

Book review

Guerrillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa

Siphokazi Magadla

UKZN Press, 2023

ISBN: 9781869145163 / 186914516X

*Review by Anthea Garman**

Siphokazi Magadla's *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers* rests on 40 life histories of women who joined armed struggles of many kinds to fight apartheid. The book is a result of her doctorate which in turn rests on work she did while being a research consultant at the Institute for Security Studies. In 2010, on the tenth anniversary of the United Nations' (UN's) adoption of Resolution 1325¹, Magadla and Chery Hendricks produced the documentary *Women and Security Sector Transformation*

1 Security Council [resolution \(S/RES/1325\)](#) reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

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in *South Africa* (2010). Magadla interviewed Major General Ntsiki Memela-Motumi, then chief director of transformation management in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF); Thandi Modise, a previous chair of the Portfolio Committee on Defence in the National Assembly and; Mala Singh, former deputy national commissioner of the South African Police Service (SAPS). Memela-Motumi and Modise are both former combatants in Umkhonto weSizwe (MK). They provided rich accounts of how their experiences as women in MK informed their later roles in transforming the SANDF. However, the study also has a prior genesis in Magadla's own experience of being the daughter of a soldier in the Transkei Defence Force. He ended his military career at 40 after that force was integrated into the SANDF. Her mother, a psychiatric nurse, also made her aware of the unstable mental conditions of many soldiers who were demobilised from the various armed forces in the period around 1994. This personal knowledge plus the experience of working with the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) gives the impetus for an important study. It is a study arising out of the complicated and turbulent moment in time when seven armies were integrated. These seven armies include the South African Defence Force (SADF), MK, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) and the four 'homeland' armies. This was a period in which those who had chosen to fight apartheid were faced with the question of whether they were career soldiers or not; and whether a return to civilian life was possible now that there was no longer a war.

The author used the methodological route of life histories, with their richness, complexity, and mixed motivations. She also interviewed women from MK (22 of the 40); APLA (6 women); the Amabutho (11 women from township units organised to make the country "ungovernable" in the 1980s) and; one person from a self-defence unit. The author furthermore chose to situate this firmly in the terrain of contested gender understandings in the post-apartheid era. All of this gives this study its depth and range. In addition, Magadla draws on: (1) existing autobiographies and interviews; (2) poetry published by some of these combatants in *Malingbongwe: Poems from the Struggle by ANC Women* (edited by Lindiwe Mabuza, 2020) and; (3) on speeches and

comments from a conference she organised in 2016, *S'obashaya Ngamatye: Women and 60 Years of the Armed Struggle in South Africa*, as well as one or two other conferences. In this way she roots the whole study powerfully in the actual lives, actual experiences, actual words, and understandings of the women. As a result, one senses an enormous respect and care from the author in the way she treats these lives that she has had in her hands for the duration of this study.

As a reader and a journalist, I lived through this period. I met many of these women when they returned, and was so deeply impressed with their convictions, their choices, and their clarity about the future. Therefore, I take the following two lessons from this book:

First, there is the lesson regarding gender and the racial politics of feminism. Magadla uses the words “combative mothers” in the title deliberately. This is because she intends to walk right into the thorny thicket around being female, being mothers (or not), and being black under apartheid. She shows very persuasively – via their life stories – that many women chose to go into exile to fight. This was because apartheid forces had pushed the violence right into their homes and into their families. The attack from the state was multipronged: against their blackness, against their bodies, against their femaleness, against their loved ones, against the sanctity of their homes, and against their culture. They had multiple reasons to fight back and they were clear-eyed about what those reasons were. The reasons were both small and big at the same time. It ranged from avenging a lost brother through to changing the country in its entirety for the future. Magadla argues that it was the particular intimate nature of the experience of apartheid violence which shaped the combative experiences of these women. She describes this as a “politicised, militant and combative motherhood that defined women’s collective mobilisation and participation in the armed struggle inside and outside South Africa” (p. 96). But the nature of this militant response was also historical and deeply imbedded in African cultures of resistance. And Magadla makes this clear when she discusses Poqo and the Pan Africanist Congress whose resistance has a deep root in this country in the rural areas (in Chapter 2). It is interesting that many of the women interviewed did not consider themselves women-soldiers. They were

women *and* they were soldiers. And then, on integration in the transition period, many of these women (most of Magadla's subjects) decided that they were not career soldiers. They had taken up arms to achieve a goal, not to fight endless wars, and they chose to be demobilised. This discussion in Chapter 2 on "combative mothers" makes a major contribution to gender theory in South Africa.

Second, there is the lesson about the age of those who went into exile to fight. Again and again the phrase "I was seventeen" crops up in the book. It is very sobering to now sit with the debt owed to those who gave their youth to the struggle for the end of apartheid. It is extraordinary to feel and grasp – in their own words – the formation of the will to fight, to undo great wrongs at such a young age. It is astounding to realise that apartheid made instant adults of them. Magadla quotes Thenjiwe Mtintso (responding to a student at the University of the Witwatersrand's conference *Politics of the Armed Struggle in Southern Africa*, 2016) as saying: "... [we] actually left patriarchal societies and with a very clear intention, which is the liberation of the[ir] country ... We were our own agents" (p. 191). She also quotes Makhosazana Xaba's words of realisation: "Wow, I can do something in the world" (p. 49). These choices and motivations are so clearly agentic. Also the choices and motivations point to clarity around the root cause of the suffering being not just apartheid but societies rooted in violent patriarchy. It pervades these life stories and gives every one of these women a much larger cause to take on.

They certainly took on the patriarchy. Magadla points to how sexual violence in the MK camps has been sensationalised. She resituates this violence within the experiences of the waves of women who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s and confronted it – again with agency and clarity. Their struggle against patriarchal aggression and norms was made visible in the camps. They learned from those experiences, they changed situations, and they made life better for the oncoming waves of exile female combatants. Then they came back into the country with these strategies and understandings honed for the next round of struggle – the formation of a new gender order in a post-apartheid South Africa.

The truly sobering part of the book is the enormity of the debt owed to these women and the paltry ways in which they were compensated. Some

received a once-off payment for their years of military service – ranging from R12 000 for under a year through to R42 000 for up to 23 years. Some, certainly not all, received special pensions. Women who had led platoons and instructed cadres found their ranks downgraded because of their lack of education once they entered the SANDF. Those who decided on a career in the armed forces found themselves dismantling the patriarchal culture inside the SANDF all over again. But more than that, there was severe trauma and wounding to overcome and heal from. In the immediately gripping and engaging introduction, Magadla uses Makhosazana Xaba's poem, "Our wounds, our lips" (pp. 13–14). This is to show that the process of 'truth and reconciliation', which took place immediately after the political transition, was premature. It was just too early for many women combatants to turn up and tell their stories. The words "They wanted us to tell and listen before our wounds healed" speaks directly to the necessity for the time to be given to heal before they could speak. Magadla says: "It [the TRC] assumed that speech, the articulation of violence, ought to precede the healing instead of vice versa" (p. 14).

This is a book, in the fullness of time, full to the brim, of 40 women speaking to us. We are the beneficiaries of their very great sacrifices, from the time when they decided to be soldiers.