women were excluded from all formal governance activity.

Indigenous African Chiefdoms

During pre-colonialism and throughout the nineteenth century, the main form of governance in indigenous African society was in the form of chiefdoms that had one reigning chief.⁸¹ Chiefdoms were usually named after an ancestral figure such as the Xhosa and Zulu.⁸² The names of the chiefdoms remained the same throughout apartheid and even during the anti-apartheid struggle, and many contemporary native South Africans still refer to their chiefdom with a sense of pride and reverence. In Nelson Mandela's autobiography's opening sentence, he mentions his ancestral connection to the Thembu royal house and the Xhosa chiefdom.⁸³ Mandela then goes on to remark that his "father Gadla Henry Mphakanyiswa was a chief by both blood and custom."⁸⁴ The fact that Nelson Mandela opened his autobiography by clarifying his genealogy demonstrates the importance of ancestry and chiefdoms within African communities. With that said, it is important to recognize that women were not allowed to participate in leadership positions or the basic operations of chiefdoms. So perhaps, Nelson Mandela's early reference to the importance of chiefdoms reinforces the tradition of male led governments and organizations that exclude the participation of women.

⁸¹ Ibid., 25.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Nelson Mandela, 1.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1.

Historical chiefdoms were similarly structured to male-dominated organizations such as the ANC. According to historian Leonard Thompson, chiefs historically “met with their councilors, who were drawn from the heads of homesteads, regulated the affairs of his people, listened to complaints, settled disputes, and received visitors.”⁸⁵ Although Thompson does not make explicit that the councilors he is referring to were male, it can be inferred; due to the types of work prescribed for South African women, they were not able to spend much time away from their homesteads. Thus, the chiefdom was traditionally ruled by men because women’s work was focused on the area around their homes.⁸⁶

Furthermore, the fact that chiefdoms were predominantly ruled by men suggests that African women did not have access to decision-making roles in the government regime, unlike their male counterparts who were able to access the chiefdom with their concerns whenever they saw fit.⁸⁷ This is similar to the way the ANC operated. When the organization was initially established in 1912, women were not allowed to participate in the decision making process until they were ostensibly granted full membership status within the ANC and the right to vote in 1943.⁸⁸ In contrast, male members of the ANC had been able to voice their opinions since the organization was founded.

In another similarity between chiefdoms and anti-apartheid male-dominated organizations, there were many different official forms of relationships between chiefs and their male subjects, but there were no clear relationships between chiefs and their female subjects. For instance, “if a chief required public support for some enterprise or had important information to communicate, he would convene a meeting of his male subjects,” but the needs of women and their opinions

⁸⁵ Thompson 25.

⁸⁶ Walker 11.

⁸⁷ Thompson 25.

⁸⁸ Walker 89.

were rarely directly considered.⁸⁹ Similarly, the highest members of the ANC constantly asked their fellow male ANC members for support. However, they did not consult women, even after the ANC established an African National Congress Women's League that would supposedly give African women a voice within the larger ANC.

As one can see, indigenous South African society already excluded African women from involvement in traditional governance structures, and when whites began to settle in South Africa in the middle of the seventeenth century, their laws further pushed women into positions of inferiority in relation to governance and political involvement. In other words, Dutch colonialism added another layer of oppression to the already present oppression that African women faced on a daily basis in their own communities.

Section II. *The Second Layer of Oppression, Dutch Colonialism*

In 1652, Europeans established their first settlement at the Cape of Good Hope and changed the South African state forever. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela recalls one of his teachers in school, Chief Joyi, telling him

African people lived in relative peace until the coming of the *abelungu*, the white people, who arrived from across the sea with fire-breathing weapons. Once, he said, the Thembu, the Mpondo, the Xhosa, and the Zulu were all children of one father, and lived as brothers. The white man shattered the *abantu*, the fellowship, of the various tribes. The white man was hungry and greedy for land, and the black man shared the land with him as they shared the air and water; land was not for man to possess. But the white man took the land as you might seize another man's horse.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibid, 26.

⁹⁰Nelson Mandela 24.

Nelson Mandela mentions that Chief Joyi's "facts" about South African history were not always completely accurate, but he supported Chief Joyi's belief that there was more to South African history than was stated in a textbook.⁹¹

The first Dutch settlement was a slave holding society. The institution of slavery was officially implemented in South Africa in 1658 when the Dutch East India Company imported slaves from Dahomey and Angola. However, most slaves were imported from the West Indies. This settlement became rigidly stratified by race in its first decade.⁹² During the colonial period, "blacks were extracted from diverse native cultures and dispersed in small, mixed lots among many owners."⁹³ The Dutch actively separated Africans and completely disrupted their kinship networks in an effort to prevent slave unionization and slave rebellions. This method was similar to the system used by slaveholders in the United States. Many white slave owners believed that the best way to ensure that their slaves would not rebel was to weaken ties among African families by separating them. This approach to slavery in South Africa was the initial step in establishing a system that completely separated black people from one another and from whites and which would become a rigid system of apartheid in 1948.

African families were separated by gender specific labor activities. Men and boys often worked in the fields, while women and girls worked in the houses. Once slavery ended in South Africa, the migratory labor system began which furthered the physical separation of African families. Men often left their homes to find work in the cities, while women and their children remained at the homesteads.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., 25.

⁹² Thompson 36.

⁹³ Ibid., 52.

⁹⁴ Afolayan 204.

Although the migratory labor system was intended by white South African officials to cripple African communities, this separation of African families negatively affected African women more than African men. Women became solely responsible for their children, but because of indigenous black South African customary law, they still did not have ownership rights to their children. Most men were not present in the black South African townships, but they were still able to control their families through black customary law. Thus, when the Dutch entered the Cape, they oppressed Africans by separating their families, and they also solidified the oppression that African women already faced with regard to patriarchal African customary law. In other words, the Dutch simultaneously created a new form of oppression while solidifying an already present form, and together, both forms doubly bound African women.

In another effort to control the African population, the white South African government established a pass system in the 1790s.⁹⁵ This system required every African to have a pass if they wanted to travel out of their allotted town or chiefdom.⁹⁶ According to Sociologist William Redman Duggan, “Pass books resembled a comprehensive passport and included all vital statistics of each individual such as ones birth certificate, marriage or divorce actions, work history, driver’s license, and immunizations certificate.”⁹⁷ The first pass system was instituted in the 1790s during the colonial period, not during the apartheid era. Thus, when the ruling white Afrikaner government implemented the Population Registration Act in 1950, which classified

⁹⁵ Thompson 37.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ William Redman Duggan. *A Socioeconomic Profile of South Africa*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973, 22.

everyone according to race and forced everyone to carry a pass⁹⁸, this act simply reinforced the practices of the pass system that had been in place since slavery.⁹⁹

The legal basis of slavery in the Cape was a Roman-Dutch law in the Netherlands that prohibited slaves from marrying, having rights to their children, entering legal contracts, acquiring property, or leaving wills.¹⁰⁰ Ironically, with regard to the treatment and position of indigenous South African women, the Roman-Dutch law and indigenous black South African customary law both prevented women from having legal rights to their children. Therefore, the new addition of the Roman-Dutch law solidified the harsh realities that women faced daily, but it also placed African men in the same position as black women. In other words, colonialism challenged the normative masculinity of African men because it placed the entire black population, both men and women in positions of subservience. African men resisted colonial strictures undercutting their masculinity by fighting to maintain African traditions that oppressed women, which allowed African men to remain in positions of dominance within the African community during slavery.

In the Cape, just as in most other slave holding societies, the institution of slavery was upheld through “the fact and threat of violence.”¹⁰¹ Enslaved women especially experienced forms of violence from their white slave owners. It was common for white slave owners to sexually assault enslaved African women and many of these instances led to the birth of a child. In South Africa, when an enslaved woman bore a child the child would automatically become a slave. Although this circumstance was oppressive, within the Dutch slave system, this law also

⁹⁸ Funso 131.

⁹⁹ Helen Joseph, *Side by Side: The Autobiography of Helen Joseph*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1986, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Thompson 42.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

traced the lineage of children through their mothers whereas according to indigenous South African cultural traditions, the lineage was traced through the father's family and children belonged to their father.¹⁰² Thus, the cultural norms upheld in pre-colonial indigenous South African societies and those that the Dutch settlers upheld with regard to their slaves often contrasted with one another. This Dutch law was not specific to enslaved populations, but it applied to anyone who had a child outside of marriage.¹⁰³ According to scholar Kathleen Brown's book *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches & Anxious Patriarchs*, free Dutch society was patriarchal and in a marriage a child legally belonged to the father, but "children born outside of marriage not only lost his or her legal claim to the father's estate, but began life without a provider" and were not socially recognized.¹⁰⁴ This law extended to the illegitimate relationship that occurred between a white slave master and an enslaved African woman in order to insure the offspring of this relationship would have no claim to the Dutch father's estate and could not become a free member of Dutch society.¹⁰⁵ During colonialism and slavery the conflict between patriarchal African customs and racialized oppressive white customs began to force women to negotiate a double layer of oppression, which would inhibit the lives of African women through slavery, segregation, apartheid, and even the anti-apartheid movement.

Slavery was abolished in South Africa in 1834, but similar to the end of slavery in America, freed slaves in South Africa remained in poverty with little help from the white South African government.¹⁰⁶ Also, similar to the United States, the only jobs that were available to free Africans involved the same type of work that they had been performing during slavery. In

¹⁰² Harriet Sibisi. 168.

¹⁰³ Kathleen M. Brown. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 129.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁶ Thompson 60.

America, this meant that former slaves became sharecroppers often on the same plantation where they had been enslaved, while in South Africa, freed slaves often continued to work for their former masters for very meager compensation.¹⁰⁷ In another similarity, once slaves were freed in both societies, white leaders established legislation that would maintain a system of white racial supremacy. Segregation was a major method of maintaining white supremacy in both locations; in the U.S. this system was called Jim Crow, in South Africa it would eventually become known as apartheid.

Both systems separated indigenous Africans from whites in all public accommodations including housing. However, in the United States, this separation intensified the connection between African families because Africans were forced to live together in the same neighborhoods and African men and women usually looked for work from African employers whose offices were close to their place of residence. In contrast, in South Africa, indigenous African family members were already separated from one another because most African women still resided in chiefdoms in rural areas, while African men lived in the cities. When slavery ended and segregation began in South Africa, cities gradually became segregated by law, which made it more difficult for black women and their children to move to the cities where their husbands lived. The only place for African families to live together was in a growing section for African outside of the cities called shantytowns.¹⁰⁸ These towns were not the ideal place for a family to live, and most women chose to continue to reside with their children on their native reserves. The separation of African families placed more responsibility on African women

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ M. Bahati Kuumba. *Gender and Social Movements*. New York: AltaMira Press, 2002, 29.

because they had to perform their duties of motherhood while also working long hours in the field to support their families.¹⁰⁹

The Segregation Era

Segregation in South Africa is often referred to as petty apartheid and primarily occurred between the years 1880 through 1948.¹¹⁰ According to William Beinart and Saul Dubow, “Segregation was the name coined in early twentieth century South Africa for the set of government policies which sought to regulate the relationship between white and African colonizers and colonized.”¹¹¹ The most important piece of segregation legislation was the 1913 Natives Land Act.¹¹² This Act “prohibited Africans from purchasing or leasing land outside the reserves from people who were not Africans.”¹¹³ This Act also allowed the white government to legally separate African and white people by forcing Africans to live in the native reserves (another term for native South African chiefdoms).¹¹⁴ As historian Robert Vinson explains, this Act “divided the ownership of land between whites and blacks. Eighty-seven percent of the land belonged to the twenty percent of whites, and seventy-five percent of blacks were only given thirteen percent of the land.”¹¹⁵ The land that white leaders “gave” Africans was largely unsustainable and African families eventually fell into extreme poverty.¹¹⁶ The white government never intended for the African reserves to be self-sustaining. Instead, the “reserves

¹⁰⁹ Thompson 156.

¹¹⁰ Robert Vinson, “South African Segregation” (Lecture, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, September 10, 2008).

¹¹¹ William Beinart and Saul Dubow. *Segregation and Apartheid: in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. London: Routledge, 1995, 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹³ Thompson 163.

¹¹⁴ Beinart & Debow, 4

¹¹⁵ Robert Vinson, “Egoli” (Lecture, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, September 5, 2008).

¹¹⁶ Thompson 164.

were being transformed into reservoirs of cheap, unskilled labor for white farmers and industrialists, and by 1936, almost every African man with a home in the reserve went out to work on a white farm or in a white town at some stage in life” in order to provide for his family.¹¹⁷ African men’s need to leave their homesteads and move to the cities to find work led to the creation of the migratory labor system. As African men left their homes, many African women remained on the homesteads with the responsibility of performing their traditional reproductive and agricultural labor while also taking on the jobs that their husbands, brothers, or fathers left behind.¹¹⁸

The Migratory Labor System

The migratory labor system describes the massive migration of African men and women into the cities. The migratory labor system is a phrase that scholars, such as Leonard Thompson and David Massey, use to describe the migration of African men from the native reserves into urban centers. According to David Massey, this system officially started in 1886 when the white South African government recognized its need for African male labor in South Africa’s newly discovered gold mines outside of urban areas like Johannesburg.¹¹⁹ The migratory labor system did encapsulate the migration of African males to the cities, but this was not the only form of migration present during the migratory labor system. For instance, all men did not migrate to the cities. Some African men continued to work in the rural areas on white farms as farmhands.¹²⁰ Furthermore, some African women also migrated to cities to seek employment, gain

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 156.

¹¹⁹ David Massey. "Class Struggle and Migrant Labor in South African Gold Mines" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 17, No. 3. Published by: Canadian Association of African Studies, 430.

¹²⁰ Ngcobo 143.

independence and to leave behind African patriarchal customs.¹²¹ Once in the cities, African women usually worked as domestic servants in the homes of white South Africans or in textile or canning factories.¹²²

African women experienced subordination and exploitation in both forms of employment. According to feminist scholar Jennifer Fish, “In South Africa’s history, domestic labor reinforced the overarching ideology of apartheid throughout daily interactions in the private household sphere.”¹²³ In other words, the interracial interactions of whites and Africans within white owned domestic spaces were simply manifestations in microcosm of the larger institution of apartheid. African women, for instance, often experienced sexual assault while performing domestic service jobs. In Laretta Ngcobo’s novel, the main character Jezile is raped by her white boss while she is working as a live-in domestic servant in the city of Durban.¹²⁴ After experiencing rape, Jezile becomes very concerned about returning home to Sigageni. As the “dawn broke, the thought of telling her community back in Sigageni about her bitter experience filled her with shame. She was no longer so sure of their sympathy and understanding. Any other misfortune but this. They would never understand this. Something in her could not face it. Rape is a burden to its own victim.”¹²⁵ Even though many African women experienced some type of sexual assault at the hands of white men, African women’s work in white homes also enabled African women to see the inequities in the ways whites lived in comparison to Africans, which helped fuel African women’s desire to resist apartheid.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Kuumba 30.

¹²² Ibid., 42

¹²³ Jennifer Fish. "Organising from Private Spaces: Domestic Labour in South African Civil Society." *Women's Activism in South Africa: Working Across Divides* (2009): 124-54, 125.

¹²⁴ Ngcobo 201.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 205

¹²⁶ Walker 15.

African women also experienced subjugation while performing factory work. Most factories were overseen by white employers who treated African women like minimum-wage-earning slaves. However, their labor in factories also allowed African women to become acquainted with union campaigns and labor organizations. Trade unions “were the only arenas that working women could come together to talk about similar grievances.”¹²⁷ Additionally, as explained by Cherryl Walker, “Trade unions were a training ground for a new form of leaders—working women who rose to leadership positions within their union and who from there were frequently drawn to a wider political involvement.”¹²⁸ The increasing numbers of women moving to the cities in the 1930s, and the networks that women created there would manifest themselves during the anti-apartheid resistance movement of the 1950s.

Whether men or women migrated to the cities, the migrant labor system itself negatively affected the lives of all Africans because it became a way for the white government to purposely divide African family units. Kinship networks were one of the most important aspects of indigenous South African society. The white government recognized this and used this knowledge as a way to subordinate the African population further and prevent the possibility of an African uprising. Africans fought against governmental separation of their families. In fact, some African leaders called for a separation from whites as a way to uphold their own traditions. According to William Beinart and Saul Dubow

Attempts by rural based African population to defend their old ways of life were not segregationist in the sense that whites understood the term. But these could be compatible with elements of segregation in certain respects—as an expression of their own separate identity, as a means to retain some control over their residual land, or as an expression of popular support for chiefs.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Beinart & Dubow 10.

Even though some African communities resisted, however, chiefdoms were still officially overseen by the white government, with the “ultimate authority” being the white magistrate.

Still, the white magistrate depended on the cooperation of African chiefs to do his job.¹³⁰

Therefore, although the white government was officially in charge, Africans communities were still able to maintain a degree of power because if they choose not to cooperate with the

government, the government was unable to work effectively. In his autobiography, Nelson

Mandela describes an instance when his father, an African chief, defied the white magistrate in

1918.¹³¹

One day one of my father’s subjects lodged a complaint against him involving an ox that had strayed from its owner. The magistrate accordingly sent a message ordering my father to appear before him. When my father received the summons, he sent back the following reply: “*Andizi, ndisaqula*” (I will not come, I am still girding for battle).¹³²

Mandela’s father’s response was “not acceptable to the white magistrate, who charged

Mandela’s father with insubordination and deposed him” which ended the Mandela family

chieftainship.¹³³ If Mandela’s father had not been deposed, Mandela would have ascended the

Thembu throne and might not have become the social activist that we know today.

When African men moved to the cities, they often left their wives at home. The migratory

labor system facilitated the beginning of a new sexual division of labor within African South

African communities which remained throughout the apartheid era. This new division of labor

was characterized by men providing productive labor in the cities and women providing both

productive and reproductive labor in the reserves.¹³⁴ While both women and men performed

productive labor, men in the cities engaged in waged labor, whereas women in the reserves

¹³⁰ Thompson 172.

¹³¹ Nelson Mandela 7.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Beinart & Dubow 138.

engaged in unwaged productive and reproductive labor.¹³⁵ As a result of this difference, women's work was less valued, by their African male counterparts and by the white South African government. The fact that women's work was considered to be of lesser value than men's is symbolic of the inequalities of the sexual division of labor, and ultimately the migratory labor system. Feminist scholar Cheryl Walker argues that the "sexual division between men and women...is the fundamental contradiction in society and the source of their oppression as women; the removal of this division is thus the key task in the emancipation of women."¹³⁶ Yes, the inequities of this new sexual division of labor further oppressed African women, but these inequities were not the sole cause of female oppression. African society was oppressive for women before the new sexual division of labor caused by the migratory labor system even began. This new sexual division of labor actually benefited women because it allowed women to create networks with the other women who remained in the reserves, and these networks were utilized during the anti-apartheid movement.

During the Apartheid period there was a geographical and physical separation between the sexes; women and men rarely interacted with one another and even married couples only saw one another once a year.¹³⁷ Nonetheless, even though women and men's roles were very distinct from one another, each gender's role reinforced that of the other. In other words, women lived in the reserves and were primarily responsible for reproducing offspring, but the children that they were producing were the future African labor force. In the words of sociologist M. Bahati Kuumba, "The unpaid reproductive labor of African women subsidized the South African

¹³⁵ Kuumba 31.

¹³⁶ Walker 1.

¹³⁷ Ngcobo 4.

economy by facilitating the existence of an underpaid urban male labor force.”¹³⁸ Thus, even though physically separated, the African community still affected one another. Furthermore, as a result of the migratory labor system, men and women utilized their already created networks and organized separately during the anti-apartheid movement. Although African men and women were organizing for the same overarching cause, these gender specific approaches to resistance allowed women to call for liberation from both the white government their patriarchal African society.

The Apartheid Era

Segregation remained the de facto law of the land in South Africa until 1948. In that year, the National Party officially implemented the apartheid regime. According to scholar Makau Mutua, “In 1948 the Nationalist Party, the Afrikaner political flagship, won the primarily white election and thereafter used state institutions to give preferential treatment to whites, primarily Afrikaners, in virtually all areas of political, social, and economic life.”¹³⁹ The term apartheid literally means apartness, and this term was chosen by the Afrikaner government to dictate the physical separation of the four main races of South Africa: white, black, colored and Indian.¹⁴⁰

The Afrikaner government had four main intentions when they gained control of the nation.

First, the population of South Africa comprised four “racial groups”—White, Colored, Indians, and Africans—each with its own inherent culture. Second, Whites, as the civilized race, were entitled to have absolute control over the state. Third, White interests should prevail over black interests; the state was not obliged to provide equal facilities for the subordinate races. Fourth, the white racial group formed a single nation, with Afrikaans—and English-speaking components, while Africans belonged to several

¹³⁸ Kuumba 31.

¹³⁹ Makau Mutua. *Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, 130.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 131.

(eventually ten) distinct nations or potential nations—a formula that made the white nation the largest in the country.¹⁴¹

Notably, the fourth goal allowed the National Party to solidify the physical separation of black Africans and whites by creating ten distinct areas of residence for blacks. This process actually began a few decades before the start of the official apartheid era with the passage of the 1913 Natives Land Act.¹⁴² According to Makau Mutua, “this act officially started the systematic dispossession of land of Africans.”¹⁴³ This inequitable land distribution detrimentally affected the lives of every African. Not only were blacks given a small portion of land, they were also given land that could not properly be used for agricultural purposes such as growing food. Furthermore, there was not an adequate water supply in the Bantustans, and many women such as Dora Tamana, who was a leading member of the African National Congress Women’s League and the Federation of South African Women, had to walk a half a mile everyday of their childhood to collect water for their families.¹⁴⁴

Cherryl Walker describes Dora Tamana’s childhood in the reserves in order to expose the harsh realities of these areas. Dora was raised in a community called Hlobo, one of many communities in the Transkei, which was one of the ten native reserves. The nearest town was a three to four hour walk away and the closest store was an hour’s walk.¹⁴⁵ According to Walker, “In Hlobo there were no buses and such roads as there were extremely rough, the modern medical facilities were non-existent, and there was only a two-room mission school which catered up to standard 6.”¹⁴⁶ Reserve women, such as Dora, only worked in and around their

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Walker 13.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

homes, and knew little about the outside world.¹⁴⁷ The fact that women lacked mobility was oppressive. However, the Natives Lands Act gave African women some power and independence because it established women as the heads of their households.¹⁴⁸ According to Cheryl Walker, “In the reserves women were being obliged to assume an increasing degree of *de facto*, if not *de jure*, responsibility and authority as heads of their households.”¹⁴⁹ Women’s newfound position changed the traditional African family structure and ultimately challenged the conventional masculinity of African men.¹⁵⁰ A possible result of this challenge was that during the anti-apartheid movement black men rarely included the opinions of black women. This reluctance to consult black women could be read as an effort by black men to gain back their power over their female counterparts. Despite these challenges, however, the reserves were still entrenched with patriarchy, and even if a woman became the head of her home, she could still be overruled by a male chief.

Indigenous African chiefdoms also changed during the apartheid era. According to the 1951 Bantu Authorities Act and the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, African chiefs were no longer able to reign freely.¹⁵¹ Instead, the white government employed African chiefs and they became just another branch of the white civil service.¹⁵² Because the reserves were already governed by a patriarchal African chiefdom when the white government gained control over the reserves, it added another layer of subordination to the already present oppressive structure. Thus, these laws placed black South African women underneath an institutionalized double layer of oppression.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵⁰ Mutua 201.

¹⁵¹ Beinart & Dubow 17.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Acts implemented during the apartheid era reinforced the double layer of oppression that black South African women experienced. Makua Mutua's asserts that "under apartheid, the negative consequences of all the discriminatory and exclusionary laws and policies that governed all black Africans, male and female, were more acute for African women in all sectors of society."¹⁵³ This was the case primarily because African women resided beneath two different laws: tribal law and Roman-Dutch law.¹⁵⁴ Although both systems were patriarchal, Cherryl Walker argues that black South African customary law was the harsher of the two with regard to the restrictions that it placed upon black South African women.¹⁵⁵ For instance, according to Roman-Dutch law, women became minors after marriage, but customary law always considered women as minors whether or not they were married.¹⁵⁶ The white government recognized the harshness of black customary law and used these principles of female subordination when drafting its apartheid legislation.

In 1950, the Afrikaner government passed the Groups Areas Act which furthered the dispossession of black land. This act permanently segregated racial groups into different areas, otherwise known as Bantustans. Theoretically, the white government separated blacks into Bantustans for two reasons. First, legally establishing a separate living space for indigenous Africans insured that whites and blacks would not be living in the same areas. Second, and more importantly, the government established ten different Bantustans, instead of just establishing one large place for indigenous Africans to live, in an effort to separate Africans from one another. The white government believed that if they separated indigenous South Africans they would not be able to unionize and revolt against the apartheid state.

¹⁵³ Mutua 144.

¹⁵⁴ Walker 17.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

While the creation of the Bantustans further separated African families there were some African women who still managed to move from the Bantustans to urban areas. African women began to move to the cities in increasing numbers in the early eighteenth century in an attempt to leave behind indigenous African patriarchal customs.¹⁵⁷ However, African women's moves were not able to completely remove them from a patriarchal society because white South African urban society was also patriarchal. In reality, African women were moving from one patriarchal system to another.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, "in the early 1920s there were not yet any restrictions, in the form of passes, on the mobility of African women largely because their townward migration was on so small a scale."¹⁵⁹ African women were usually prohibited from living with African men in the cities, mostly because men lived in same sex dormitories owned by their employers.¹⁶⁰ As a result, African women were forced to live in squatter camps along the margins of the urban areas.¹⁶¹ These camps were a place that women from various Bantustans could come together in a way that was not possible in the rural areas. Together, African suburban and urban women created a unique network that they utilized during the resistance movement.

This urban-suburban network was very distinct from the networks that rural women created. While rural women organized around watering holes, urban women met one another around metaphorical watering holes such as grocery stores and church meetings. As a result of the different organizing rituals of rural and urban women, there was tension between these two groups of women during the resistance movement. For instance, women in the urban areas were

¹⁵⁷ Walker 14.

¹⁵⁸ Kuumba 30.

¹⁵⁹ Walker 14.

¹⁶⁰ Baruch Hirson, "The Economic Background to South Africa" Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line: Revolutionary History: Volume 4, No. 4. (2009)

<<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol4/no4/hirson01.htm>>

¹⁶¹ Kuumba 30.

more independent and entrepreneurial than rural women because urban women were farther removed from the enforcement of African South African customary law. As argued by Funso Afolayan, “Women with a high sense of initiative, self-reliance, and resourcefulness strove to create a new world of economic independence and autonomy free from the state, the church, and from African men by engaging in the controversial but profitably world of illicit beer brewing.”¹⁶² Beer brewing enabled women to both earn a living and create links to other women that they would utilize during the resistance movement. Eventually, the apartheid government declared beer breweries to be illegal in order to make it difficult for women to find work in shantytowns and in the cities because the government feared that urban female financial stability would lead to the establishment of stable and permanent African families in the cities.¹⁶³

The white government also established the Abolition of Passes and Documentation Act in 1952 in order to hinder the migration of African women to the cities.¹⁶⁴ According to historian Alistair Boddy-Evans this act “repealed early laws, which differed from province to province, relating to the carrying of passes by African male workers and instead required *all* African persons over the age of 16 in *all* provinces to carry a 'reference book' at *all* times.”¹⁶⁵ Now that African women had to carry passes, they were forced to remain in the reserves underneath a mixture of oppressive African customary law and Roman-Dutch law. Notably, this Act was the first piece of legislation directed solely toward the African female population. Fortunately,

¹⁶² Afolayan 205.

¹⁶³ Kuumba 72.

¹⁶⁴ Walker 126.

¹⁶⁵ Alistair Boddy-Evans. Blacks (Abolition of Passes and Co-ordination of Documents) Act No 67 of 1952. About.com. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.

<<http://africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheidlaws/g/No67of52.htm>>

African women recognized this direct attack and immediately began to mobilize together to fight the apartheid regime by utilizing their rural and urban networks.

Section III. *Resisting Two Layers of Oppression,* The Anti-Apartheid Movement

The anti-apartheid movement and efforts to overthrow apartheid did not start in a particular year. In fact, Africans had been fighting the white supremacist rationale for apartheid (officially implemented in 1948), and the prejudices and inequalities that it represented, since the moment that the Dutch landed in South Africa in 1652. Beginning that year, black South Africans became the lesser race in the nation of their birth, and *all* African people, both men and women, have been resisting the white colonial authority and its legacies ever since.

African resistance took multiple forms and targeted multiple oppressors. In other words, there was not one form of resistance present during the resistance movement. African female involvement in the resistance movement, for instance, was different than their African male counterparts because women simultaneously fought two separate and mutually reinforcing layers of oppression: the apartheid regime and indigenous African patriarchal societal customs. Although women had been organizing since the eighteenth century, the conditions of the anti-apartheid movement created a space for women to expand their struggles. Women's resistance to apartheid was also more complicated than men's because women were physically separated from one another because of the migratory labor system—some women remained in the native reserves while other women lived in urban areas. This physical separation created a rift between these distinct African female populations, which facilitated the growth of two separate female

networks that did not typically communicate with one another.¹⁶⁶ Both groups of women fought against the patriarchal characteristics of African society and white implemented apartheid by focusing on similar overarching forms of oppression, such as pass laws; however, rural and urban women utilized different methods to resist these two regimes based upon their distinct regional and geographic locations.

The requirements and constraints of the pass system affected all African women regardless of region of residence. In the words of Helen Joseph, “The very word ‘pass’ strikes horror into the hearts and minds of the African people, for the pass controls every aspect of their lives, houses, work ,movement and the penalty for failure to produce a pass on demand is immediate arrest.”¹⁶⁷ Since the late eighteenth century, the white South African government only required African men to carry passes as a way for white government officials to monitor the influx of African men into cities because of the migratory labor system.¹⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the government required African women in certain parts of South Africa to carry passes decades before the Abolition of Passes Act in 1952, which established the pass requirement that *all* Africans over the age of eighteen carry passes regardless of gender.¹⁶⁹ For instance, the Orange Free State extended pass requirements to women in the year 1910.¹⁷⁰ As a result, the women of the Orange Free State immediately organized to fight the pass laws. They argued that “nowhere else were women subject to such regulations, and by imposing on women the risk of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, passes directly threatened the well being of the family.”¹⁷¹ In addition, “if mothers were taken off to gaol for falling foul of the pass laws, children would be neglected

¹⁶⁶ Walker 162.

¹⁶⁷ Joseph 14.

¹⁶⁸ Kuumba 60.

¹⁶⁹ Walker 126.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

and the family would suffer.”¹⁷² If women went to jail then children would not be cared for properly. This protest was one of the earliest examples of public discontent expressed by African women in modern South Africa. The Orange Free State women also created a method of organizing around motherhood. According to sociologist M. Bahati Kuumba, “The ‘motherist frame’ is a justification for social action based on the mothering attributes of nurturance and responsibility for the family that are part of the construction of womanhood.”¹⁷³ Notably, this motherist platform would be utilized in the coming years of anti-apartheid resistance by both rural and urban women.¹⁷⁴

Rural women played an important role in the resistance movement even though this group of women is the least talked about in scholarship. Many scholars, feminists included, have focused on urban female resistance, some doing so because they are urban themselves. In fact, rural resistance was more complicated and more difficult to organize because rural women were less autonomous and mobile than their urban female counterparts.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, rural women resided closer to and lived more fully within and under traditional oppressive African patriarchal customs. According to Cherryl Walker, statutory and customary laws were “both increasingly patriarchal, but customary law was the far harsher of the two” to resist.¹⁷⁶

Lauetta Ngcobo is one of the first African feminist writers to make visible the importance of rural women’s organizing to the larger resistance movement. As literary scholar M. J. Daymond notes, “Ngcobo is to be celebrated as the first South African woman writer to have demonstrated the ways in which a African rural woman’s story, her actions and her

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Kuumba 63.

¹⁷⁴ Walker 26.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 18.

consciousness, is both a powerful register of events and a means of shaping a people's understanding of national issues."¹⁷⁷ Ngcobo, through her novel, seeks to draw readers' attention to the double layer of oppression, with regard to patriarchal traditional African culture and the oppressive white governmental regime that rural African women faced and resisted between the years 1950 to 1980. Through characters like rural African women, white government officials, and her protagonist Jezile Majolo, she makes visible the particular types of female action that have been elided by the scholarly focus on African men's "heroic" resistance that has become the standard narrative of African resistance to apartheid. Furthermore, Ngcobo sheds light on the often omitted or disregarded physical and ideological divisions that occurred between rural and urban women during the resistance movement. While the events of her novel *And They Didn't Die* occur between the years 1950 to 1980, the reserve that Ngcobo talks about in her novel is not necessarily supposed to be representative of all black South African reserves.¹⁷⁸ Instead, Ngcobo uses the reserve Sigageni as a detailed and substantive example of female rural resistance.

Ngcobo opens her novel with an illustration of rural resistance. In the first paragraph, the African women of Sigageni have tipped over the dipping tank in protest of its use by the white government. The term dipping "means that cattle are made to swim through a tank filled with disinfectant which protects them against numerous diseases."¹⁷⁹ However, during this process, white government officials would "cull or destroy the cattle that were judged too numerous for the meager land on which they had to graze, and because this was done at the tanks during the compulsory dipping of herds, country women protested against the loss of their wealth and their

¹⁷⁷ Margaret J. Daymond. *Afterward to And They Didn't Die*. By Laretta Ngcobo. (New York: Feminist Press), 1999, 247-273.

¹⁷⁸ Ngcobo 252.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

livelihood by smashing these tanks.”¹⁸⁰ In response to this protest, the white official in charge of the dipping tank thinks to himself, “What do dipping tanks have to do with clinics and doctors and starving children? The government is doing everything for them, and they deliberately wreck it—they accept nothing that is done for their own good, no appreciation, no understanding at all—how can anyone teach them to think!”¹⁸¹ Ngcobo highlights the thoughts of this white official as representative of the approach of many white South African’s that rationalized everything African women did, such as killing cattle so that there could be fewer cattle to compete over grass, as beneficial and not detrimental to Africans. This belief resulted from the paternalistic divine right ideology that European colonialist’s used to justify the enslavement and continuing oppression of Africans.¹⁸² Simply put, Europeans believed that God gave them the divine right to colonize Africa. As described by Winnie Mandela in *Part of My Soul Went with Him*, “the white man came with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other; he gave the black man the Bible while taking his land... And while the white man was enjoying this heaven on earth, he wanted us to believe we would have our share of the fat of the land in the next world.”¹⁸³ Ngcobo uses the thoughts of the white official to illustrate that the divine right ideology was still present during the 1950s apartheid era.

Importantly, Ngcobo depicts the women protesting the dipping tanks as fearless. She writes,

The white official looked up, He saw them. A group of about seven women approaching nonchalantly, with hoes slung over their shoulders. They were going to pass him by as though they had not seen him. He could hear the rhythmic muffled sound of the earth under their measured steps. The women looked away from the slippery contents of the tank spewed everywhere around it. He stood up quickly, flushed and furious at the sight

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 264.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁸² Thompson 43.

¹⁸³ Winnie Mandela 123.

of them. He could have stopped them, but he did not—he went on cursing inside. “These women, this strange breed of womanhood, thin and ragged and not like women at all—they think they rule the world, they herd cattle, they plough fields, they run this community. That’s what it is; that’s why this defiance—they’ve lost respect for manhood, for all authority, but they haven’t got the sense to do it properly. In the absence of their husbands they’ve lost the need for men, if nobody stops them, they’re going to ruin this country. In spite of what others think, it is these women we have got to deal with, not those far away men in the cities.”¹⁸⁴

Through this fictional character Ngcobo draws our attention to the white South African government’s belief that the resistance performed by African women in the rural areas, such as overthrowing the dipping tank, provided evidence for their presumption that African women were not really women at all, and as a result African women did not deserve the same treatment or protections that white women could claim. Ngcobo uses her novel to shed light on and make visible protests engineered and carried out by rural women. Rural women tip over the dipping tanks multiple times throughout the novel and through her focus on this example Ngcobo suggests that these protestors are showing the white government that they could not be stopped.

Lauretta Ngcobo’s novel *And They Didn’t Die* also illustrates rural women using the networks that they created in their daily lives to organize. For example, the women of the Sigageni reserve met every Thursday to discuss political issues, such as the impact of the pass laws, which were salient to their position as rural women.¹⁸⁵ Collectively the women of Sigageni decided to not accept passes in defiance of the apartheid government and the women who already had passes publically burned them in front of white officials in protest.¹⁸⁶ Rural women fought pass laws by using a motherist framework. This method of resistance, which is often called maternalism, has been used by activists in various social movements around the world. According to American historian Linda Gordon “Historically, putting children first arose with

¹⁸⁴ Ngcobo 2.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 79.

putting forward motherhood as women's claim to respect and power. The dominant form of this construction among activists was what some called 'maternalism,' and this too took a variety of historical and political forms."¹⁸⁷ For instance, many women shared the belief that "women's work, experience, and/or destiny as mothers made them uniquely able to lead campaigns" for social justice.¹⁸⁸ African female activists shared this belief during the resistance movement and by using a metaphor that African South African society and the government both supported rural women were able to simultaneously challenge the conventions of both systems.

A maternalist approach was used by women, such as Ngcobo's protagonist Jezile Majolo, who engaged in pass protests and told themselves that "it was for her daughter S'naye that she was fighting, and for all the children of South Africa."¹⁸⁹ Women used the motherist framework to resist apartheid, but also to resist the patriarchal African South African custom that prevented women from having rights over their children. Women, and their children, were literally dying in the reserves because there were not adequate food or health clinics.¹⁹⁰ Women had to care for their children with scarce resources while their husbands were away in the cities. They did so without the comfort of having rights to their children because African customary law defined women as "perpetual minors, always under the guardianship of their nearest male relative, regardless of their age, marital status or any other consideration" such as motherhood.¹⁹¹

Furthermore, rural women wanted to have the rights over their children because many of their husbands did not support the family in any way, monetarily or emotionally. Some African men did love their wives but did not make enough money to send back to their families which

¹⁸⁷ Linda Gordon "Putting Children First: Women, Maternalism, and Welfare in the Early Twentieth Century," U. S. History as Women's History (1995): 63-86, 65.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ngcobo 93.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹¹ Walker 7.

left their wives completely impoverished.¹⁹² On the other hand, some men established new families once they moved to the cities and completely disregarded the family that they left behind in the reserves.¹⁹³ Some African men's creation of new urban families was a major concern for rural women. Although polygamy was an indigenous South African custom, rural women began to resist this tradition because it allowed men to marry other women and focus their economic support on their new, closer families. As Ngcobo explains in her book, rural women were "afraid of losing their husbands to women in the cities. They felt insecure in their ragged clothes, their emaciated bodies and their barefoot lifestyle. They felt they were no match for those 'wild' city women."¹⁹⁴ In her novel, rural women were concerned with keeping their husbands because in the African community, "the only thing that secured women a position in society were husbands."¹⁹⁵ Moreover, rural women had to stay married to their husbands because their husbands had sole custody of their children, and a woman was unable to divorce her husband without losing her children. As feminist scholar Harriet Sibisi argues, "The fact that a wife has no rights over the children in cases of separation has far-reaching effects in maintaining marriages in spite of long periods of separation."¹⁹⁶ Therefore, when rural women were protesting apartheid pass laws on a platform of motherhood they were simultaneously fighting a system of customary laws that prohibited them from having rights over their children.

Urban women also used the 'motherist framework' as a rationale for their activism during the resistance movement. The Federation of South African Women (FSAW), which was the leading urban women's organization during the Anti-Apartheid Movement, often "recruited

¹⁹² Ngcobo 85.

¹⁹³ Afolayan 199.

¹⁹⁴ Ngcobo 18.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Sibisi 168.

women to join their demonstrations by telling them that it was their duty as a mother.”¹⁹⁷ An FSAW pamphlet entitled “A Call to Mothers” proclaimed “our children’s future depends on the extent to which we, the mothers of South Africa, organize and work and fight for a better life for our little ones.”¹⁹⁸ Urban women also used the motherist framework in order to resist apartheid laws, such as the pass laws, that hindered their mobility, but they also used this framework to legitimize their inclusion in male dominated organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC). In other words, women recognized that many African men saw women largely as reproducers and mothers.¹⁹⁹ Women used this recognition to their advantage in order to gain respect from “official” resistance movement organizations, such as the ANC.

The ANC was founded in 1912 by the African male elite of South Africa and they were not initially concerned with fully including women in their organization.²⁰⁰ In 1913, the ANC established a Bantu Women’s League which allowed women to become auxiliary members only and without voting rights.²⁰¹ The purpose of this women’s League was to “provide the catering and organize the entertainment at meetings and conferences.”²⁰² Although there are few extant records on Bantu women, I hold that the existence of the Bantu Women’s League suggests that women had been active in struggles against colonial authorities since the early eighteenth century. Thus, initially the ANC only included women into their organization for their reproductive labor or because male members saw women’s roles primarily as mothers, wives and reproducers.²⁰³ The early ANC focused on gaining political rights for Africans so that they could

¹⁹⁷ Kuumba 64.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Walker 26.

²⁰⁰ Thompson 174.

²⁰¹ Walker 32.

²⁰² Ibid., 33.

²⁰³ Ibid., 26.

have equal access to economic resources.²⁰⁴ Considering that no women, white or African, had the right to vote, the ANC considered women's right to vote a separate battle that was ultimately unnecessary during a time that no black person had the right to vote.²⁰⁵ As Cherryl Walker explains, "black women could not protest for the right to vote, because no black had the right to vote, and as a result women's rights had to take a backseat to the rights of the entire population."²⁰⁶ In essence, the ANC wanted to focus on issues that affected the entire African population such as passes, rents, the cost of living, and laws that discriminated against all African people.²⁰⁷ Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement in America was controlled by male-dominated organizations such as the National Association of Colored People that only wanted to focus on inequities that the entire black population faced and women's rights were seen as a distraction from the goals of the movement.

Each of the issues faced by Africans were important, and affected men and women, but the fact that the ANC was not fully inclusive of women and did not see the need for women to have a political voice was in part a result of the patriarchal customs that framed society and rigidly differentiated men and women. Customarily, men were the providers or breadwinners and women were the biological and cultural reproducers.²⁰⁸ Since the beginning of the migratory labor system in 1886, and throughout apartheid (1948-1994), many African men were unable to provide for their families because their factory jobs only paid a single man's salary.²⁰⁹ As a result, many African women became responsible for financially providing for their families, by either performing agricultural work or moving to the cities, because their husbands were unable

²⁰⁴ Matua 140.

²⁰⁵ Walker 25.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Gosselin 72.

²⁰⁹ Walker 6.

to send money back home.²¹⁰ This reality led some African men to feel that they had lost their manhood because they were not able to perform their customary masculine duties. Thus, in order for men to regain their status as breadwinners of the African household it was in their best interest to find ways to participate in the government. Such participation might enable them to change laws, such as those defining the pass system, which hindered their ability to provide for their families. While not explicitly stated, it seems possible that the early ANC excluded the political participation of African women in order to prevent women from gaining political power. If women equally shared political power with men, = traditional African customs relating to distinct gender responsibilities and governance in which only men held political power might be completely dismantled.²¹¹

In the early 1940s, the ANC began to recruit women.²¹² According to Cherryl Walker, “The [ANC’s] new concern with women did not simply reflect a desire to attract greater numbers to the ANC, but it also reflected the recognition that the position of women had undergone real changes since the first ANC constitution had been drawn up in 1919.”²¹³ At the annual ANC conference, the delegates passed this resolution:

That this Conference recommends to the parent body the necessity of reviving the women’s section of the Congress in terms of the provision of the Constitution. Further that women be accorded the same status as men in the classification of membership. That the following means be made to attract women: (a) to make the programme of the Congress as attractive as possible to the women, (b) a careful choice of leadership.²¹⁴

ANC male members and leaders openly discussed the involvement of women for the next few years. Finally, in 1943, women were granted full membership status, including the right to vote

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 33.

²¹² Ibid., 88.

²¹³ Ibid., 80.

²¹⁴ Walker 89.

and participate in ANC affairs at all levels.²¹⁵ Notably, the same year that women gained full participatory rights in the ANC, the ANC established a separate African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) and all ANC female members had to become members of the ANCWL.²¹⁶ In other words, "The ANCWL was set up within the ANC as a subsidiary body to which all female members automatically belonged."²¹⁷ The fact that women gained full rights in the ANC the same year that the ANCWL was created was not coincidental. The ANC purposefully established the ANCWL in order to ensure that women did not have a voice in the larger ANC. Cheryl Walker explains this decision:

By establishing a separate Women's League, the ANC recognized that women occupied a distinct and inferior position to men in society and by directing women into a separate body, the ANC was also perpetuating sexual divisions within its organization which tended to reinforce stereotypes about 'women's work', and subtly undermined the formal equality of the sexes that had been proclaimed.²¹⁸

Essentially, the ANCWL facilitated the continued silencing of women's voices in the ANC and in the broader patriarchal anti-apartheid movement.

The ANCWL was organized in a way that reinforced patriarchal African customs.

According to the official 'Rules and Regulations of the African National Congress Women's League' the main goals of the ANCWL were:

- a.) To arouse the interest of African women in the struggle for freedom and equality and assist the widespread organization of women;
- b.) To take up special problems and issues affecting women, and
- c.) To carry on propaganda against apartheid and discriminatory laws among African women.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 90.

²¹⁹ 'Rules and Regulations of the African National Congress Women's League', mimeo, p. 1, FSAW II H1.

The early ANCWL focused on “women’s activities” such as fund-raising and food preparation.²²⁰ ANC leaders carefully watched the actions of the ANCWL in order to ensure that the ANCWL only focused on women’s issues and not national issues.

The first ANCWL president was the wife of influential ANC member Dr. Zuma, Madie-Hall Zuma. The relationship between Dr. and Mrs. Zuma allowed the ANC to keep a close, and personal, watch over the discussions within and actions of the women’s league because according to South African customary law, a woman was required to be loyal to her husband at all times.²²¹ In fact, most male ANC members did not want their wives, or daughters, to become involved in the ANCWL because such participation might distract them from their duties as caregivers.²²² As Madie-Hall Zuma put it, “Some women have been reluctant to join our clubs because their husbands feared they’d meet unsuitable women who might mislead them.”²²³ In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela recalls being “taken aback” when Winnie wanted to become involved in the ANCWL pass protests.

Winnie and I were relaxing after supper when she quietly informed me that she intended to join the group of Orlando women who would be protesting the following day at the pass office. I was a bit taken aback, and while I was pleased to see her sense of commitment and admired her courage, I was also wary...I told her that if she was arrested she would be certain to be fired by her employer, the provincial administration—we both knew that it was her small income that was supporting the household—and that she could probably never work again as a social worker, since the stigma of imprisonment would make public agencies reluctant to hire her. Finally, she was pregnant, and I warned her of the physical hardship and humiliations of jail. My response may sound harsh, but I felt responsibility both as a husband and as a leader of the struggle, to be clear as possible about the ramifications of her action. I, myself, had mixed emotions, for the concerns of a husband and a leader do not always coincide.²²⁴

²²⁰ Walker 91.

²²¹ Afolayan 183.

²²² Walker 91.

²²³ *Drum*, September 1952, 10.

²²⁴ Nelson Mandela 221.

Winnie listened to her husband's advice, but still participated in the action along with the other Orlando ANCWL members marching to the Central Pass Office in Downtown Johannesburg to protest pass laws.²²⁵ The women were arrested and Nelson Mandela, along with Oliver Tambo went to the jail to bail them out. Upon Mandela's arrival at the jail, Lilian Ngoyi, the national president of the ANCWL and Helen Joseph, secretary of the South African Women's Federation, prevented Mandela and Tambo from bailing out their wives and the other women because these ANCWL leaders believed that "in order for the protest to be genuine and effective, the women should serve whatever time the magistrate ordered."²²⁶ They also argued that "the matter was a women's affair and the ANC—as well as anxious husbands—should not meddle."²²⁷ Events, such as these, proved that women were capable of resisting apartheid without the help of the patriarchal ANC, or their husbands. Since the ANCWL was still officially a part of the ANC, however, female leaders like Lilian Ngoyi, and Helen Joseph, realized that they had to create a women's organization that was completely separate from the ANC in order to give women the opportunity to resist apartheid in their own ways. This desire to free up women's "approach" to the anti-Apartheid struggle led to the creation of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW).

Women focused on national liberation, but they also had a dual interest in women's emancipation.²²⁸ African women recognized that the ANC was a part of a national liberation movement that was not focused on women's issues.²²⁹ African female activist Frene Ginwala declared

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 222.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., xiv.

²²⁹ Ibid.

It is true that as a national liberation movement the ANC's priority is national liberation. But being realistic we have got to accept that when it comes to a choice, either or, the decision is more than likely to fall towards national liberation. I mean that is by virtue and definition of what the [ANC] organization is.²³⁰

This being said, women had to create their own organizations in order to address both national issues *and* women's issues. This need led to the creation of a multi-racial women's organization: The Federation of South African Women. In April 1953, Florence Matomela, then president of the ANCWL, Frances Baard, local organizer in the African Food and Canning Workers' Union (AFCWU), and trade unionist Ray Alexander met in Port Elizabeth to discuss the establishment of a national women's organization that could play a major role in the national liberation struggle.²³¹ Throughout the next year, Ray Alexander and Communist Party of South Africa activist Hilda Watts took the initiative to plan the first official national conference of women for April 1954.²³² They sent out invitations to other women's organizations in the country on a platform that

We women, like men, want to be free to move about in the country of our birth, to live where we like, to buy land freely. We want an end to the migrant labour system... We claim for ourselves and our daughters, as well as for men, the right to education and employment in all occupations and professions. While our main struggle is with men against racialism and the colour bar, to make our national struggle more effective, we ask that men support us in our fight for equality.²³³

The early organizers of the Federation of South African Women recognized that they needed male organizations, such as the ANC, to see women as equal partners in the resistance struggles and not as subordinate and peripheral members. As a result of sexist ideologies that African men were taught in childhood that portrayed men as leaders and women as their subordinates, many male organizations did not believe that women had a natural place alongside them in the

²³⁰ "'Picking up the Gauntlet': Women Discuss ANC Statement" in *Agenda*, 8, 1990, pp. 5-18, 13.

²³¹ Walker 135.

²³² *Ibid.*, 139.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 142.

resistance movement. However, without the equal contributions of both genders, the liberation movement would not have been as powerful or successful in the fight against apartheid.

Furthermore, the creation of a national women's organization challenged African customary laws that did not allow women to become equal to their male counterparts, specifically with regard to participation in governance.

A year later, on April 17, 1954, the Federation of South African Women held its first meeting in Trades Hall, Johannesburg.²³⁴ Alexander and Watts asked men to cater this meeting in an effort to achieve a "taste of real emancipation for both men and women."²³⁵ Women participants of the meeting overwhelmingly welcomed this idea because male caterers would allow the women to discuss business without interruption.²³⁶ In the words of Cherryl Walker, "This was a startling lesson in role-reversal for all concerned, both men and women."²³⁷ In her speech at the conference Ida Mtwana exclaimed, "Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the children. Today they are marching side by side with men in the road to freedom."²³⁸ The visible role reversal of this meeting illustrated that women's participation in the liberation movement was hindered by their customary roles as care takers. Only when men took over their roles as caterers could women actually hold a productive meeting to discuss their primary concerns as women and as Africans.

This conference was attended by women involved in the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), the South African Indian Conference (SAIC), the Congress of Democrats (COD), the South African Coloured People's Organization (SACPO) and left wing

²³⁴ Ibid., 153.

²³⁵ Ibid., 143.

²³⁶ Ibid., 154.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

trade unions.²³⁹ Notably, all of the delegates at the conference were urban women.²⁴⁰ As a result, rural women did not have any representation in the conference, and ultimately in the FSAW.

According to Cherryl Walker,

Although profound changes were restructuring the fabric of society in the reserves, and rural women were not completely divorced from the momentum of political events, there were not the same opportunities or incentives for them to organize politically. They were more rigidly isolated, more rigidly bound by traditional patriarchal restraints than their urban counterparts, and the practical problems of establishing and maintaining an organization were far larger.²⁴¹

Cherryl Walker correctly recognizes that rural women were more rigidly bound by traditional patriarchal restraints than urban women. Yet, her statement also problematically assumes that women in the reserves were not organizing, in their own regional specific way, and women in the cities were not also bound by traditional patriarchal society to some extent.

As I have stated earlier, women in the reserves constantly protested dipping stations and passes. Cherryl Walker even suggests this point earlier in her book *Women and Resistance in South Africa* when she discusses a rural pass protest that occurred in the Transvaal in 1957 and a cattle-dipping protest organized by rural women in 1959.²⁴² Walker also notes that “within the urban community, patriarchal attitudes and values were still deeply entrenched.”²⁴³ In other words, urban women were not completely removed from traditional customs at all. Instead, urban centers “in many ways were more oppressive than tribalism, not less, in its treatment to women.”²⁴⁴ Although urban women were no longer directly affected by customary law, the majority of city inhabitants still had ties to their native rural areas.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, rural women

²³⁹ Ibid., 160.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 162.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., 148.

²⁴³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 150.

²⁴⁵ Funso 201.

did not themselves completely escape from patriarchy given that they moved to a city that was directly ruled by a patriarchal white government.

At this conference, “a skeletal framework of a national organization of women was created, a Women’s Charter, setting out the philosophy behind the new organization adopted and its broad aims established.”²⁴⁶ This charter is one of the most significant documents established during the resistance movement. The “Women’s Charter” was a two and a half page document that outlined the purpose of the new organization and the ways in which the position of African women could be improved in relation to their African male counterparts and the apartheid government.²⁴⁷ This significant document addressed the problems that African women, along with women of other races, faced with regard to both customary and statutory law. For instance, the Preamble of the charter states:

We the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, Africans, Indians, Europeans and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.²⁴⁸

The charter also stresses the importance of a single society, in which women are able to become equal to men.²⁴⁹ However, the drafters of the charter realized that women, especially African women, could not have equal rights with men unless certain patriarchal customary laws were eradicated. According to a section of the charter entitled “Equality for Women” the women of the conference proclaimed that

²⁴⁶ FSAW: ‘Report of the First National Conference of Women’ (hereinafter ‘Report’), 16.

²⁴⁷ Walker 156.

²⁴⁸ “Women’s Charter” in FSAW: ‘Report’ p. 1 <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/women/wcharter.html>> (For a full representation of the “Charter”, see Appendix A)

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

We resolve to struggle for the removal of laws and customs that deny African women the right to own, inherit or alienate property. We resolve to work for a change in the laws of marriage such as are found amongst our African people, which have the effect of placing wives in the position of legal subjection to husbands, and giving husbands the power to dispose of wives' property and earnings, and dictate to them in all matters affecting them and their children. We recognize that the women are treated as minors by these marriage and property laws because of ancient and revered traditions and customs which had their origins in the antiquity of the people.²⁵⁰

Therefore, the “Women’s Charter” textually manifested the African female fight against both patriarchal African customs and the apartheid regime. Moreover, the Women’s Charter that was established at this conference was eventually used as a guideline for the 1955 Freedom Charter created by the Congress Alliance, which was a coalition of national anti-apartheid resistance organizations led by the African National Congress in the 1950s.²⁵¹ According to Nelson Mandela, the Freedom Charter “extols the abolition of racial discrimination and the achievement of equal rights for all. It welcomes all who embrace freedom to participate in the making of a democratic, nonracial South Africa. It captured the hopes and dreams of the people and acted as a blueprint for the liberation struggle and the future of the nation.”²⁵² It is vital to recognize that a wholly female organization was responsible for establishing a document that would be adopted by the largest coalition of anti-apartheid resistance organizations and became an outline for the Freedom Charter, which was arguably the most important anti-apartheid document ever produced.

The Federation of South African Women contributed to the anti-apartheid movement in many ways, but most importantly they spearheaded the creation of one of the most popular forms of anti-apartheid pass protests. The Federation, along with the African National Congress Women’s League, was responsible for organizing numerous pass protests between the years

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Kuumba 43.

²⁵² Nelson Mandela 174.

1954 and 1959.²⁵³ The first pass protest occurred in Pretoria on October 27, 1955.²⁵⁴ This protest was significant because the FSAW asked African rural women to attend their protest. In her autobiography *Side by Side*, Helen Joseph discusses the various challenges the organizers of the conference faced with regard to bringing women from all areas to the protest. According to Joseph, “The Transportation Board refused to grant licenses for the buses which women had applied to hire to bring them from the townships to the Union Buildings.”²⁵⁵ The only other alternative was public transportation that involved two bus journeys and a train. Although this was an expensive and tiresome trip, the organizers of the protest tried to find ways to get the rural women to the protest because they realized that they needed the participation of all women, in order to successfully protest the government. In addition, the involvement of rural women would guarantee success for the Pretoria pass protest, and the future protests of the Federation of South African Women would prove to male centered organizations like the ANC that women, from every region, could successfully organize without the help of African men.

Despite the transportation difficulties, the FSAW held fundraisers to ensure that large numbers of rural women could get to the protest.²⁵⁶ The urban FSAW realized that they needed the participation of rural women in order to make the demonstration as successful as possible. According to Helen Joseph, “As I drove to Orlando I saw, high above me, on the railway embankment, a train packed with women, singing, their arms out of the windows in the Congress salute, telling the world they were on their way to Pretoria.”²⁵⁷ The two thousand women that

²⁵³ Walker 186.

²⁵⁴ Joseph 10.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

gathered at Pretoria that day proved to the government that women were not going to remain quiet any longer about issues that affected the African female community.

On August 9, 1956, the Federation of South African Women demonstrated again in Pretoria in protest of pass laws extended to African women.²⁵⁸ This protest was the single most important event that the FSAW ever organized because it brought together over twenty thousand women from all races, all regions, and all classes.²⁵⁹ Helen Joseph, along with Lilian Ngoyi, Rahima Moosa, Sophie Williams led the march that day.²⁶⁰ Joseph remembers looking back “I could see nothing but women following us, thousands of women marching, carrying letters of defiant protest against unjust laws, against the hated pass system, against passes for African women.”²⁶¹ Helen Joseph spoke to the twenty thousand women that women and proclaimed

We represent and we speak on behalf of thousands of women—women who could not be with us. But all over this country, at this moment, women are watching and thinking of us. Their hearts are with us. We are women from every part of South Africa. We are the women of every race; we come from the cities and the towns, from the reserves and the villages—we come as women united in our purpose to save the African women from the degradation of passes... We African women know too well the effect of this law upon our homes, upon our children. We who are not African women know how our sisters suffer... *We shall not rest* until all pass laws and all forms of permits restricting our freedom have been abolished. *We shall not rest* until we have won for our children their fundamental right to freedom, justice and equality.²⁶²

Helen Joseph, along with the three other leaders of the protest took the protest letters to the office of the Prime Minister.²⁶³ Unsurprisingly, he was not there, but the women left all of the letters in his office and returned to a sea of women standing in the amphitheatre.²⁶⁴ Lilain Ngoyi immediately called for a silent protest of thirty minutes and “as she raised her right arm in the

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid., 2.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Congress salute, 20,000 arms went up and stayed up for those endless minutes and as the clock struck three and a quarter past, it was the only sound.”²⁶⁵ Helen Joseph looked around at all of the faces of the protestors “until they became only one face, the face of the suffering African people of South Africa.”²⁶⁶ This demonstration was significant for many reasons, but most importantly, it facilitated the necessary unification of African rural and urban women in the fight against patriarchal customary African South African society and the oppressive apartheid regime.

Conclusion

If I could time travel, I would go back to see the August 9, 1956, Pretoria demonstration with my own eyes. The picture that Helen Joseph so eloquently paints when she says that “20,000 women, of all races, held their arms in the congress salute for a solid thirty minutes to protest the laws extended to African women” is enough to bring me to tears.²⁶⁷ This demonstration marked the beginning of a new era of anti-apartheid resistance because women from all over South Africa put aside their differences with regard to race and region, and came together for the larger cause of fighting the two oppressive systems that had negatively affected their lives: patriarchal African society and the white misogynist South African government.

The first layer of oppression faced by African women was present *before* colonialism: indigenous African society was oppressive to women before the Dutch settled at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652. Due to African society’s patriarchal structure, this culture’s most important traditions concerning gender roles, family structure, initiation rituals, and marriage facilitated the oppression and subordination of women. Since pre-colonialism, African society has upheld

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Joseph 2.

deeply entrenched inequitable gender roles that placed men into positions of dominance and women into positions of subservience.²⁶⁸

Historically, women have been responsible for cultural and biological reproduction. Although both of these roles are important, women's work has been continuously devalued by their male counterparts, which has facilitated the subordination of women in African society. Furthermore, African society's patrilineal family structure, in which ancestry and lineage is determined by the father, also devalues women, especially girls, because boys are more appreciated in part because they will carry on their fathers name.²⁶⁹ Even initiation rituals teach boys that they are the leaders and women are subservient.²⁷⁰

In addition, there are numerous African customs, such as polygamy, that are associated with marriage and are oppressive to women. According to this tradition, men had the option to marry as many women as they want, whereas women were required to stay faithful to one husband.²⁷¹ For instance, Jezile, the protagonist of Laretta Ngcobo's novel *And They Didn't Die*, stresses that the "worst misfortune that could befall a woman was to be caught in adultery, or worse still, to be pregnant in the absence of her itinerant husband."²⁷² This tradition increases men's autonomy and power, whereas it limits women's autonomy. Another marriage ritual that oppresses women is patrivirilocity because it requires a woman to move to her husband's household immediately following marriage, which ultimately decreases a woman's mobility.²⁷³ A marriage's customary monetary exchange of Brideweath (*lobola*) is also extremely oppressive

²⁶⁸ Afolayan 26.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 187.

²⁷⁰ Gosselin 72.

²⁷¹ Thompson 33.

²⁷² Ngcobo 17.

²⁷³ Afolayan 203.

considering that women are literally being traded for money or cattle.²⁷⁴ Moreover, rights *uxorem* give a husband full sexual access to his wife's body and control over her productivity; rights *in genetricem* grant a husband full possession of his children and leave his wife without legal rights to their children. Both laws are oppressive to women because under these laws once a woman marries she loses control over her body, and the offspring that her body produces.

Chiefdoms, the customary form of African governance, prohibited women from participating in all governmental affairs; thus, chiefdoms furthered the oppression of women.²⁷⁵ Therefore, since pre-colonialism, African women have not been able to participate in any type of governmental organization. Importantly, the tradition of prohibiting women to participate in governmental affairs was upheld when the Dutch settled in South Africa in 1652. Arguably, African male organizations, such as the African National Congress, used this tradition to justify the exclusion of women during the anti-apartheid movement.

The moment that the Dutch invaded South Africa, African women were faced with a second layer of oppression that furthered their subordination and solidified the first layer of subordination that they already experienced within their patriarchal indigenous African culture. This second layer of oppression, which was facilitated by the Dutch, began during colonialism and was continued by the white government throughout slavery, the migratory labor system, segregation (1880-1948), and apartheid (1948-1994).

These two layers of oppression detrimentally affected the lives of African women for centuries. However, starting with the 1913 Orange Free State pass protest, African women began to resist African customary law and white statutory law.²⁷⁶ Throughout the remainder of the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 182.

²⁷⁵ Thompson 25.

²⁷⁶ Walker 26.

twentieth century, women found ways to resist the constraining patriarchal characteristics of both societies by creating networks with other women. This was not an easy task, in part because the migratory labor system created two networks of women: rural and urban. Women organized and protested African customary law and white statutory law in their own respective areas, but in order for women to completely change the oppressive nature of these two systems, rural and urban women had to organize and establish a unified front.

The women that established the Federation of South African Women, the leading women's anti-apartheid organization, recognized the need for unity among South African women and facilitated the unification of women from all races and regions. Significantly, the establishment of the FSAW was itself a result of the double layer of oppression. For instance, women created their own space, without men, because male organizations such as the ANC would not allow women full participation, and the white South African government would not allow any black, to participate in South African government in any form. FSAW leaders realized that black women would only gain equality if they eradicated customary practices that prevented them from becoming equal to their male counterparts and simultaneously helped the entire African population defeat the discriminatory apartheid regime. The FSAW performed many great feats, but most importantly, this organization created the foundation for the next decade of the anti-apartheid movement. Demonstrations, such as the Pretoria pass protest that took place on August 9, 1956, showed African men and the white South African government that African women refused to live underneath a double layer of oppression any longer.²⁷⁷ African women strove to eradicate both layers of oppression through unified and passionate protests that changed the tone of the resistance movement and proved to their oppressors that African women were a

²⁷⁷ Joseph 2.

fearless group that would not stop fighting until the two simultaneous systems of oppression that they experienced ended.

Appendix A: The Women's Charter, 1954

Women's Charter

**Adopted at the Founding Conference of the Federation of South African Women
Johannesburg, 17 April 1954²⁷⁸**

Preamble: We, the women of South Africa, wives and mothers, working women and housewives, African, Indians, European and Coloured, hereby declare our aim of striving for the removal of all laws, regulations, conventions and customs that discriminate against us as women, and that deprive us in any way of our inherent right to the advantages, responsibilities and opportunities that society offers to any one section of the population.

A Single Society: We women do not form a society separate from the men. There is only one society, and it is made up of both women and men. As women we share the problems and anxieties of our men, and join hands with them to remove social evils and obstacles to progress.

Test of Civilisation: The level of civilisation which any society has reached can be measured by the degree of freedom that its members enjoy. The status of women is a test of civilisation. Measured by that standard, South Africa must be considered low in the scale of civilised nations.

Women's Lot: We women share with our menfolk the cares and anxieties imposed by poverty and its evils. As wives and mothers, it falls upon us to make small wages stretch a long way. It is we who feel the cries of our children when they are hungry and sick. It is our lot to keep and care for the homes that are too small, broken and dirty to be kept clean. We know the burden of looking after children and land when our husbands are away in the mines, on the farms, and in the towns earning our daily bread.

We know what it is to keep family life going in pondokkies and shanties, or in overcrowded one-room apartments. We know the bitterness of children taken to lawless ways, of daughters becoming unmarried mothers whilst still at school, of boys and girls growing up without education, training or jobs at a living wage.

Poor and Rich: These are evils that need not exist. They exist because the society in which we live is divided into poor and rich, into non-European and European. They exist because there are privileges for the few, discrimination and harsh treatment for the many. We women have stood and will stand shoulder to shoulder with our menfolk in a common struggle against poverty, race and class discrimination, and the evils of the colourbar.

National Liberation: As members of the National Liberatory movements and Trade Unions, in and through our various organisations, we march forward with our men in the struggle for

²⁷⁸ "Women's Charter" in FSAW: 'Report' p. 1 <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/women/wcharter.html>>

liberation and the defence of the working people. We pledge ourselves to keep high the banner of equality, fraternity and liberty. As women there rests upon us also the burden of removing from our society all the social differences developed in past times between men and women, which have the effect of keeping our sex in a position of inferiority and subordination.

Equality for Women: We resolve to struggle for the removal of laws and customs that deny African women the right to own, inherit or alienate property. We resolve to work for a change in the laws of marriage such as are found amongst our African, Malay and Indian people, which have the effect of placing wives in the position of legal subjection to husbands, and giving husbands the power to dispose of wives' property and earnings, and dictate to them in all matters affecting them and their children.

We recognise that the women are treated as minors by these marriage and property laws because of ancient and revered traditions and customs which had their origin in the antiquity of the people and no doubt served purposes of great value in bygone times.

There was a time in the African society when every woman reaching marriageable stage was assured of a husband, home, land and security.

Then husbands and wives with their children belonged to families and clans that supplied most of their own material needs and were largely self-sufficient. Men and women were partners in a compact and closely integrated family unit.

Women who Labour: Those conditions have gone. The tribal and kinship society to which they belonged has been destroyed as a result of the loss of tribal land, migration of men away from the tribal home, the growth of towns and industries, and the rise of a great body of wage-earners on the farms and in the urban areas, who depend wholly or mainly on wages for a livelihood.

Thousands of African women, like Indians, Coloured and European women, are employed today in factories, homes, offices, shops, on farms, in professions as nurses, teachers and the like. As unmarried women, widows or divorcees they have to fend for themselves, often without the assistance of a male relative. Many of them are responsible not only for their own livelihood but also that of their children.

Large numbers of women today are in fact the sole breadwinners and heads of their families.

Forever Minors: Nevertheless, the laws and practices derived from an earlier and different state of society are still applied to them. They are responsible for their own person and their children. Yet the law seeks to enforce upon them the status of a minor.

Not only are African, Coloured and Indian women denied political rights, but they are also in many parts of the Union denied the same status as men in such matters as the right to enter into contracts, to own and dispose of property, and to exercise guardianship over their children.

Obstacle to Progress: The law has lagged behind the development of society; it no longer corresponds to the actual social and economic position of women. The law has become an obstacle to progress of the women, and therefore a brake on the whole of society.

This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large section of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves.

We shall teach the men that they cannot hope to liberate themselves from the evils of discrimination and prejudice as long as they fail to extend to women complete and unqualified equality in law and in practice.

Need for Education: We also recognise that large numbers of our womenfolk continue to be bound by traditional practices and conventions, and fail to realise that these have become obsolete and a brake on progress. It is our duty and privilege to enlist all women in our struggle for emancipation and to bring to them all realisation of the intimate relationship that exists between their status of inferiority as women and the inferior status to which their people are subjected by discriminatory laws and colour prejudices.

It is our intention to carry out a nation-wide programme of education that will bring home to the men and women of all national groups the realisation that freedom cannot be won for any one section or for the people as a whole as long as we women are kept in bondage.

An Appeal: We women appeal to all progressive organisations, to members of the great National Liberatory movements, to the trade unions and working class organisations, to the churches, educational and welfare organisations, to all progressive men and women who have the interests of the people at heart, to join with us in this great and noble endeavour.

Our Aims

We declare the following aims:

This organisation is formed for the purpose of uniting women in common action for the removal of all political, legal, economic and social disabilities. We shall strive for women to obtain:

1. The right to vote and to be elected to all State bodies, without restriction or discrimination.
2. The right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work.
3. Equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights.
4. For the development of every child through free compulsory education for all; for the protection of mother and child through maternity homes, welfare clinics, creches and nursery schools, in countryside and towns; through proper homes for all, and through the provision of water, light, transport, sanitation, and other amenities of modern civilisation.

5. For the removal of all laws that restrict free movement, that prevent or hinder the right of free association and activity in democratic organisations, and the right to participate in the work of these organisations.
6. To build and strengthen women's sections in the National Liberatory movements, the organisation of women in trade unions, and through the peoples' varied organisation.
7. To cooperate with all other organisations that have similar aims in South Africa as well as throughout the world.
8. To strive for permanent peace throughout the world.

¹The Charter expressed the philosophy and aims of the newly established Federation of South African Women (FSAW). It was adopted at the inaugural conference and included in the final report of the conference.

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