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## 2. Unyielding Warriors: The Role of Indian-Origin South African Women in Liberation Struggle

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses the role of Indian diasporic women in the South African anti-apartheid movement. Indian origin South African women united to combat the apartheid laws of the white government. Women of Indian descent made significant contributions to the liberation struggle that cannot be ignored. Very little documentation exists regarding the efforts of these courageous women to abolish slavery. These narratives are also essential to understanding the gendered perspective on the anti-apartheid struggle. Diverse women, including those with advanced degrees and from affluent environments, were among the first to join the struggle. Their movements were directed by these women*

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Women, Liberation, South Africa, Gender

**Introduction:** The origins of the Indian Diaspora in South Africa can be traced to the importation of indentured labour. Women were significant components of the new South African population among these migrants. Their experiences span colonial history and apartheid, culminating in the new social system of South Africa. As soon as the National Party took power in South Africa in 1948, the country's all-white government began enforcing existing policies of racial segregation through a system of legislation known as "apartheid." Under apartheid, non-white South Africans, who constitute the majority of the population, would be required to reside in separate areas from whites and use separate public facilities, with limited contact between the groups. By 1950, the South African government had prohibited marriages between whites and persons of other races and sexual relations between black and white South Africans. By classifying all South Africans by race, including Bantu (black Africans), coloured (mixed race), and white, the Population Registration Act of 1950 laid the groundwork for apartheid. Asian (meaning Indian and Pakistani) was later introduced as a fourth category. In some instances, legislation separated families by classifying parents as white and their offspring as coloured. South Africa was subject to the most draconian laws in human history. The international community recognised with grave concern the inhumane treatment of the black populace. Throughout apartheid, South Africa's position in international affairs remained crucial.



**Indian-Origin South African Women: Defiance, Dignity, and Fight for Freedom:** The participation of Indian-origin South African women in their struggle against the apartheid state can be traced to the popular Supreme Court ruling by Justice Malcolm Searle, popularly known as the Searle judgement, which invalidated all non-Christian and non-Indian marriages. This decision dealt a severe setback to the identity of women of Indian descent. Their unions were declared invalid. Their marital status was questioned. This court ruling triggered the minds of Indian-origin women, and they began to believe that they needed to break free from the constraints of being meek and the Indian stereotype of being feminine and feeble. Therefore, they have begun to promptly respond to the atrocities committed by the white government. They believe that participation in the movement is the only way to regain their dignity.

**Uncovering the Stories of Indian South African Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement:** The recurrent incidence and forms of resistance in India inspired the women even more. Their participation in the Satyagraha movement challenged their image as submissive and passive individuals. They demonstrated unequivocally that they had the same rights as their male counterparts, and thus had every right to live a dignified life; South Africa belonged to them just as much as it did to the Blacks. Black South African and Indian South African women united to combat the apartheid laws of the white government. Important contributions made by women of Indian descent to the liberation struggle cannot be ignored. There has been very little documentation of the efforts made by these courageous women to abolish slavery. These narratives are also crucial for deciphering the gendered perspective on the anti-apartheid struggle. Diverse women, including those from affluent backgrounds and with advanced degrees, were among the first to join the Struggle. These women gave direction to their movements. Some women who deserve special mention are:

**Kasturba Gandhi: A Silent Strength in the Freedom Struggle in South Africa:** Kasturba offered assistance to the women of the Indian community whose husbands had been arrested for opposing apartheid laws, leaving them alone. Kasturba joined Gandhi and worked alongside him. She was compelled to leave her home and speak out against the oppressive laws. She was Gandhi's primary source of support. Since the beginning of civilization, women have endured immeasurable suffering and oppression. The feminism of women is perpetually at odds with their engagement with the outside world. Concepts such as war resistance have been gendered and interpreted as masculine.

**Manonmoney Ama Naidoo: A Courageous Fighter for Freedom and Equality:** A political prisoner who resisted apartheid laws and was subjected to inhumane police treatment. She is originally from India. She was conceived in Transvaal. During the British colonisation of India, her maternal ancestors were indentured Indian labourers. Her father was a Mauritius-born vegetable vendor. In 1934, she became actively involved in the politics of the country, and she encouraged other women to enter the struggle by taking the lead.

**Rahima Moosa: Leading the Fight for Equality and Workers' Right:**



Rahima Moosa played a significant role in 1955 in rallying women from all castes, socioeconomic sectors, and ethnicities to oppose the government's segregationist laws. Rahima excelled at public speaking and delivered persuasive speeches. For the 1956 anti-defiance campaign, she delivered a ferocious address to the entire audience of women. She was one of the early female leaders who led the group of mobilised women in a protest march towards the Pretoria headquarters. Even though she was carrying a kid, Rahima assumed the leadership role in this campaign. This did not prevent her from ceasing to be politically active. Together with other female leaders like Meer Fatima and Lillian Yogi, she gave this march direction and was successful in persuading women to take part fully in the march. Rahima was placed on a government blacklist and prohibited in 1960 as a result of her political engagement.

### **Zainab Aswat: A Fearless Voice in the Struggle Against Apartheid:**

She first involved in a political demonstration occurred in 1946 when a small group of freedom fighters of Indian descent attempted to block one of Umbels Road's key streets. The government essentially issued the street. The young Indian South Africans attempted to obstruct their path. When the authorities later apprehended them, there were 18 resisters. One of them was Zainab Asvat. Six of the 18 people detained—Zahra Bhayat, Zubedia Patel, Mrs. Lakshmi Govender, and Mrs. Veermah Pather—were female. Those women had taken refuge next to the street they intended to block, but one night their tents were stormed, leading to numerous injuries as the tents collapsed on people. The leaders demanded that the female fighters go back to their homes, and the police detained the male fighters who had taken refuge in the tents as well. In response, the women protested and wouldn't turn around. They remained behind to stand behind their male commanders and comrades. The gathering that had assembled to support these struggles was addressed by Zainab Asvat. This was Zainab's first speech in front of an audience. She vehemently opposed the notion of racial supremacy in a speech that was both compelling and passionate. Later, she encouraged women to take part in the campaigns of defiance. She organised the demonstration.

**Aysha Dawood: Championing Equality and Defying Apartheid:** In the Western Cape, she was born. Her mother was Malay, while her father was a merchant from India. She was very interested in politics and news regarding events in her nation. She grew deeply resentful of the National Party, notably for enacting anti-movement laws during the apartheid era. She had a strong desire to join the anti-defiance efforts and oppose the harsh legislation. The trade union movement first called for a strike to protest the apartheid legislation of the National Party in 1951. The left supported the trade union movement. Ayesha eventually learned about the nation's leftist politics as a result. Her political activism started after she joined the strike. Ayesha continued her political activism soon after the strike; in fact, she got women to organise unions and take part in the disobedience. She established the Worcester United Action Committee at a very young age. The family of the struggling stalwart receives assistance from this committee after being abandoned. It also addressed issues with legislation, as well as housing and rental limitations put in place for persons based on the colour of their skin. She spent a lot of time working with the African National Congress, and she organised and led the



women's march, which included about 800 women. She was quickly approved as an A.N.C. member, and the year after she became a member, 1953, a committee of women sent her to Copenhagen to attend a convention of the International Democratic Federation for women. In the course of her political activism, she visited numerous industries to observe the situation of the black workers there and subsequently expressed concerns about their living and wage standards. She was previously detained for nine months of inciting and violating the act to combat communism. She was detained and accused of treason in 1956. She formed a close bond with veterans of the anti-apartheid movement during the arrest. She continued to battle against the laws against black people even after she was released from jail. An exit permit was delivered to Ayesha, causing her to leave the nation. In 1968, she departed for India, where she, her husband, and her children were all given full citizenship.

### **Rabbi Motala: Empowering Women and Defying Apartheid:**

Rabbia Motala is another name who cannot be overlooked. Her husband also took part in the fight against apartheid. She joined the Natal Indian Congress and marched in anti-apartheid demonstrations with its leaders. She assisted them in raising money for the families who had lost their breadwinners and were now alone. She was inspired to get involved in the African National Congress's efforts by her spouse. She met numerous notable people through her affiliations with many institutions, including Nelson Mandela, who frequently stayed at their house. Rabia continued to solicit money for the left-leaning publication *New Age*. She scribbled in it frequently. She would write especially about how women could struggle for change in society. She would repeatedly urge women through her writings that they needed to leave their homes and rebel against the apartheid regime in order to secure a better future for their offspring. Rabia joined the Banshees Committee in the 1960s, a group that aimed to support the needs of the relatives of those who had been exiled by the white government. In addition to being forced to stay inside their homes, they were also sent to extremely isolated locations without access to any form of communication. They were totally cut off from society and lived alone. They were in need. Rabia worked as a teacher for their kids because they were more at risk of not getting an education and she and the banshees committee helped these families maintain a normal existence. Through money they generated, the group also paid for rations and other household necessities. Additionally, Rabia's husband has dispatched medical teams to aid the exiles. Rabia's husband was detained once more for three years in the late 1960s due to his political opposition to the government. Rabia persisted in her fight against the Narwhal Party's racial prejudice during these three years. She persisted in organising women to oppose the laws of apartheid. She supported Nelson Mandela's wife Winnie in her struggle against the state. Rabia persisted in battling, and once her husband was released from prison, they saw Mandela, whom he had requested they meet while he was on Robin Island. They talked about how they would proceed politically. Mandela nominated Rabia's husband to be the country's ambassador to Morocco after the national party left. Remembering Rabia's role to the battle is important.

### **Devikarani Princilla Jana: A Fierce Advocate for Human Rights and Equality:**



Devikarani grew up in an environment where fighting for one's rights was encouraged. Due to his political involvement, her father was placed on trial, which was difficult for her and her family. In the 1960s, she enrolled in a Natal law school. She was interested in international affairs and politics and considered pursuing a legal education. She later chose to specialise in human rights. Through this, she became acquainted with a large number of individuals who approached her for assistance. As a human rights attorney, she witnessed firsthand the impacts apartheid laws had on individuals and families. Upon observing these unjust laws and the plight of the negroes, she wept. She was determined to oppose the oppressive government. She considered participating in the active politics of the country. Devikarani joined the clandestine Indian National Congress cell, through which she began organising individuals to oppose the purported laws. Through the organisations, she sought to provide legal counsel to the people. She offered free counsel and defended numerous political detainees in court. She also provided assistance to the families of the freedom fighters who were left destitute and without assistance from the National Party's government. In addition to her own life experiences, she witnessed the wretched condition of black women, who were subjected to the double subordination of being both black and female. Thus, she was inspired to rally them and defy the black laws. She subsequently became Mandela's secretary and was one of the few individuals permitted to visit him while he was imprisoned on Robin Island.

**Conclusion:** The participation of South African women of Indian descent in the struggle and their protest against the apartheid laws served as a significant source of inspiration for Indian women fighting for independence from the British Empire. Indian women's participation in the South African liberation struggle challenged the very notion that they are feeble and submissive. This sent a powerful message to Indian women back home that if South African Indian women could maintain their dignity and fight for their freedom, then so could they. A successful social movement requires a degree of political autonomy to maintain its relative alliances with other movements, it should be noted.

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