



# **NARRATIVES OF WOMEN DETAINED IN THE KROONSTAD PRISON DURING THE APARTHEID ERA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL EXPLORATION, 1960-1990**

## **Abstract**

*Seen as taboo by society to have women arrested, could this factor perhaps have played a role in how women were treated in prison? One can assume that conditions in women prisons during apartheid were much better than those in male prisons, but that might not have been the case. Male prisons, such as Robben Island, received international condemnation. Yet, there was scarce attention given to the conditions in women prisons. Although the Kroonstad Prison is located in the Free State Province, it used to serve the whole country during apartheid. This was evident in the case of Dorothy Nyembe, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, who served her time in the Kroonstad Prison where she experienced harsh treatment and little support from her family and society. In the struggle for freedom, often seen as a job for men, society perhaps was unsure how to deal with, and provide support to, incarcerated females. This article's emphasis is on the narratives of women detained under apartheid and the Kroonstad female prison will be used as a case study. While the focus of this article is on the Kroonstad Prison, it is important to record that the experiences and stories of female political prisoners who served their time elsewhere, should equally deserve attention. To provide evidence for this article, testimonies during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC) will be scrutinised, as well as the biographies of women who served their terms at this prison. For the purpose of this article, the qualitative research method has been employed, as well as the oral history methodology and the traditional methods of historical research.*

**Keywords:** Women; Kroonstad Prison; apartheid; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); solitary confinement; liberation struggle; trauma.

**Slutelwoorde:** Vroue; Kroonstad-tronk; apartheid; Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie; alleenopsluiting; vryheidstryd; trauma.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The article commences with the notion that a typical patriarchal structure produces and reproduces male

dominance and renders women ineffective and silent.<sup>1</sup> This assertion is informed by the skewed reporting through published and unpublished manuscripts, advancing the role of men over that of women in the liberation struggle. It is clear that the harsh laws of apartheid were experienced by both men and women. The narratives of women, however, remain largely untold. Little justice has been done in the telling of their stories and, in instances where they are mentioned, their voice is very minimal. The researcher refers to the Human Rights Violations hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa,<sup>2</sup> as this pattern was recognised during these hearings. Women often came to report stories of their loved ones, namely their husbands, brothers and male colleagues, but not often their own stories. Factors that influenced this situation included the fear, or the feeling, that their stories were not as bad as those of their male counterparts or relatives. The article attempts to demystify the growing and unsubstantiated idea that women did not play an active role in the liberation struggle. The TRC was commended for establishing a Special Hearings for Women.<sup>3</sup> This was done in order to focus mainly on women and their stories of human rights' violations. It is argued in this article that when stories of women remain untold, society runs the risk of enhancing the misconception that women did not play a significant role during the liberation struggle. It became clear, through the narratives shared during the TRC, that women played a significant role. In their active role during the liberation struggle, they were also not exempt from the wrath of the apartheid law. In a report by the Federation of South African Women (FedSAW) it was stated that, "One of the reasons behind the different conditions is the amount of campaigning and world attention being focussed on particular prisoners and prisons, e.g. Robben Island and its inmates. Another reason is that women's position in society makes them more invisible than men."<sup>4</sup>

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- 1 South African Historical Archives, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter referred to as SAHA). The Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies Papers, File AL3119f, Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Workshop, 19 March 1996.
  - 2 The TRC was a court-like body, which was established after the end of apartheid. Different hearings were held for victims, perpetrators and different institutions, including political parties. The TRC of South Africa took a restorative justice approach which places emphasis on the healing and redressing of imbalances. This approach also allowed perpetrators to apply for amnesty in exchange for "full disclosure". It therefore served as a platform which allowed people to share their experiences while living under apartheid, and at the same time help victims to find closure through discovering about the atrocities suffered by their loved ones.
  - 3 These hearings recognised women as active participants in the struggle for liberation and as direct victims and survivors of human rights' violations. These hearings further gave a voice to those who had, in the past, been silent. It also provided those who had been powerless with strength. They received closure during the process of sharing their experiences.
  - 4 Federation of South African Women to the Western Cape Government, *Women in prison* (s.l.: s.n., s.a.), p. 1. For Robben Island imprisonment, see N Solani and N Nieftagodien,

In most cases women were seen as submissive and obedient and their taking leadership roles in the struggle for liberation in SA were seen as taboo. This intensified the debate on the masculinisation of the liberation struggle.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when women were incarcerated for playing active roles in the liberation struggle, the apartheid law enforcement agencies did not know how to deal with them. Perhaps this can be seen in less public attention from those around the world who condemned the apartheid society, as well as from the female prisoners' families. The Kroonstad female prison was, unlike other prisons, such as the one on Robben Island. The lack of reporting of the stories of these women during the apartheid era presented them as "invisible" within the penal discourse.

In this article, the narratives of some women and their voices are highlighted, in order to express their experiences. This was done through perusing the documents, such as the TRC hearings and newspaper articles tapping into their lives, and through personal memoirs. It became evidently difficult for them to share their experiences with anyone, especially with people who did not seem sympathetic to what had really happened to them when they were in detention. Owing to preconceptions, some women might have not bothered to share their narratives, which can largely be one of the reasons the public is not aware of their [women] suffering while in prison.<sup>6</sup>

The TRC discovered that in circumstances where a woman refused to succumb to the brutal treatment by the authorities, this infuriated the authorities and, therefore, such women were exposed to even harsher measures. This was contrary to the situation in which men found themselves. When a man did not break under interrogation, he was considered brave. The same could not be said about women. Women would be called irresponsible and told they were not women enough because, instead of taking care of their families, they had dedicated their lives to the liberation struggle, which was perceived as a man's territory.<sup>7</sup> In fact, such women were deemed notorious by the prison authorities.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND AIMS

The qualitative research method was employed due to the fact that this article is based on the recordings of the women who shared their experiences of their

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"Political imprisonment and resistance in South Africa: The case of Robben Island". In: South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 1, 1960-1970 (Paarl: Zebra Press, 2004), pp. 391-409.

5 For more information on this, see R Suttner, "Masculinities in the African National Congress-led liberation movement: The underground period", *Kleio: A Journal of Historical Studies from Africa* 37(1), January 2005, pp. 71-106.

6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Human Rights violations", <<http://www.justice.gov.za/tc/hrvtrans/helder/ct00776.html>>, accessed 1 September 2016.

7 *Ibid.*

incarceration at the Kroonstad Prison between 1960 and 1990. The objective of using this research method was basically to develop an understanding of black women's imprisonment during apartheid, particularly as political prisoners. As mentioned previously, not all black female prisoners in Kroonstad were political prisoners. Therefore, this article drew on the available testimonies of only black female political prisoners. The scarcity of primary sources became a major motivation to conduct further research on this topic.

In the light of limited sources, the article aims at encouraging further research and, also, to motivate former female political prisoners, particularly those who were incarcerated in the Kroonstad Prison, to come forth and extensively share their narratives. This article granted them a platform, through oral history research, to share their narratives. For the purpose of this article, primary, as well as secondary sources, will be used. These include books on the subject and on other relevant topics, such as the biographies of women who were involved in the struggle against apartheid and their stories on incarceration; unpublished theses; papers presented at conferences and workshops; recordings of the TRC proceedings, as some women might have shared their stories while in prison; and archival sources. To a large extent, the researcher will use autobiographies, newspaper clippings and other platforms where women have shared their experiences of incarceration.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

B Goldblatt and S Meintjies<sup>8</sup> discussed the issue of human rights' violations against women and their silence. Their paper, titled *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which became part of the TRC submission in 1996, focuses on the role of women in South Africa. Although the issue of incarceration, rape and other forms of sexual assault were not given much attention, their paper analyses the role of women during the liberation struggle and their suffering, and it exposes the reasons why most women do not speak out.

In an article written by SA Pete, *Angels and demons, innocents and penitents: An analysis of different "characters" within the penal discourse of apartheid South Africa 1980 to 1984*,<sup>9</sup> she exposes the vast difference in treatment between black and white female prisoners. Although the focus is mainly on white women, one can draw helpful conclusions from this study. Her focus is on how the prison was made to seem a safe space for white women

8 SAHA. The Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies Papers, File AL3119f, Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Workshop, 19 March 1996.

9 SA Pete, "Angels and demons, innocents and penitents: An analysis of different 'characters' within the penal discourse of apartheid South Africa 1980 to 1984", *Prison Comparisons*, 2015, pp. 411-429.

who, unfortunately, find themselves on the wrong side of the law, and grants them the opportunity to correct their path. It looks solely at the incarceration of white women and exposes the focus by the media. When one reads this article by Pete, it highlights the gap left by untold stories of black female prisoners. This, however, is a sound study as it allows a comparison through other platforms where narratives were shared and, therefore, it can be used as a benchmark in order to expose the suffering of political prisoners across racial and gender lines.

C Makhoere, in her autobiography (prison memoirs), *No child's play: In prison under apartheid*,<sup>10</sup> deals with her personal narrative. The book is filled with raw personal experiences at first hand; it is a powerful read as the author shares her role during the liberation struggle and her suffering at the hands of the apartheid police. Moreover, the author goes where most women have not – relating her experiences (including suffering and defiance) during incarceration. Having written from a personal perspective, she gives an insight into her emotions. The feminist voice is not lost in her writing, although it is filled with bitter and earnest accounts and deliberations. Makhoere, at some point, speaks about her time in solitary confinement and how she is left with her thoughts. However, she does the reader little justice by not stating explicitly what those thoughts were. In this instance, she may have scraped the surface in her analysis when speaking of herself, as she prefers to present herself as a defiant person and often does not relate the stories of her suffering. It is almost as though the book was still a form of protest on her part, ensuring that the oppressor did not see her break.

DEH Russell's article, *Life in a police state: A black South African woman speaks out*,<sup>11</sup> provides a detailed interview conducted with Jean Pease, a schoolteacher, who was detained in prison in 1985 during a State of Emergency imposed by President PW Botha. Although Pease was not detained in Kroonstad, this article is an example of the kind of atrocities with which black women in prison were faced and how detention and other forms of oppression might have differed for men and women in apartheid SA. The article also covers the effects of racism in prison and, more importantly, the effects that detention had on Pease as a person; thus, highlighting the most undisclosed aspect about detention. Although not extensively, she provides insight into how solitary confinement affected her, how she related to people while she was in prison and when she was released, and relates how long it took her to get over the shock.

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10 For more information and clarity, read CK Makhoere, *No child's play: In prison under apartheid* (London: Women's Press, 1988), pp. 1-128.

11 DEH Russell, "Life in a police state: A black South African woman speaks out", *Women's Studies International Forum* 12(2), 1989, pp.157-166.

#### 4. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article attempts to reveal the underreported and overlooked stories of women as political prisoners in the Kroonstad Prison. The researcher acknowledges that one cannot study women in prison during apartheid and not focus on their role during the struggle against unjust laws. There will, therefore, be an analysis of the role of women, the reasons for their incarceration and, more importantly, the stories they have shared while in prison. Thus, the researcher argues that there is a growing phenomenon, especially concerning the telling of women's own stories, to counter the perception that perhaps women's stories, "aren't important enough or not even relevant".<sup>12</sup>

In the 1960s, forms of torture on political activists were characterised by solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, standing for long periods and repeated assaults.<sup>13</sup> In the 1970s, during the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM),<sup>14</sup> a number of professional and educated women, such as nurses, social workers, teachers and medical doctors, were included as political prisoners. According to M Ramphele, these women were, however, marginalised as a result of the prevailing norms of discrimination and marginalisation due to ethnicity and gender.<sup>15</sup> During this period, many women flocked to the cities, while others moved into informal settlements near cities. This increased the workforce amongst females and more women received prominent jobs, such as managerial positions.<sup>16</sup> Forms of torture in the 1970s took a more violent approach and women began to experience the same assaults as men, although their torturers gradually started to focus on their sexuality. Women would be physically assaulted in a callous, brutal and vicious manner, for example being punched in the face or in the womb area, and experiencing threats of rape.<sup>17</sup> In the 1980s, women became even more active in the struggle against apartheid. To torture these women, the security forces started to use women's sexuality to undermine their identity and integrity during interrogations and while they

12 SAHA. The Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies Papers, File AL3119f, Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Workshop, 19 March 1996, p. 10.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

14 Ideals by Bantu Stephen Biko.

15 L Segal and P Holden, *Great lives: Pivotal moments* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2008), pp. 112, 117.

16 LS Graybill, "The contribution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission towards the promotion of women's rights in South Africa", <<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S02775395000016066>>, accessed 2 September 2016.

17 SAHA. The Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies Papers, File AL3119f, Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Workshop, 19 March 1996, p. 10. See also, M Fullard, "State repression in the 1960s". In: South African Democracy Education Trust, Volume 1, 1960-1970, pp. 355-363; M Coleman (ed.), *A crime against humanity: Analysing the repression of the apartheid state*, p. 48; D Foster, D Davis and D Sandler, *Detention and torture in South Africa: Psychological, legal and historical studies*, p. 11.

were already serving their sentences in prison. Women were expected to strip in front of police officers and prison guards, who made remarks about their bodies. They were asked to star-jump naked, with breasts exposed. In many instances, women's fallopian tubes were flooded with water until they burst and at times, rats would be pushed into their vaginas.<sup>18</sup> Without doubt, this was inhumane and degrading to women.

This article will briefly touch on the extent to which trauma played a role in the lives of these women and how the atrocities they suffered during their time in prison could have affected them, and perhaps still affect them to this day. The trauma experienced by political prisoners/activists in the Free State was discussed in an article by K Pudumo, C Twala and B Kompfi, but little attempt was made to highlight the effect of trauma on female prisoners. Another shortcoming is that it contains no reference to the Kroonstad Prison.<sup>19</sup> Although the author wrote extensively about women's suffering during the apartheid era in her MA mini-dissertation, the atrocities that took place in the female section of the aforementioned prison were not dealt with.<sup>20</sup>

The main objective of this article is to explore the personal narratives of women. The Kroonstad Prison was strategically chosen because it was one of the main prisons for black female political prisoners during apartheid; the female equivalent of Robben Island.

## 5. WOMEN'S ROLE IN RESISTING APARTHEID

Black female political prisoners were often sent to the Kroonstad Prison, although there were other female detainees on different charges in the prison as well. With black people becoming more militant in their approach to the fight against apartheid, many women began to take more active roles in the late 1960s. While in the early 1960s, some would be arrested for harbouring *Umkhonto weSizwe* (MK) soldiers, they later began to be more active as MK soldiers themselves. When looking at older women who were detained in the Kroonstad Prison, for

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18 A Krog, "Locked into loss and silence. Testimonies of gender and violence at the South African Truth Commission". In: CON Moser and FC Clark (eds), *Victims, perpetrators or actors? Gender, armed conflict and political violence*, p. 204.

19 K Pudumo, C Twala and B Kompfi, "The socio-political impact of trauma as experienced by the African National Congress's political activists in the Free State Province, 1970-1994", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5(3), March 2014, pp. 568-573. See also, K Pudumo, *The traumatic experience of the African National Congress's (ANC's) political activists in the Free State Province (1976-1994): An historical overview* (Unpublished Honours Dissertation, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 2013), pp. 8-50.

20 NPZ Mbatha, *Historical perspective on women as victims of human rights violations and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC), 1996-1998* (Unpublished MA Mini-Dissertation, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 2011), pp. 1-70.

example Amina Desai<sup>21</sup> and Dorothy Nyembe,<sup>22</sup> they were charged with assisting MK soldiers and having their homes used as underground bases. It was a crucial role they played, yet it can barely be seen as militant. In the late 1970s, South Africa had a more militant youth, as scores of them joined the military wings of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in exile, with some setting up camps in the country as underground bases. This move took on a more militant approach and an action-reaction pattern during apartheid, as the arm of the law became stricter against these political activists, whether male or female. The Western Cape region of the FedSAW launched a campaign in mid-1988 to focus attention on the plight of women political prisoners. "To understand the motivation for a campaign concentrating on women prisoners, we need to look beyond the statistics and focus on the conditions under which women are kept. Conditions relating to men and women political prisoners are disparate despite the fact that they have the same 'rights' in prison."<sup>23</sup> This was a response to the growing concern regarding the conditions to which women were subjected while in prison. It was also a way to emphasise the role of women at that time.

## 6. ANC WOMEN'S LEAGUE AS ONE OF THE WOMEN POLITICAL BODIES

There were several women political organisations during apartheid, which were aimed at fighting against injustices brought about by apartheid. For example, the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL)<sup>24</sup> set out tasks regarding the advancement of women's rights in South Africa. These were:

- To arouse the interest of African women in the struggle for freedom and equality; and assist the widespread organisation of women;
- To take up social problems and issues affecting women; and
- To carry on propaganda against apartheid and discriminatory laws among African women.<sup>25</sup>

The ANCWL, together with other organisations, set out to fight the oppressive pass laws, which the government had decided to extend to women. Several

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21 In 1972, she was sentenced to five years imprisonment under the Terrorism Act for furthering the aims of the banned African National Congress and the South African Communist Party.

22 She was the longest serving female political prisoner in South Africa. She was imprisoned for 15 years from 1969 to 1984.

23 Federation of South African Women to the Western Cape Government, p. 1.

24 Formed in 1943 and inaugurated at the 1948 ANC Annual General Conference, the ANCWL sought to become a voice for the women of South Africa and, at the same time, building awareness amongst women to take a more active role for their rights.

25 F Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: A history of the ANC* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing, 1988), p. 131.

campaigns were organised with other political parties, including the South African Communist Party (SACP). FedSAW<sup>26</sup> was launched in 1954 to act as an umbrella organisation, bringing together the key organisations of women in South Africa, and to also rally women around the country to form an entity.<sup>27</sup> On 17 April 1954, 150 delegates met in Johannesburg from different parts of South Africa to adopt a women's charter. The charter urged women to play a more active role in the struggle for national liberation and to identify certain goals and aims that the women would wish to reach to ensure that a state of national liberation was acquired.<sup>28</sup> At its launch, FedSAW stated a list of reasons why it had to be formed. These include: to embrace all women, irrespective of race, colour or nationality; to help strengthen, build and bring together in joint activity the various women's sections in the liberation movements, as well as other women's organisations; to express the needs and aspirations of housewives, wage earners, rural and professional women of SA; to bring about the emancipation of women from the special disabilities suffered by them under laws, customs and conventions; and to strive for a genuine South African democracy, based on complete equality and friendship between men and women, and between each section.<sup>29</sup>

FedSAW affiliates included the ANCWL and various trade unions; the Congress of Democrats; the Indian Congress; and the South African Coloured People's Organisation.<sup>30</sup> Another organisation, called the Women's Defence of the Constitution League (also known as the Black Sash<sup>31</sup> because they wore black sashes when they carried out protests as a sign to "mourn the violations of the constitution"), often held silent protests throughout the country to protest government legislation. The Black Sash became very active during the apartheid years in being a voice for the oppressed. It was a white female organisation, but they focused on the discriminatory laws against other women of different races in the country.<sup>32</sup> These and other organised political groups of women expressed their concerns regarding the discriminatory laws in SA during apartheid. This brief background aims to highlight the role of women away from political organisations which were male dominated, as well as being, in part, an ideal way of highlighting their triumphs in overcoming discriminatory laws.

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26 I Liebenberg, *The long march: the story for liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria: HAUM, 1994), p. 217.

27 *Ibid.*

28 T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (London: Longman, 1983), p. 142.

29 Meli, p. 131.

30 Lodge, p. 142. Helen Joseph was a social worker and a founding member of the Congress Movement.

31 The Black Sash was established in 1955 in outrage over an artificial enlargement of the Senate that enabled entrenched clauses of the 1970 Constitution to be amended. It fought tirelessly against injustice and inequality in South Africa.

32 J Paton, *The land and people of South Africa* (Lippincott: s.n., 1990), p. 193.

## 7. EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN INCARCERATED AT THE KROONSTAD PRISON

A number of famous female politicians were incarcerated at the Kroonstad Prison, including Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Dorothy Nyembe and Thandi Modise, to name but a few. The three lines on which social inequality is generated – class, race and sex – were experienced by some of these black female political prisoners during apartheid. One may argue that this may still be the case in our current society; however, this warrants a different study.

An article in *Die Volksblad* newspaper on 25 September 1980 discussed white female prisoners in Kroonstad in a highly emotive undertone. Filled with empathy, the article stated, “When a woman finds herself in prison, it is essential that a consistent effort be made by the authorities to appreciate the extent of her humiliation and regret. She remains a woman, and that fact is important in determining the manner in which she is to be treated and trained [...] this is the first thing to strike you when you walk into the section reserved for women prisoners at Kroonstad: the feminine atmosphere, the order, the peaceful surrounding.”<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note how the article describes the, “section reserved for white female prisoners at Kroonstad”, but makes no mention of their counterparts in the black section of the prison. This could easily be interpreted as if the latter did not experience the same treatment. Furthermore, the article suggested that the former were the only ones to be forgiven and rescued.

In addition, in the same article, there is also the mention of female warders who were helpful and treated white female prisoners as having committed crimes due to emotions they were unable to control. As argued by J Cock, this was an indication that prison for white females was created as a homely, caring and stimulating environment within which to rehabilitate these traumatised, “fallen angels”.<sup>34</sup> However, Mokhoere, who was arrested in October 1976 under the Terrorism Act, had a different experience concerning the prison warders. Her recollection of prison conditions as a black female political prisoner was not one of a nurturing and safe space. She recalled, “Warrant officer Smith was a real bitch. She was a bully, clumsy, and most of the time when she came to work she was drunk. She believed her juniors should idolise her.”<sup>35</sup> Mokhoere stated that the prisoners were worse off with her, as she would look at them as if they were, “things coughed up and splashed against a dirty wall”. She says, as a black person, she was not expected to talk back to her. She describes thus, “blacks

33 *Die Volksblad*, 25 September 1980, p. 13.

34 J Cock, *Maids and madams – A study in the politics of exploitation* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1980), pp. 416-417.

35 JA Scheffler, *Wall tappings: An international anthology of women's prison writings 200 to the present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1986), p. 98.

were supposed to shuffle around and nod their heads all the time, but they had to jump when she called [...] She hated political prisoners the most.”<sup>36</sup>

It seems that in the 1980s, a number of newspapers, particularly the Afrikaans ones, had an interest in white women incarcerated at the Kroonstad Prison. This was evident when another article was published in the *Rapport*, describing the prison as a place of healing where these fallen angels were nursed back to health.<sup>37</sup> The headline read, “Women in prison – for them you weep”, which was contradictory, as the article allowed no opportunity for weeping. The article presented the prison as a serene place where these female prisoners were allowed to be feminine and do their hair, have photographs in their cells and even put up curtains to make their cells more homely. The article alluded to, “The bits of décor and colour which she employs to transform the small, claustrophobic square space behind the barred cell door into a reflection of her own personality, are authentically feminine and often excessive in character”.<sup>38</sup> Ironically, according to this article, the food in this prison was also presented as good and healthy, acknowledging that a plate could easily be seen as meticulously prepared by a woman.<sup>39</sup> Contrary to this splendid picture painted by the article on the white female section of the Kroonstad Prison, across the hall in the section for black female prisoners a different scenario prevailed. For example, Makhoere contends that milk was counted a privilege for black female prisoners and, therefore, their coffee and tea were always served black. She explained, “Some of the older prisoners thought that the coffee was made by braaing mealies, grinding them, then boil it [the mealies] to make coffee [...] tea was ‘red muthis some Nyanga used.’”<sup>40</sup>

The above description of the black female section gives a reflection that their food left a lot to be desired. In some instances, these prisoners were fed with rotten cabbage, over-cooked carrots, and accompanied by a mug of a yellow drink (powder mixed with water called *Phuzamandla* – which loosely translates to, “drink for strength”), although there were some meals which included soya beans, soft porridge, tinned fish, a hard slice of bread, and soup (merely brown powder and water). Breakfast and lunch were the same all week, except on Sundays when they would change to samp.<sup>41</sup> Makhoere described the fish as having been mixed up with its bones, boiled and served to prisoners.

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36 *Ibid.*

37 *Rapport*, 23 October 1983, p. 10.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 Scheffler, p. 101.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

The evidence above shows that there was a vast difference in the description of food for whites and that for black female prisoners. According to Makhoere, the food served also depended on the prisoner's race as Desai's diet was completely different as an Indian woman. Her breakfast was bread with jam or syrup, coffee or tea with milk; lunch was bread and well-prepared vegetables; and supper included mealie rice with meat or fish. As an Indian woman, she received meat three times a week, fish twice a week and soya beans also twice a week. When other prisoners questioned why her diet was different, they were told that she was Indian and therefore allowed an Indian diet. From the above, it is clear that, although Desai was categorised and imprisoned with black female prisoners, she enjoyed some preferential treatment being an Indian. This was a divide-and-rule strategy by the apartheid prison authorities.<sup>42</sup>

Of interest is the fact that Nyembe, Madikizela-Mandela and Desai would share the same table, yet their diets were different. Makhoere mentions that Nyembe also had a different diet, but failed to mention how different. She recalled that they could not accept these conditions and, therefore, wanted to challenge the "madness". She says that Nyembe and Desai would, at times, share their food with her causing her to feel somewhat fortunate. Moreover she felt spoilt because she shared meals and conversations with older prisoners.

While incarcerated, Makhoere noticed glaring racial inequities and refused to submit quietly to these injustices. In challenging the *status quo*, she organised other female prisoners to resist the human rights' violations of their prison conditions. These women, for the first time, started a hunger strike in a women prison. Their strike was successful, because it resulted in the improved provision of food. After the hunger strike victory, she [Makhoere] subsequently led the women in protests against prison clothes (doek and pinafore) and unfair labour practices. This protest, however, led her to solitary confinement.<sup>43</sup>

White female prisoners were allowed to participate in sports activities, including netball, tennis, squash, badminton and fitness, as well as crafts, such as clay modelling and crocheting.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, black prisoners were allowed a 30 minute walk in the yard, which was regarded as exercise. Frustratingly, a high wall enclosed the yard used for exercises.<sup>45</sup> The prison authorities had the tendency to place those who were deemed troublesome in solitary confinement and this was done solely to break the political spirit of such prisoners. When in solitary confinement, exercise would be less than 30 minutes as that time was also allocated for having a shower.<sup>46</sup> A confined daily routine for black women

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42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

44 Pete, p. 417.

45 AM Du Preez-Bezdrob, *Winnie Mandela: A life* (Johannesburg: Zebra Press, 2003), p. 166.

46 N Yousaf (ed.), *Apartheid narratives* (Amsterdam: s.n., 2001), p. 32.

included breakfast in the morning around 07:00, work from 08:00 until at 12:00, when they would have lunch. They would then be taken back to their prison cells at 12:40 until 13:00. They would be expected to work again for an hour from 13:00 to 14:00. At times, they would be granted a chance to do some exercises until just before supertime. Their normal day would end at 15:00 when they were taken back to their prison cells until the next morning.<sup>47</sup>

Although the apartheid government treated white female prisoners with sensitivity, it is argued in this article that such conditions were detrimental to the prisoners' community. The article in the *Rapport*, quoted previously, went further to state that, "some of them [women] are mothers, even grandmothers. Major Maureen Halgryn, the Commanding Officer of Kroonstad Women's Prison confessed that, 'When one is forced to listen to the problems of some of these prisoners, woman to woman, sometimes one cannot help but shed a tear with them. But you cry inside, because you are not supposed to show your emotions'."<sup>48</sup>

It was a different situation for black female prisoners who were in the same prison, as they continued to experience the segregation laws of apartheid. These included the issue of study privileges. Frances Baard in her account stated that, while incarcerated at the Kroonstad Prison, one of their tasks was to teach other inmates who could not read and write. Interestingly, the only book in their possession as inmates was the Bible and they were not issued with writing material. She said, "as a prisoner you must have something to write with. You do not care how you got it, and how you are going to get it, but you must have something. So we used to have some writing materials there too. And after we had given lessons we used to examine these people, like a proper school."<sup>49</sup> However, Baard did not explain as to how they obtained the writing materials. One can simply assume that some sympathetic prison workers provided them. Study privileges were in some instances withheld, especially in the late 1970s. It may be that, because during that period students protested against apartheid education, the prison authorities returned the "favour" by denying them the privilege of being able to study. There were exceptions in this regard; for example, Thandi Modise<sup>50</sup> was young when she was arrested in 1978 for

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47 Scheffler, p. 99.

48 *Rapport*, 23 October 1983, p. 10.

49 SA History Online "Jail - History of women's struggle in South Africa", <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/jail>>, accessed 30 March 2017.

50 Arrested in 1979 for MK underground activities, she was sentenced to eight years imprisonment and was released in 1988. Modise was four months pregnant when she got arrested. While she was in prison, she enrolled for studies and completed her matriculation and a BCom degree in Industrial Psychology and Economics. She is dubbed the first woman to be arrested for MK activities.

MK activities and not for student protests, which is why she probably was not punished by not being afforded study privileges.<sup>51</sup>

Sibongile Mkhabela,<sup>52</sup> on the other hand, stated that, "In prison there was nothing to write on except pieces of toilet paper. It was actually very interesting because it wasn't the first time; I think it was the second time in prison to use toilet paper as writing material. I had learnt the first time that if you wrote on toilet paper [and I have absolute respect for toilet paper], and somehow you found a needle, and you stuck it on a cloth and sewed it in, it could get home. Therefore, that's how I got my messages home. But then that also became part of my indictment (laughs). That led to my conviction because eventually, apparently, some Security cop found finally (*sic*) started searching the hems of the skirts and found 2 or 3 of those toilet papers that became evidence."<sup>53</sup> While she was in prison, her numerous applications to study were denied. When she came out, she was served with a banning order that restricted her from entering any place of education; she then matriculated by correspondence in 1983.<sup>54</sup>

White women wore dresses which they made themselves in prison, according to their own preferences and taste.<sup>55</sup> Black women, on the other hand, were put in prison uniforms. The prison uniform for black female prisoners comprised two denim overalls, two *doeks* (turbans/head wraps) and two pairs of panties. Makhoere described the panties as, "baggy white shorts with no elastic where they ended (which was near mid-thigh); they had elastic only around the waist. They were the thick, old-fashioned cotton type"; ones she described as fit for soccer players.<sup>56</sup> She further alluded to the fact, "We were expected to wear men's shoes; solid clumping tough shoes meant to last for the whole five years. They did not give us any polish for the shoes, either. We were also given two khakhi-grey night dresses, one with long sleeves and the other with short sleeves".<sup>57</sup> They also had two V-neck jerseys, socks, a white apron and

51 Parliament of South Africa, "Thandi Modise", <<https://www.parliament.gov.za/person-details-fancy/1732>>, accessed 1 November 2016.

52 Mkhabela was arrested for her role in the Soweto Uprisings of 1976. She was an executive member of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) and also the General Secretary for the South African Students Movement (SASM). Mkhabela was arrested and charged with sedition in what became known as the Soweto 11 trial where she was the only female. She was first sent to Fort Hare after her sentencing and then to the Kroonstad Prison.

53 Wits University LRC Oral History Project, "Sibongile Mkhabela" <[http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv\\_pdf/AG3298/AG3298-1-111-text.pdf](http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdf/AG3298/AG3298-1-111-text.pdf)>, accessed 10 February 2017.

54 SB Franktalk "Sibongile Mkhabela", <<http://sbfranktalk.blogpost.co.za/2016/06/bio-of-week.html>>, accessed 1 November 2016.

55 *Die Volksblad*, 25 September 1980, p. 13.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Scheffler, p. 99.

a red and yellow turban.<sup>58</sup> Makhoere says, “Looking at this ensemble, a normal reasonable person could see that this was insane. When we appeared in these ‘crazy clothes’; we looked like we were in a mental asylum. For example, blue denim overalls, white apron, brown shoes, navy-blue socks and a red or yellow turban; these people had decided to treat us like mad people but all identically mad, a uniform insanity.”<sup>59</sup>

It is interesting to note that the prison was a safe space for white women, one described as serene, whereas a black female prisoner described her space as a mental asylum.

## 8. STORIES OF WOMEN

Activist Ahmed Timol used the home of Amina Desai, one of the longest serving Indian female political prisoners, as an underground base. After Timol was arrested in October 1971 at a roadblock and found with communist literature in his car, these documents were traced back to Desai’s home. Her home was then raided while she was trying to destroy Timol’s diary and she was taken to John Vorster Square Prison in Johannesburg, where she was interrogated for four hours. Desai was kept in solitary confinement for several months after Timol’s death. She was then sentenced to five years under the Terrorism Act 83 of 1967, for furthering the aims of the banned ANC and the SACP in 1972. Her jail term was at the Kroonstad Prison. She was released in 1978, then banned and placed under house arrest for a further five years.<sup>60</sup>

In a book by FL Buntman, *Robben Island and prisoner resistance to apartheid*, Desai was described as having been somewhat racist when she came to prison, complaining about having to share meals with a black woman, Nyembe. Over time, “Mrs Desai was fierier against apartheid than Dorothy”, said an anonymous letter to the author of the aforementioned book on 10 January 1996.<sup>61</sup>

Nyembe was recognised as a, “symbol of the courage and resilience of women”.<sup>62</sup> She was imprisoned for 15 years from 1969 to 1984. She was arrested in 1963 for furthering the aims of a banned organisation, namely, the ANC. After three years she was released, but again arrested in 1968 and sentenced in February 1969 to 15 years under the Terrorism Act and Suppression of

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58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*

60 Wikipedia, “Amina Desai”, <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina\\_Desai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina_Desai)>, accessed 1 November 2016.

61 FL Buntman, *Robben Island and prisoner resistance to apartheid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

62 South African History Archive, “A FedSAW report: Women in prison”, <[http://www.saha.org.za/women/a\\_fedsaw\\_report\\_women\\_in\\_prison.htm](http://www.saha.org.za/women/a_fedsaw_report_women_in_prison.htm)>, accessed 1 November 2016.

Communism Act, accused of harbouring MK cadres.<sup>63</sup> The trial of Nyembe and 11 others took place in the Supreme Court in February and March 1969. The 16-page indictment alleged that, between June 1962 and November 1968, they had conspired with 26 others to overthrow the existing order in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) by means of subversion, terrorism, violent revolution and warfare. Of the 12 accused, 11 were found guilty of various charges under the Terrorism Act.<sup>64</sup> While serving her term in Kroonstad, she had no family support, since it was regarded as unacceptable for a woman to go to prison. Thus, she served her sentence in isolation.<sup>65</sup>

Mkhabela was one of the youngest inmates. Whilst in prison, she was determined to fight the apartheid system. She was inspired by the fact that the older generation had found a way of surviving prison. She stated, "We were not a generation of sixties; we were a new generation and ours was everything or nothing".<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, she argued, "With women, I suppose that it was more difficult because as much as we had access, we were really coming from different spaces. Those of us who still had the fight in them and you were meeting with people who say well you know, we are here now there's little we can do and as far as the prison itself was concerned, and those of us who felt what the hell what the hell."<sup>67</sup> She also mentioned that due to being moved from one prison to the next as black female prisoners, they were unable to build bonds of friendship in prison. Because she was moved around a lot, she would go for months at times without her family knowing where she was being held.<sup>68</sup> In her interview, conducted by Wits University, she spoke of her role in the liberation struggle, but did not dwell much on her suffering while in prison. Regarding the prison conditions, she highlighted only cases where she fought against the prison authorities, particularly on the issue of prison uniforms that were degrading. She did not dwell on her isolation, or on the issue of being declined the opportunity to study. Like Makhoere, Mkhabela is still militant, even in her account of events.

Makhoere was arrested in October 1976 under the Terrorism Act. She was held for ten months at the Silverton Police Station while awaiting trial and, thereafter, sentenced to five years in prison on 27 October 1977 for attempting to undergo military training. She was kept in isolation unlawfully for two years.<sup>69</sup> At some point, when she complained about the harsh prison treatment, a

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63 *Ibid.*

64 SADET, Volume 1, 1960-1970, p. 641.

65 South African History Archive, *passim*.

66 Wits University LRC Oral History Project, "Sibongile Mkhabela".

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

69 SA History Online, "Caesarina Makhoere", <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/caesarina-kona-makhoere>>, accessed 1 November 2016.

psychiatrist was called in to examine her.<sup>70</sup> Makhoere stressed how angry she was when the psychiatrist asked questions which sought to stress her abnormal behaviour. She explained, "I was angry because first, these people had put me into segregation for so long a period and then they brought this character here to ask me stupid questions, implying I must be insane".<sup>71</sup> She said that the psychiatrist wanted to justify her isolation to show that it was because of being uncooperative with the prison authorities and deserved to be segregated. She further explained, "I tell you that you have to attend to those problems because there is no sanity in this prison while there is this discrimination against most of us here. Interestingly, after this incident the psychiatrist never visited me again."<sup>72</sup> According to Makhoere, the emotional pain she suffered still endured years after she was released. She described how other prisoners would often feel helpless and sometimes would no longer know whether they were still human or not.<sup>73</sup>

## 9. PRISON TRAUMA

Solani and Niefertgodien described the emotional trauma which came with being imprisoned as follows, "Imprisonment allowed the state to monitor closely those it offended most and place them at the mercy of apartheid's activities. Warders enforced prison procedures slavishly and at least in some cases, callously. The South African penal system allowed for distributing individuals, fixing them in spaces, classifying them, extracting from them the maximum in time and force, training their bodies, coding their continuous behaviour, maintaining them in perfect visibility, forming around them an apparatus of observation, registration and recording, constituting from them a body of knowledge that is accumulated and centralised."<sup>74</sup>

What could be described as a safe haven for white women appeared to be hell for black female prisoners. When there were protests from the female black prisoners, the reaction was harsh punishment in the Kroonstad Prison. Solitary confinement, aimed at manipulating the detainee's psyche, since such prisoners were locked up individually in, probably, dark cells for weeks or months. Detainees understood the trauma and mental disturbance that came with such incarceration. The constant fear of death in detention was also traumatising. Many political prisoners experienced the distressing prison environment and

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70 J Mapanje, *Gathering seaweed: African prison writing* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 2002), p. 244.

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

73 Yousaf (ed.), p. 32.

74 Solani and Niefertgodien, p. 392.

the constant feeling of helplessness and despair. Prison authorities were always viewed with suspicion.<sup>75</sup>

Sister Bernard Ncube from FedSAW, who spent more than a year in solitary confinement (1986/87), recalls, “You are like an animal in a cage. Everything that was meant to help me be a human was taken away. Gradually, I came to understand that it was a period in which I would have nothing to do with the world and my friends. You need a strong spirit to build you up in these periods because you have nothing else.”<sup>76</sup> Mkhabela, on her isolation stated, “The trial took about another 11, 10 months. And of course you become isolated [...] that’s when you felt being a woman, because once you’re with the guys you have your first solitary confinement because you’re in Section 6. Once you are tried, you’re supposed to be going on trial with the on-trial prisoners, political prisoners, but on-trial prisoners. Now for the guys they could all be together, there were 10 of them. But I couldn’t be with anyone, so it meant another 11, 12 months of solitary confinement [*sic*].”<sup>77</sup> When Helen Suzman visited the inmates, she was told about the appalling prison conditions and the treatment meted out to the black female prisoners. Suzman could not believe that these prisoners could be subjected to isolation and denied visits from their relatives. The prisoners complained that the only reading material they were exposed to was the Bible and this, the prisoners argued, was to brainwash them.<sup>78</sup>

According to Krog, for the prisoners, particularly the black ones, trauma would start long before their actual incarceration. Psychological trauma became severe, even when prisoners were transported from the courts after the verdict of their cases *en route* to the prison cells. The questions such prisoners asked themselves included the following: Will I ever taste freedom? Will I ever be able to see my loved ones? What conditions will I be living under? The prisoners were also anxious about the fact that visits from their family members and correspondence with loved ones could also be declined without valid reasons.<sup>79</sup> All these limitations were used as punishment, with detainees understanding the trauma and mental disturbance that came with such incarceration. The constant fear of death in detention was also traumatising.<sup>80</sup>

Deprived of meeting their loved ones when they were in prison may have been one of the most difficult hardships these women faced. Nyembe was never visited by family during her whole 15 years at the Kroonstad Prison; that alone, may have been traumatic. Another aspect of trauma came as a result of leaving behind new-born babies at home to start the prison sentences. Alice Lesole, who was a student activist from Welkom, was subjected to this. Thandi

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75 Yousaf (ed.), p 32.

76 Federation of South African Women to the Western Cape Government, p. 1.

77 Wits University LRC Oral History Project, “Sibongile Mkhabela”.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Krog, p. 208.

80 *Ibid.*

Modise was four months pregnant when she was sentenced to the Kroonstad Prison and the environment she was in did not augur well for the development of her unborn baby. Mojabeng Radebe, who was arrested for her role in student politics in Welkom and the surrounding areas, expressed how she and her fellow comrades were ostracised by society when they returned from prison. Insults were heaped on them for being irresponsible by taking up a man's role in the struggle for liberation. She was placed in solitary confinement several times for her militancy.<sup>81</sup> Although this section of the article has focused on a few examples of prison torture and some related aspects to it, further studies can be pursued to unpack the above.

## 10. TRAUMA AND COMPLEXITIES OF RETELLING STORIES

The researcher came across a few women who were, at some point, incarcerated in the Kroonstad Prison, but after a few attempts to secure interviews unsuccessfully, decided to abandon the project for the time being. It was realised by the researcher that in writing this article and putting forth the message about the shocking conditions of black female prisoners generally, the interviewees would be reliving their past experiences and, at the same time, also the trauma. This is one aspect which researchers need to be wary of and it was through this realisation that the researcher came to understand the deep-seated emotional trauma of these female prisoners. This, the researcher believes, is one of the major factors which prevented them from being willing to expose their prison experiences. In order to address the above challenge, a similar study should be conducted whereby the stories of prison experiences can be recorded.

During the period of conducting this research, a pattern was identified in which the majority of the female prisoners simply scratched the surface when addressing the psychological and emotional trauma they experienced in prison. Although Mkhabela and Makhoere shared their stories as militant young people who wanted to prove that prison did not break them, in one way or another, their experiences as narrated showed that they had emotional scars. For Makhoere to have written a book on her prison experiences proved therapeutic. The book exposed the atrocities suffered by female prisoners under the apartheid prison system, which was devoid of corrective measures, exposing only punitive procedures.

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81 Sowetanlive "Writer tells of unsung mom's heroism" <[www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2012/06/29/writer-tells-the-story-of-unsung-mom-s-heroism](http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2012/06/29/writer-tells-the-story-of-unsung-mom-s-heroism)>, accessed 1 February 2017.

## 11. CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that the impact of prison conditions in the black female section of the Kroonstad Prison had negative consequences for such prisoners. Firstly, one may argue that black female prisoners were exposed to “double punishment”, namely, that they were prisoners and that they were female. Secondly, the gender stereotyping also complicated matters because they were accused of being involved in male-dominated territory, namely that of the liberation struggle. In fact, this argument suggested that females should not involve themselves in the liberation struggle. The above analysis can be seen as a synopsis of the bigger challenge of providing a historical narrative of the impact of the torture and trauma experienced by the female prisoners in the Kroonstad Prison. Thirdly, with this study the researcher hoped to elicit future research and create space for women to speak out about their prison experiences elsewhere in the country. The researcher also noted that sexual assault was one form of torture and a human rights violation that women had not spoken about previously. In most instances, the female prisoners had no faith in the prison authorities and were ever vigilant of possible rape and assault. Furthermore, the male prison warders would make sexual remarks to them. However, they could not report them due to the nature of the prison management system.