

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MK**From Leadership in the Trenches to Leadership in Government and Society**

South Africa still battles with a reality of sexism and a culture of patriarchy in the workplace that needs to be addressed. We must consider all avenues towards changing the mindsets of our people so as to ensure that our children eventually work in environments that are not stifled by narrow stereotypes.

By Jackie Sedibe

My name is Refiloe Florence Sedibe. I am a retired Major General of the South African National Defence Force and have spent a combined total of 40 years in military service as a soldier in the liberation struggle and later, as a senior official in the SANDF. I'm blessed to have also been wife to my loving husband Joe Modise, whom I miss dearly, and mother to our two lovely daughters Boipuso and Lesedi. The perspective that I have gained from each of these experiences; soldier, major-general, wife and mother, today forms within me a deep appreciation for the many challenges, which at times may have appeared insurmountable, that were faced by so many brave and determined women in the fight for South Africa's liberation. This article represents my attempt to cast some light on the lesser told stories of female cadres in the military wing of the ANC - Umkhonto we Sizwe. It is an effort to identify the difficult and lengthy path that women in the MK had to walk to finally gain acceptance into and legitimacy within its male-dominated ranks. Gender equality on the battle field is hard won - and perhaps unsurprisingly, the same was true within the MK. For those of us who had to sacrifice, struggle and endure under very difficult circumstances to earn fair recognition for our contribution to the liberation struggle, notions of equality thus take on special relevance. I hope to present the context in which women in the MK, from all walks of life, of differing talents, experiences and ages found the courage to prove that they were no different from any other cadre and had the strength to survive the inhospitable climate of war. I will also discuss my experiences as a female MK veteran in the post-Apartheid South African Defence Force (SANDF) and in South African society upon returning from exile.

I left my childhood home in Mpumalanga, South Africa, as a young girl in 1964 to join the MK shortly after the Rivonia trial. Leaders of the ANC had begun to recruit young men and women for military training abroad at the time and my father - who held a position in the ANC - spoke to me about the prospect of my enlisting

in the MK. I immediately indicated my wishes to join and was recruited by a family friend. After a dangerous crossing on foot from Zeerust to Lobatsi in Botswana, I formed part of a small contingent of youths who were headed to Tanzania for MK orientation. When I left South Africa, my understanding of politics was limited to the matters that I had overheard in discussion among members of my family, many of whom were actively involved in the ANC, and to the concerns that neighbours would raise as they recounted experiences gained under the oppression of apartheid either at work, on a plaas, or in the cities. My decision to join was thus partly made in anger at the brutality and hatefulness of the apartheid system but also, out of what was then a vague but sincere longing for a democratic South Africa.

I was educated by the MK while I was in exile; I received training in radio communication in conventional war at a military academy in Odessa, in the Soviet Union, and thereafter learned clandestine communication which included cryptography, frequency modulation and Morse code in Moscow. I also gained formative field experience in Tanzania. There were very few women in the MK at the time of my joining and at the camp in Kongwa, Tanzania, we numbered eight women amongst approximately 500 men. In fact, in those days there was very little knowledge of women, in any country of the world, taking up arms alongside men. We women of the MK trained and studied with our male counterparts and had to complete all of the same physical exercises. We were not granted, nor did we request, any gender based leniency and I believe that MK women in the camps gained resolve and a greater sense of purpose in being the exception. I learned that women in the MK could earn respect by show of skill and bravery. In terms of skill, most of the women in our camp were highly capable snipers; I and others were able to assemble and disassemble pistols and AK47s blindfolded. We also deepened our knowledge and understanding of politics through regular debate. This placed us on par with our male contemporaries in the camps. In terms of bravery however, 'very dangerous

tasks' were an area where women were seen to excel: we had women involved in MK activities in the early stages of its formation, particularly in regional commands. Women would volunteer to carry suitcases packed with weapons into the forward areas – those territories closest to South Africa, facing danger and the risk of long term detention almost on a daily basis. We lost some of our women to the horrors of Vlaakplaas and also in battle, while defending our bases in Angola against UNITA militia. Women completed covert missions from 'underground' houses in Botswana, Lesotho and South Africa and successfully operated under the nose of the notorious Special Branch without detection. Women also played a fundamental role in demonstrating that the liberation of South Africa was a cause that was championed by

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individuals of many nations and indeed, many races; we had operatives who were mainly white women sympathisers who drove cars, fully packed with weapons, into South Africa and similar international operatives who joined the struggle and agreed to smuggle weapons at various border posts when supplies were needed.

I returned from exile in 1993 with a husband in the senior ranks of the ANC and two young children, to a country at the dawn of a rebirth. Change was imminent and there was a strong mood

of excitement but it was however tempered by the painful sacrifices that had been demanded by the struggle. Nevertheless, our people were generally happy when we returned; we were greeted by friends and family who felt that at last, their fathers, mothers, children, brothers and sisters who had been away for so many years were now back and ready to dismantle the remaining structures of the evil system of apartheid. They believed that with trained cadres of the movement living amongst them, there would no longer be harassment and intimidation by the security forces of apartheid structures. But real change would prove slow and deliberate.

The integration process of seven different armed forces into one South African National Defence Force after 1994 was one of the most difficult integration processes to be completed by any national defence force. I strongly believe that successful integration was achieved because so many of us from the non-statutory forces (ANC MK) were determined to be integrated into the statutory system in order to effect necessary changes from within the system. The process demanded sincere compromise, discounting years of service, field experience and the level of training of former MK cadres. This meant that most had to be re-trained in conventional warfare, regardless of age or rank, which proved problematic because tutors in the SANDF were often very junior in terms of rank and experience relative to their pupils. This in turn promoted a culture of confrontation and animosity between the old guard and former non-statutory force personnel. I can assert from personal experience that gender equality within the SANDF was, and will continue to be, an important area requiring careful attention. I was a Major General in the MK, where I sat on the highest decision making body of the wing – the revolutionary council. Upon induction into the SANDF however, I had to accept the junior rank of a Brigadier. The justification that I was given for the modesty of my new rank was that there were no female generals in the former SADF and that I would find it difficult to cope as the solitary woman among men at

senior levels of the SANDF. Some felt that I should be grateful for the rank of Brigadier since my being an African female in the role set a new precedent in itself. I had to come to terms with a role that required me to salute higher ranking male colleagues who, as MK cadres, had been my juniors. Many MK women, men as well, gave up a lot to be integrated into the new structures of the SANDF.

New rules were introduced in the broader Public Service when the Employment Equity Act was introduced in the SANDF. With it came a wave of personnel re-shuffling and consequently, considerable anger amongst senior officers of the former SADF. This was mainly owing to the fact that finally, all senior officers were subjected to some form of scrutiny. Those who could not present a matriculation certificate had to vacate their positions or show that they were studying towards achieving a certificate. We saw a sizeable number of white officers leave the SANDF by opting for the exit packages that were introduced at this time.

In 1997, I was appointed as head of the Equal Opportunities Chief Directorate and worked tirelessly for that structure to gain recognition in the SANDF. We slowly gained respect from those who embraced change and I travelled extensively in South Africa and also travelled abroad to talk with troops and senior officials about my directorate and its policies. The international community in particular, received us well; I remember when I visited the United States as a Major General of the SANDF to attend the annual general meeting of the Defence Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) that our directorate's presentation on the subject of women in the SANDF - their training, deployment and experiences - received a standing ovation. I was subsequently invited to address different universities on the role that women played in the liberation struggle as it was understood that in South Africa both men and women had fought for the liberation of their country.

I established a gender forum for men and women to exchange ideas and

develop protocols on how to interact in the work environment. This forum helped me to understand the fears and concerns of both men and women and some of the causes of discrimination against women in the workplace. These interactions were instrumental to me in formulating new policy that was sensitive to *both* genders. In later years I broadened the focus of our directorate to include special attention to the values of the SANDF while South African soldiers were deployed outside the country. I believe that a strong appreciation of the core values of the SANDF is necessary in those troops engaged in peace keeping operations abroad. I would like to believe that I

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was perceived by my colleagues in the SANDF as a woman of strong character with a sincere interest in building a better, more inclusive defence force. I feel a sense of accomplishment in the fact that when I left the SANDF in 2004, there were more than 10 female generals in various arms of service – a striking contrast to the reality of just 10 years prior, when I was integrated into the statutory force. Today, the SANDF is still male dominated. This is mainly because of the nature of its mandate - but this fact should not be misinterpreted as sufficient grounds

for complacency. It simply means that women in the SANDF have still farther to travel along the road to gender equality; and to these women I say: ‘A Luta Continua!’

South Africa still battles with a reality of sexism and a culture of patriarchy in the workplace that needs to be addressed. We must consider all avenues towards changing the mindsets of our people so as to ensure that our children eventually work in environments that are not stifled by narrow stereotypes. I believe that gender mainstreaming courses, which inform personnel of the necessary role of women in the defence force, will be imperative in promoting gender equality in the SANDF. These courses should be included in the defence force training curriculum from formative to senior levels and regarded as among the courses required for the promotion of candidates. The defence force will become more merit based and equitable once the perception that the adoption of gender sensitive norms amounts to the lowering of standards is eradicated.

MK veterans, both women and men, can and should continue to play an important role in our defence force. The knowledge and understanding of politics that these individuals developed through their experiences in the non-statutory forces is a valuable resource that can be used to facilitate more measured and informed decision-making in current diplomatic assignments. I also believe that MK veterans have a strong role to play in curbing crime within their communities by heading community policing fora.

I salute those men and women who swelled the ranks of the MK, some of whom sacrificed not only their youth but their lives for this great nation and her people. We cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe, many of us barely out of childhood, were drawn to the movement in the hope of liberating our country in our lifetimes. The impossible was accomplished and freedom was won. The onus now lies with current and future leadership to safeguard and indeed reanimate the principles that governed the conduct and inspired the selfless sacrifice of so many of the cadres and leaders of our movement. ■