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The Family Politics of the Federation of South African Women: A History of Public Motherhood in Women's Antiracist Activism

Winner of the 2017 Catharine Stimpson Prize for Outstanding Feminist Scholarship

In the austral summer of 1972, Lilian Ngoyi sat down in her matchbox house in Soweto, Johannesburg, and wrote her life story. “Born in Pretoria Blood St 1911[, I] was the only girl in a family of five boys,” this story began. “I wish I could be reborn to put my shoulders under the wheel of freedom. Freedom of all my children. An Africa where there would be food for all. Universal & compulsory education,” this story ended.¹ As she was writing, Ngoyi had been confined to her home for a decade: she had been banned from public engagement in South Africa for her activism against apartheid, the regime of racial separation and inequality introduced in 1948.² She wrote at the request of a sponsor at Amnesty International, which was supporting her as a prisoner of conscience (Daymond 2015, 253–61).

Ngoyi's autobiography was, then, a political text. One would expect it to detail her history of activism: her rise from labor organizing, to the presidency of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League, to her presidency of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW)—the first national organization of women from all state-defined racial groups united

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¹ Lilian Ngoyi, typescript autobiography, 1972, Lilian Ngoyi Papers, Historical Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, file A2551, 1, 21. Punctuation has been slightly modified for readability.

² In 1956, Ngoyi became FEDSAW's president. At the year's end, she was arrested for treason and stood trial for four years. After her 1961 acquittal, she was banned from public speech or publication, or from meeting with more than one person at a time.

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against apartheid, founded in 1954. Yet she surveyed these years in just one paragraph.

In contrast to the brevity with which she treated her other political achievements, Ngoyi devoted more than a dozen pages—over half of the text—to an eight-month period in 1955. This was the time of the international tour that she took as delegate to the World Congress of Mothers of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), where she represented FEDSAW. As she traveled, she recalled, “this time I had no complex, I was a woman & a mother, my colour was not my problem.”³ Ngoyi explained the whole arc of her activism in terms of this transcendent power of motherhood: “the main thing is we do not want to discriminate. As mothers a child is a child.”⁴

A year after her journey to the World Congress of Mothers, Ngoyi led FEDSAW’s march of twenty thousand women to the prime minister’s office in Pretoria. On August 9, 1956, a day now celebrated as Women’s Day in South Africa, women marched with babies on their backs, holding children by the hand, to demand freedom from pass laws that divided their families. Passes were the despised identity documents that black South Africans were forced to carry to justify their presence in towns by linking them to white employers; introduced earlier in local municipalities, they were extended to black men across the country in 1952. Officials announced that pass laws would extend to black women in September 1955, threatening their ability to live with their kin.

In this article, I demonstrate that the deep history of public motherhood in southern Africa was what made FEDSAW’s famous march possible: biological and symbolic motherhood had long been associated with responsibility for public social life in the region. Moreover, I argue that the first half of the twentieth century was a time of profound transformation in the ways that women in southern Africa talked about and experienced motherhood. The influences of both Christianity and left-feminist internationalism encouraged women to claim that long-standing regional cultural forms of public engagement were a new extension of private maternal responsibilities. African women talked about their public activism as emanating from an idealized private sphere in order to make themselves legible as social actors, both to agents of the white-controlled state and to allies in South Africa and across transnational networks. In turn, these allies emphasized their own public motherhood to legitimate themselves to African activists. Motherhood became a potent political discourse, even as activist women’s control

³ Ngoyi, typescript autobiography, Lilian Ngoyi Papers, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

over their actual homes and family lives diminished under state oppression. This analysis therefore intervenes in a long-standing debate within South African feminist scholarship over whether FEDSAW's maternal politics were inherently conservative or radical by demonstrating that neither characterization is sufficient. FEDSAW's maternal politics were multivalent because of the history of gendered political communication and compromise out of which they emerged.

Rethinking FEDSAW in terms of public motherhood

Historians of west and east Africa have recently used the term "public motherhood" to refer to women's participation in spaces central to community life on the basis of literal or symbolic maternal authority (Semley 2011, 2012; Stephens 2013). These *longue-durée* studies have stressed that maternal responsibilities have long been understood as public as well as domestic and that motherhood has long been a powerful symbolic identity for women who were biological mothers, as well as for women who did not bear children. This concept theorizes why African women have historically understood motherhood as an empowering and capacious identity, by divorcing motherhood from Western assumptions that a woman's identity as a mother is defined primarily with respect to her domestic responsibilities to biological children and their father (Oyewùmí 2000). It highlights both the extended family and the broader society as spaces where mothering happens, as the capacity to create life has given women spiritual authority in both precolonial and modern Africa (Berger 2014).

The fact that "public motherhood" does not assume that mothering typically or previously happened in a private sphere is what differentiates this concept, productively, from the analytical framework that previous scholarship on South African women's organizing has employed: "maternalist politics." As Lorelle Semley describes, "some scholars examining how women have translated 'private' roles as mothers into political organizing in African, Western, and Latin American contexts have defined such action as 'maternalist' politics. Maternalist politics is defined narrowly in terms of a specific (often confrontational) relationship that self-defined mothers establish with the state" (Semley 2011, 174). Seth Koven and Sonya Michel pioneered this concept in their 1993 edited volume, which showcased how Western women shaped modern welfare states: "Women focused on shaping one particular area of state policy: maternal and child welfare. It was in this area, closely linked to the traditional female sphere, that women first claimed new roles for themselves. Using political discourses and strategies that we have called 'maternalist,' they transformed motherhood from wom-

en's primary *private* responsibility into *public* policy" (Koven and Michel 1993, 2). While Western public spheres were never as firmly separated from private life as this language suggests, this claim is glaringly inappropriate for African contexts, where women as public mothers had long shaped precolonial "public policy." Moreover, under colonialism and apartheid, public mothers often worked around oppressive states to advance political goals in ways that could prepare them to make demands on state officials.

Thinking about the long history of public motherhood can enable us to get past an enduring impasse in the existing scholarship on the politics of motherhood in FEDSAW. This impasse concerns how feminist maternal organizing was or potentially could be.

Julia C. Wells's work on women's anti-pass law activism has been most associated with the position that "maternal politics are clearly not to be confused with feminism" and "should not be mistaken for political maturity" (Wells 1998, 253). Of women like Ngoyi, Wells says, "The women who participated in the resistance movements had to transcend social norms which limited women's activities to the sphere of home and family. The conservative nature of both African and Western custom at those times militated heavily against women stepping beyond the bounds of the household into the sphere of public and political life" (Wells 1993, 139). Women's activism in FEDSAW represented "a major conceptual breakthrough," but it was still motivated by "their virtually inviolable dedication to their roles as mothers and homemakers." Racist policies that threatened "their ability to carry out these functions," Wells argued, "triggered an extremely emotive response." Activism against passes, as a defense of an existing familial arrangement, "centered on a conservative goal—to retain a known social order rather than to create a new one" (139).

African feminists have challenged Wells's analysis, arguing that black women's public defense of familial interests could advance women's rights as individuals and as members of families and communities in a racist state. "Why the Berlin Wall between blackness and liberation struggle on one hand and feminism on the other?" Nomboniso Gasa (2007a, 214) has asked. "These are the kinds of binaries that are completely unnecessary and do not make sense of black women's experiences. . . . African women were homeless by state design. . . . Their struggle against the pass laws, which were a tangible way of infringing their rights, was, in fact, a struggle to be in the public domain at the same time as a struggle for free movement" (214). Zine Magubane has insisted, "We cannot even speak of concepts like the nuclear family, relations between the sexes, the institution of marriage, or women's reproductive role outside of the fundamental fact of life for African women—the brutality of the migrant labour system" (Magubane 2010, 987).

These debates have largely been concerned with the era of black women's resistance against colonialism and apartheid. But what if we expanded our historical and theoretical lens? Cherryl Walker, who published the first and only book-length study of FEDSAW in 1982, has suggested that scholars should do just that. She came to this position after reflecting on that pioneering study, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (Walker [1982] 1991), which set out to examine women's public organizing across lines of race and class—without paying much attention to what women like Ngoyi meant when they identified themselves as *mothers*, not just women. In the original 1982 edition, Walker had concluded simply that maternal organizing was a “conservative defense of home and custom” ([1982] 1991, 264). By the early 1990s—moved by a growing body of feminist scholarship inspired by her work, and a growing South African women's movement of which she was a part—Walker retreated from this appraisal. In her introduction to the book's second edition in 1991, Walker suggested that it was “inadequate to categorise a women's politics constructed around the maternal and familial role as inherently conservative and leave it at that. This labeling seems to rest on an uncritical acceptance of conventional views (which one might describe as masculinist) of what the domain of the political is, with its corresponding designation of the domestic as the realm of the personal and therefore, by definition, the apolitical” (Walker [1982] 1991, xxi–xxii). Walker acknowledged that “historically motherhood in African society cannot be equated with submission and passivity” (xx); she stressed that “the association of mother with these qualities is a feature of Western rather than African society; and the unexamined assumption that this is what ‘mother’ must have meant to female anti-pass protesters in the 1950s and before suggests a Eurocentric interpretive bias” (xx). She reflected that precolonial ideas of motherhood as power may have shaped the lives of women like Ngoyi into the 1950s, as “the settler sex-gender system that came to dominate was neither pure nor uncontested. What this meant for women in the FSAW [FEDSAW] individually and collectively, how older meanings about womanhood and more specifically motherhood might have persisted and in what forms and whether there were any differences between leadership and members in this regard, are all aspects that need to be further investigated” (xx–xxi; see also Walker 1995).

Remarkably, no one has taken up this call to rethink FEDSAW's roots—even as scholarship on political motherhood after the 1950s is blossoming (Van Allen 2009; Sandwell 2015). This may be because we assume that FEDSAW's history has been sufficiently covered in Walker's book, which remains valuable despite its admitted limits. Yet because FEDSAW looms so large in feminist history and memory, its foundational politics of pub-

lic motherhood demand reexamination, in a deeper span of time and on a wider, global scale.

Public motherhood, households, and state power in the *longue durée*

When scholars talk about the politics of motherhood in colonial and apartheid South Africa, we too easily forget that public, political space was also domestic space before colonialism. In the “central cattle pattern,” the circular arrangement that archaeologists have identified as shaping most homesteads south of the Zambezi River from the seventh century, “the preeminent space of ‘public’ debate—the cattle byre—was entirely encompassed by the ‘domestic’ space of the homestead” (Healy-Clancy and Hickel 2014, 9). Oral traditions attest that access to this internalized public space was restricted by gender and generation: premenopausal women were traditionally barred. Yet motherhood authorized women’s power in the houses that encircled the byre. Most important, the mother of the male homestead head claimed great spiritual authority over the public life of the entire homestead. The homestead head’s mother traditionally resided above the cattle byre, in the “great house” at the homestead’s apex, closest to the ancestors and ritual objects. Male-dominated political space hinged on the maternal authority of women, especially older women. We cannot say, then, that mothers were excluded from precolonial public, political space (Hickel 2015).

Precolonial state power emanated from the homestead, which “served as a model for the organization of the state” (Kuper 1993, 473). As we know best for the Zulu state, both royal and commoner homesteads expanded by incorporating wives and made political alliances by marrying daughters out. Royal women—sisters and widows of kings and chiefs—were called “mother,” whether or not they had biological children. (Some of the most prominent royal sisters were in fact unmarried and without children, in order to maintain the type of authority defined by their fraternal link.) The spiritual authority of these royal “mothers”—whether biological or symbolic—paralleled that of a homestead head’s mother. But amid state expansion, royal women combined this with political authority over military homesteads. Their power was similar to that of “queen mothers” across Africa, who were “not just women rulers; they were women who ruled by doing for kings the things that mothers did for their sons” (Hanson 2002, 220).

The southern African states that confronted expanding frontiers of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century, then, had “the household as a foundation for statecraft,” to borrow Emily Lynn Osborn’s (2011, 2) term. Colonial administrators, in contrast, aimed to “treat households as discrete

and separate entities that can, nonetheless, be managed by the bureaucracy of rule” (2). Subjugating indigenous polities demanded subjugating African homes—turning institutions from which state power had historically emanated into spaces governable by the colonial state. Colonial officials, importing their familial ideals, looked to male homestead heads as mediating figures between households and the state. In the approach that came to be known as “indirect rule,” pioneered in Natal but extended across South Africa in the twentieth century, officials sought to increase the power of husbands and fathers within the household. Women were rendered legal minors, juridically subject to male authority to an unprecedented extent. Yet ultimately, colonial rule diminished homesteads’ political and economic power by undermining the systems of marriage and reproduction on which they were based. Taxes on wives and houses forced men into migrant wage labor and limited polygyny; colonial land policies prevented sons from establishing new homesteads as their fathers had, even as rural homesteads supported by male migrant laborers were supposed to preserve Africans’ rural and tribal identities (Guy 2014).

As the nineteenth-century mineral revolution pushed southern African men onto mines near burgeoning cities, women were also attracted to cities, working in their informal economies or in domestic service. At the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, urban areas were white- and male-dominated spaces, but by the early 1950s, more than a fifth of African women in South Africa were urban (Walker [1982] 1991, 128). Union officials hoped that urban women, like rural women, could be managed through their men: women were thus excluded from carrying individual passes by the national 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act, although municipalities enforced their own versions of pass laws that differentiated women by their relationships to employed men (Wells 1993, 7). As Linzi Manicom has argued, “‘The Native’ as a category of rule was a masculine one. African women were always distinctively designated when addressed within urban administration discourse as ‘the wife of’ or, if not definable in terms of a legitimate relation to a man, as ‘the Native woman,’ a sexualized construct and one that was framed as a social problem” (Manicom 1992, 456).

Amid these colonial transformations, both rural and urban African women were claiming new forms of authority over their homes and communities in terms of their spiritual leadership. There was some continuity here—women and especially mothers had long been associated with “public healing” (Berger 2014, 9). But under colonial conditions, African women newly claimed this authority as Christian mothers. As Christianity spread over the course of the nineteenth century, women proved the most avid converts, gathering in mothers’ prayer unions called *manyanos*. It is ironic that even as mis-

sionaries preached that women should preside over their children's domestic Christian education in private homes, they encouraged these public demonstrations of maternal piety to spread the gospel. *Manyanos* broadcast Christian motherhood through each union's distinctive uniform and voluble, emotional public services. *Manyano* women sometimes gathered to make demands on the state: members were conspicuous in the 1913 women's antipass protests in Bloemfontein. Debbie Gaitskell notes that 1929 antipass protests in Potchefstroom were "strikingly reminiscent of, and I suspect may well have drawn on, typical *manyano* patterns of group revivalism: the women gathered through singing in the streets of the location, 'moving from street to street until all the women had been collected' and their meetings would last virtually all night" (Gaitskell 1990, 270). But *manyanos* more generally worked to get around the state: not only by becoming fonts of resilience where women could talk about their struggles but also by building institutions such as schools and community gardens.

Translating public motherhood into social welfare movements and protest politics

Manyanos connected with other key forums for women's associational life in the first half of the twentieth century: social welfare movements. Christian leaders of these movements framed their work as an extension of maternal responsibilities and as complementary to, but distinct from, the work of men in explicitly political groups like the ANC, which excluded women from full membership until 1943 (Higgs 2004).

In making this move, African Christian women's language often suggested that state policies were pushing mothers into the public. Cecilia Lillian Tshabalala, founder of a Durban-based social welfare movement called the Daughters of Africa (DOA), thus described "the typical club woman" in the DOA as "a home woman who has found that she cannot isolate her home from her community, government and social, and that health conditions also invade its sanctuary, and that in order to protect her brood she must go out from its walls for part of her time and do her best to make government and social order and physical conditions as fine as possible, that they may upbuild and not destroy" (Tshabalala 1936, 12). Such language explains why scholars have too often written as if African women, like idealized Victorian housewives, were reluctantly putting a toe into public life to protect their children. Even scholars who see black women's maternal antiapartheid organizing as profoundly feminist fall into this: Gasa, for instance, claims that participants in antipass protests in the 1910s had been

newly “driven into the public political space by issues that were of *immediate relevance in their daily lives*” (Gasa 2007b, 140).

However, the activities of such groups, and their members’ biographies, suggest that this framing was a strategic discourse. This discourse dressed old traditions of public motherhood in garb imported from an international Christian missionary public sphere. In fact, Tshabalala never married or had children. She lived in a world defined by her spiritual leadership, as a Congregationalist woman who had traveled to the United States to continue her education as a teacher; she modeled the DOA after African American women’s clubs. Soon after writing about “the home woman,” she moved to the densely packed black settlement of Alexandra in Johannesburg to expand the DOA’s work of building nurseries and clinics, hosting savings schemes, and organizing boycotts against transport and housing policies that made it difficult for mothers to support kin (Healy-Clancy 2012).

Talking about the power of motherhood as something rooted in the private sphere—even as the historical and contemporaneous experiences of black mothers were at the heart of public life—made African women legible to white state officials, as African women also built bridges across lines of race and class. For instance, Isabel Sililo, elected the DOA’s national president in 1936, was also a founding member of the Durban Bantu Women’s Society, begun in 1930. The Bantu Women’s Society persuaded the city to open a Child Welfare Clinic for Natives through its appeals by women as mothers. At the same time, the DOA provided their own education and health care to Durban families. As a leader of the Durban Bantu Child Welfare Society, Sililo worked with national and local networks of white, Indian, and mixed-race women concerned with child welfare. And in 1937, she and her DOA colleague Bertha Mkhize led a protest of several hundred black women against municipal pass laws. In 1938, Sililo critiqued black children’s exclusion from state food aid, in light of “the recognized importance in the national life of the problem of Malnutrition,” arguing that “Bantu boys and girls belong to South Africa and can claim no other country” (in Du Toit 2014, 316). Sililo publicly described her own five children and black children generally as “future citizens that will help to build or to mar the progressive future of their country” (316). Such demands espoused the ideal of a “welfare state—that is, one which accepted core responsibilities and powers for the provision of health care, education and welfare” predicated on a national “social interdependency” (Posel 2005, 66).

Yet women’s demands on the state in the 1930s and 1940s did not represent a new expression of maternal strength, rooted in women’s private experiences. Mkhize—a founding vice president who spoke at FEDSAW’s

first conference on behalf of the DOA—exemplified this point. In the 1937 Durban pass law protests, for instance, she argued that women needed to work unfettered in the city to pay school fees for “*our children*,” to “make them into good citizens of this country.”⁵ Mkhize herself, however, never married, and she never had biological children. Some of FEDSAW’s most radical members—such as Josie Mpama, one of the first black women to join the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)—invoked public motherhood both to get state support for community programs like child care schemes and to protest pass laws.⁶

FEDSAW brought together women from diverse backgrounds with experience in both social welfare work and protest politics; delegates at the founding meeting spoke in at least five languages. Most members hailed from the antiapartheid Congress Alliance, composed of the ANC Women’s League, the South African Indian Congress, and the Congress of Democrats (COD). Most African members were from Christian backgrounds, while the white membership prominently included Jewish women, and Indian and Coloured (mixed-race) members came from Muslim and Hindu backgrounds. Many members had experience with the Communist Party (banned in 1950) and trade unions.⁷ And they represented grassroots community groups, predicated on women’s familial authority.⁸ These community groups created spaces where the bridging power of public motherhood was most evident: after violence broke out between Africans and Indians in Durban in 1949, for instance, South African Indian Congress activist Fatima

⁵ “Deputation of Native Women to Native Commissioner, Durban, 18 March 1937,” Native Advisory Board Papers, South African National Archives, Durban Repository, file 4/1/3/1625.

⁶ Mpama, who represented the Transvaal All-Women’s Union at FEDSAW’s first conference, was a radical leader of antipass protests in Potchefstroom in the early 1930s. In the early 1940s, she served as the DOA’s national secretary; in the late 1940s, as a mother and as a member of Anglican church networks, she became involved with child care groups called the Association of African and European Women and the African Women’s Self-Help Association, which secured funding from Johannesburg officials. “Interview with Josie Palmer, conducted by Julie Wells on October 19, 1977,” and “Notes on Second Interview with Josie Palmer, conducted by Julie Wells, October 26, 1977,” Josie Palmer [Mpama] Papers, Historical Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, file AD2088.

⁷ Key unions included the Food and Canning Workers Union and the Garment Workers’ Union. Grassroots groups included the Cape Housewives’ League (represented by a founding vice president, Gladys Smith), the Cape Town Women’s Food Committee (represented by founding treasurer Hetty McLeod), vigilance associations from townships outside Cape Town, and the African Women’s Association of Durban. For a full list of women at FEDSAW’s first conference, see Walker ([1982] 1991, 283); for a list of FEDSAW’s first executive committee, see Walker ([1982] 1991, 155).

⁸ See n. 7 for lists of grassroots groups, attendees at FEDSAW’s first conference, and FEDSAW’s first executive committee.

Meer worked with Mkhize in the Durban and District Women's League, which organized a nursery and distributed food aid to poor families while bringing together women from diverse backgrounds (Hiralal 2014).

Traditions and translations of public motherhood bridged women's work within and between these organizations. White FEDSAW members found that claims to maternal authority were especially useful in legitimating themselves to black woman activists. Helen Joseph, a founding member of FEDSAW from Johannesburg and a COD member, came to South Africa from Britain as an adult. She came into antiapartheid politics through an earlier career in social work, during which she collaborated with women of color to provide health care and education to children, and in the nonracial Garment Workers' Union, where many of her close comrades were black mothers (Joseph 1966, 33; 1986, 28–29). In her experiences in these careers, Joseph became outraged as she saw how laws “oppressed black women, both as women and as mothers” and how “black children struggled for education and opportunity” (Joseph 1986, 11, 27). Joseph was divorced and never had children. But she fostered an image of symbolic motherhood similar to that of childless black women leaders like Mkhize: for instance, she received annual Mother's Day cards from activist friends (Caine 2008, 586).

Ray Alexander of the COD, who was a leading force in founding FEDSAW and its first secretary, was another immigrant to South Africa who attained powerful symbolic motherhood through trade union work. Alexander, who arrived in Cape Town from Latvia as a teenager in the late 1920s, promptly joined the CPSA and became a leading organizer in the Food and Canning Workers Union; her union comrade and fellow FEDSAW founding member Frances Baard recalled that workers would “call her our mother” (in Berger 1992, 200). Alexander understood the bridging power of motherhood to such an extent that she claimed to have had her three children in the interest of union solidarity: “I was determined to have a child because talking to the woman workers about the hardships and the struggles that women have, I felt at times that I am a fraud” (in Scanlon 2005, 4). It is striking that the white Communist Alexander (also known by her married name, Simons) avowedly became a mother in order to legitimate herself as a political ally in antiracist, working-class struggles.

With her COD comrade, the Communist Hilda Watts (also known by her married name, Bernstein), Alexander organized the national “conference to promote women's rights” that launched FEDSAW in Johannesburg on April 17, 1954. The invitation Alexander and Bernstein circulated to women's groups around the country stressed the power of women as public mothers: “The battle for democracy and liberation can only be won when women, mothers of the nation—a half of the whole population—can take their rightful place as free and equal partners with men. Throughout history

women have struggled side by side with men for justice.”⁹ This invocation of “mothers of the nation” appeared in a final version of the invitation, translated into isiXhosa and signed by sixty-three women from across the country; the language appears to have been added to an initial, shorter version in the same archival file, which instead referred simply to “women—a half of the whole population.”¹⁰ Its addition suggests that it offered something that the authors realized would be useful. Yet this vision of public motherhood was complicated. The invitation both reached for a language of public motherhood and missed what that history meant in precolonial southern Africa. The authors claimed that “in the past African and Indian women did not take part in government in their traditional society” but that “today those traditional forms have been broken down,” pushing women to engage in politics.¹¹ They planned for the first meeting to play with domestic roles while stressing women’s apparently new forms of public leadership. Male volunteers would do all catering—providing “a taste of real emancipation for both men and women!”¹² Decor would include banners focused urgently on the present, such as, “Mothers do not give birth to their children so that they may be killed by Atom bombs.”¹³

At FEDSAW’s founding conference, about 150 women gathered in a hall permeated by expressions of public motherhood but with this ambiguous vision of women’s history. FEDSAW’s first president, the unmarried ANC Women’s League leader and veteran activist Ida Mtwana, declared, “Gone are the days when the place of women was in the kitchen and looking after the children. Today, they are marching side by side with men in the road to freedom.”¹⁴ She suggested that women who might be reluctant to fight apartheid would be obligated by their maternal responsibilities to do so: “We cannot sit down and fold our arms when attempts are being made to hold our progress and that of our children. . . . If we do not fight now, it will be too late, and our children will curse us for our callousness.”¹⁵ Yet

⁹ “Conference to Promote Women’s Rights, to Be Held in the Trades Hall, Kerk Street, Johannesburg, on Saturday, 17th April, 1954,” Records of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), Historical Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, file AD1137-Ac1.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ray Alexander to Hilda Watts, April 5, 1954, FSAW, file AD1137-B2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Report of the First National Congress of Women, Held in the Trades Hall, Johannesburg, South Africa, April 17th 1954,” FSAW, file AD1137-Ac1.6.2, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

these women at FEDSAW's meeting had long been fighting as symbolic and/or biological mothers.

This sense that maternal political leadership was new clearly reflected tensions within activists' own homes—but we still need to look behind these immediate tensions, to the history that shaped them. Ngoyi declared, "If it had not been for the husbands, who kept back many of the women, we would have had many more delegates at this Conference. The husbands talked of democracy, but did not practice it."¹⁶ On one level, Ngoyi—who was herself a widow and mother of three—was speaking to an older history of domestic struggles between husbands and wives over how to balance women's responsibilities to their husbands and to others, including their children (Bozzoli 1983; Oyewùmí 2000). Yet the specific resentment with which men regarded women's political engagements in the 1950s also reflected the structures of colonial and apartheid law, which had entrenched black men's power within their homes even as all black people lost political and economic power (Hunter 2010).

FEDSAW's Women's Charter, the product of this first meeting, ignored the history of colonial and apartheid disruptions of the precolonial power of motherhood. It instead took apartheid-era "customary" laws making women legal minors as reflections of tradition:

We recognise that the women are treated as minors by these marriage and property laws because of ancient and revered traditions and customs which had their origin in the antiquity of the people and no doubt served purposes of great value in bygone times. There was a time in the African society when every woman reaching marriageable stage was assured of a husband, home, land and security. Then husbands and wives with their children belonged to families and clans that supplied most of their own material needs and were largely self-sufficient. Men and women were partners in a compact and closely-integrated family unit. These conditions have gone. The tribal and kinship society to which they belonged has been destroyed as a result of the loss of tribal lands, migration of men away from their tribal home, the growth of towns and industries and the rise of a great number of wage-earners on the farms and in the urban areas.¹⁷

"Tribal" history, in this view, reflected a stage of history that women needed to move beyond: "The law has lagged behind the development of society; it no longer corresponds to the actual social and economic position of women,"

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

the charter concluded.¹⁸ “This intolerable condition would not be allowed to continue were it not for the refusal of a large section of our menfolk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves.”¹⁹

This version of history reflected a broader theory of women’s historical movement from private maternal responsibilities to public politics, which animated leftist feminist internationalism in the 1950s. Thus Alexander’s opening address at FEDSAW’s founding meeting celebrated an organization called the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which she declared represented 140 million women in affiliate groups around the world. Indeed, the WIDF, established in Paris in late 1945, was “the biggest post-1945 international women’s organisation”; its aims were “anti-fascism, lasting peace, women’s rights, and better conditions for children,” and its orientation was broadly democratic socialist and internationalist, incorporating members from the first, second, and third worlds (de Haan 2010, 548; Armstrong 2016). FEDSAW never formally affiliated with the WIDF, likely due to South Africa’s 1950 Suppression of Communism Act. But the WIDF supported FEDSAW: a photo from FEDSAW’s founding graced the WIDF’s tenth anniversary report, printed beside an image from the 1955 Conference of Latin American Women in Rio de Janeiro.²⁰ Alexander raved of WIDF, “the women of the whole world, on whom falls the responsibility for the welfare of their homes, are growing more and more aware of the need to participate actively in the struggle for peace, national liberation, and friendship for all people, irrespective of race and colour.”²¹ Making maternal politics international, Alexander suggested, was an urgent task; constructing public motherhood as a novel and emerging force underscored that urgency.

Mothers getting around the state: The World Congress of Mothers and “their great world assembly”

Nineteen fifty-five was a major year in antiapartheid politics. On June 26, 1955, the Congress Alliance’s Congress of the People in Kliptown, Johan-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Women’s International Democratic Federation, “10th Anniversary of the Women’s International Democratic Federation,” 1955, pamphlet, Women’s International Democratic Federation, Berlin, 23; see also the discussion of the Defiance Campaign and Alexander’s activism in Women’s International Democratic Federation, “That They Might Live: African Women Arise,” 1954, pamphlet, Women’s International Democratic Federation, Berlin, 18–20.

²¹ “Report of the First National Congress of Women,” FSAW, 3.

nesburg, issued its Freedom Charter, collating demands for political and socioeconomic rights from antiapartheid activists around the country. FEDSAW contributed the section “What Women Demand,” beginning with claims to rights “FOR ALL MOTHERS OF ALL RACES”: these included four months of paid maternity leave, antenatal and child care, nursery schools, and contraceptive access. “What Women Demand” then claimed more rights for children’s health and education, before turning to rights for housing, infrastructure, and food “FOR ALL PEOPLE OF ALL RACES” AND “FOR ALL PEOPLE IN ALL PLACES.”²² As Shireen Hassim has observed, FEDSAW’s “concrete demands went beyond a general political call for the extension of political citizenship and reflected the importance placed by women on the creation of an inclusive welfare state” (Hassim 2005, 626). Hassim has drawn attention to how profoundly maternalist demands shaped the Freedom Charter’s agenda (Hassim 2014, 11). But she has inadequately explained from where these demands came.

To understand how public motherhood shaped the Freedom Charter, we must survey a broader landscape of women’s politics in 1955. In February 1955, FEDSAW members Joseph, Ngoyi, and Dora Tamana left the country, bound for a February meeting of the WIDF in Geneva. The WIDF meeting would plan a World Congress of Mothers in Lausanne, Switzerland, to occur July 7–10.

As Francisca de Haan has noted, scholars have neglected the scale and complexity of the WIDF, a casualty of Cold War assumptions of political homogeneity and insufficient feminism in leftist women’s organizing (de Haan 2010). Here de Haan neglects South African scholarship: Walker discussed FEDSAW’s Communist members’ engagement with the WIDF (Walker [1982] 1991, 100–102, 135, 253). In fact, Walker’s early critics complained she was “too conscious” of “the influence of European examples, like the Women’s International Democratic Federation,” at the expense of attending to “the overall change in consciousness amongst black [South African] women after the war” (Budlender, Meintjes, and Schreiner 1983, 133). But Walker showed no interest in the WIDF’s maternal politics—even referring to the World Congress of Mothers simply as “an international congress of women” (Walker [1982] 1991, 168).

We do not need to choose between tending to local histories of consciousness or tending to global histories of political organization if we attend to the key discourse that bridged South African women and the world beyond. It is clear that the WIDF enabled not women-as-women but

²² “What Women Demand,” FSAW, file AD1137-Ea2-001. The text was debated at a May 29, 1955, meeting.

women-as-mothers to get around the states from which they came—to create new forms of community for themselves and to contemplate new futures for their countries premised on peace and equality. The World Congress of Mothers’ organizers presented their meeting as a natural expression of international solidarity: “As if moved by an elemental force, they unmistakably recognize their mission on earth as guardians of life. And this elemental power breaks through all barriers, makes all fortuitous differences go glimmering. Only that remains which united—gentleness, maternal love, and the mother’s courage which goes beyond her own strength when a bird of prey threatens the nest.”²³

In reality, women were not equally mobile. In Geneva in February 1955, the FEDSAW delegates planned to present a report titled “The Life of Children in South Africa.”²⁴ Joseph had a passport and traveled without incident, but her black colleagues had a more difficult time. Ngoyi and Tamana traveled with WIDF funding but without passports, which officials had denied them. They first attempted to sail to England, traveling under aliases and secreting themselves in the toilet as the ship prepared to disembark, but authorities arrested them at the Cape Town dock. They boarded a flight from Johannesburg to Uganda, then flew to Italy, from which they were promptly deported to Amsterdam; from there, they flew to London, where Joseph met them. WIDF personnel indicated that it was not now safe for Ngoyi and Tamana to proceed to Geneva, as South African officials were eager to deport them. While Joseph went to this first meeting alone, Ngoyi and Tamana would stay on in East Berlin through the spring. They would then try to travel to Lausanne for the World Congress of Mothers in July, hoping that officials’ attention would by then be diverted (Joseph 1986, 6–7).²⁵

When they finally made it to the World Congress of Mothers in July 1955, Ngoyi and Tamana entered a broad tent holding women from sixty-six countries, for whom multivalent claims to maternal authority made diverse struggles legible. Motherhood was not an “elemental power” but a historical one that had to be translated. Ngoyi, who presided over the second session, was most impressed by a delegate from Madagascar, “a black woman with a baby strapped to her back”; by considering commonalities between the colonization of their countries and those countries’ anticolonial struggles, she realized

²³ “Mothers of the World!” *World Congress of Mothers News and Information*, no. 5, June 1955, Women’s International Democratic Federation Records (WIDF), Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1.

²⁴ “Children of South Africa,” 1955, Treason Trial Collection (TT), Historical Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, file AD1812-Ey1.4.1.1.

²⁵ Ngoyi, typescript autobiography, Lilian Ngoyi Papers, 13.

that “when other women were talking about their progress we were talking about being realised in the family of human beings.”²⁶ She and Tamana were also awed by Soviet and Chinese women, accepting invitations to tour China and the USSR later that summer; the meeting would generate many such tours (Donert 2013, 196–97). Delegates approved a “manifesto” calling for world peace, with appeals for disarmament to the United Nations and to the United States, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and France.²⁷

Most significant for our story, the World Congress was accompanied by a Great World Assembly, where women convened national meetings of mothers in support of its goals. FEDSAW would host such an assembly: “Addressed to all mothers, to all South African women, emphasizing the questions which affect them the most—discrimination in regard to children’s education, the sufferings of families as a result of deportation to the ‘reserves,’ poverty and the lack of decent housing and medical care.”²⁸

FEDSAW’s Congress of Mothers convened in Johannesburg on August 7, 1955. Its goals were both to support the World Congress of Mothers and to discuss the Freedom Charter issued by the Congress of the People just over a month prior, with an emphasis on “how we can campaign particularly for those sections of the Charter that call for ‘Houses, Security and Comfort!’ and ‘The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall Be Opened!’” It welcomed “every mother, every woman, to come to the Congress of Mothers. No woman will be debarred from attending. Every woman who has the future of her children, of the children of South Africa, at heart, is invited to attend this meeting.”²⁹ While Walker referred to this meeting, she called it only “a report-back meeting on the Congress of the People,” where “the women present were looking for some way of dramatising their opposition to Bantu Education, the Group Areas Act and several other contentious issues” (Walker [1982] 1991, 184). Yet public motherhood suffused this gathering. It began with the unionist and South African Indian Congress activist Rahima Moosa—who was then pregnant—affirming that “we women are the basis of the human race, we will not stand by and watch this destruction.”³⁰

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Message to the United Nations Organization” and “Message to the Conference of the Heads of Governments of the Four Great Powers,” July 10, 1955, WIDE. See also “Manifesto,” July 10, 1955, WIDE, box 2, folder 2.

²⁸ “Mothers Everywhere Are Preparing for Their Great World Assembly,” *World Congress of Mothers News and Information*, no. 4, May 1955, WIDE, 3.

²⁹ Invitation from the Federation of South African Women (Transvaal), July 27, 1955, FSAW, folder AD1137-Ae2.1.

³⁰ “Meeting of Congress of Mothers: Sunday August, 7, 1955,” TT, folder AD1812-Ey1.1.6, 1.

ANC Women's League activist and trade unionist Bertha Mashaba spoke eloquently about the unequal state school system of Bantu Education, against which the ANC was leading a national boycott: "So mothers, mothers, let us fight for our children, let us not expect anybody from outside to come and help us."³¹

FEDSAW's Congress of Mothers culminated in a unanimous decision to organize "A MASS DEPUTATION OF WOMEN OF ALL RACES TO PRETORIA" to protest apartheid educational and housing policies at the Union Buildings, seat of Prime Minister Johannes Strijdom.³² Their strategy was inspired by another recent model of white South African mothers making demands on the state. As Joseph explained, "I went to Pretoria with the European women as we slept in the Union Grounds, but I was ashamed that it was only European women . . . who did not invite the non-European women. Now, it is our chance, for the non-European women to invite the European women to go there."³³ The European women to whom she referred were members of the Black Sash, a new organization that had, since late May 1955, been organizing as voters and mothers. All of its members were white women—since no black women had the vote—and most were English-speaking liberals. Their immediate protest was against the proposed Senate Act, which sought to change the Constitution to add appointed seats that would entrench the ruling National Party's control while disenfranchising the small number of Coloured male voters. Their strategies included vigils and haunts: in vigils, groups of women in the eponymous black sashes—a sign of mourning for the Constitution—stood in front of state buildings with their heads bowed, camping overnight and working in shifts; in haunts, women surrounded officials and stared unyieldingly at them (Burton 2015). FEDSAW sought to take further such political theater of public motherhood.

Mothers returning to make demands on the state:

Women march on Pretoria

When her plane back to Johannesburg landed in September 1955, Ngoyi threw herself on the tarmac to "touch the soil of my country with her navel"; then, to waiting police, she "gave the Salute of the banned African Congress and shouted 'Africa Mayibuye' [let Africa return]."³⁴ She boasted

³¹ "Meeting of Congress of Mothers," TT, 11.

³² Invitation from the Federation of South African Women (Transvaal Region), n.d., FSAW, folder AD1137-Ae2.4.

³³ "Meeting of Congress of Mothers," TT, 12.

³⁴ Ngoyi, typescript autobiography, Lilian Ngoyi Papers, 13–18.

that her family could barely recognize her, as she was so happy and plump, wearing a dress six sizes bigger than the dress in which she had departed. She had been gone for eight months, during which time public motherhood had authorized an experience of evident personal transformation. She returned to a FEDSAW that was preparing—through the rising politicization of motherhood internationally and in South Africa—to make demands on the state on an unprecedented scale.

FEDSAW's October 27, 1955, march marked the first time that a multi-racial mass of women had marched on the central government. Its successes in organizing these women stemmed from a simultaneous increase in repression: in September 1955, officials had announced that they would issue passes to black women across the country, beginning in January (Walker [1982] 1991, 185). Yet this success also reflected a deeper and broader history of organizing—in *manyanos*, clubs, unions, and political organizations, centrally including the Congress of Mothers, from which Ngoyi had just returned.

Public motherhood structured women's politics. And the meanings of motherhood—and of family, of gender, of generation—were changing through women's politics. We see this as Joseph and Mashaba canvassed across Johannesburg and Pretoria to drum up support for the march, “slipping into the townships through dark entrances to avoid the township police and the brightly lit administrative offices” (Joseph 1966, 67). As Joseph recalled, “The women we sought were waiting for us patiently. The night meetings were always in a little house, in a small room, packed to the ceiling with women, wives, mothers, old and young, their dark faces shadowed by the glow of candles or oil lamps. We began always with a prayer, and ended with a Congress song, sung softly in harmony” (67). On the margins, “there were always one or two African men at these meetings, Congress officials, listening thoughtfully. . . . ‘What about the children?’ they would sometimes ask, and we would reply: ‘That day the men must be in the kitchen, they must make the food for the children, while the women go to Pretoria!’” (68).

So the women marched. Joseph remembered that they numbered two thousand. She marched at the front—side by side with Ngoyi, with the Coloured People's Congress activist and unionist Sophie Williams, and with a visibly pregnant Rahima Moosa. If it came to it, the women promised to “deliver her child themselves, right there on the steps of the Union Buildings” (Joseph 1966, 72). At the event, the four women delivered piles of petitions against apartheid educational, housing, and racial classification policies on the cabinet ministers' doorsteps.

On August 9, 1956, FEDSAW conducted an even more powerful demonstration. On the day since immortalized in South Africa as Women's Day, an estimated twenty thousand women marched on the Union Buildings.

They were joyously defiant, traveling from as far as Cape Town and picnicking on the official lawns. They wore *manyano* uniforms, white saris, ANC colors of green, black, and gold. Some had babies on their backs or children by the hand—their own or those of their white employers. Ngoyi worried that if arrested she would never again see her daughter, who accompanied her. They left great masses of individually signed petitions against pass laws at the absent Prime Minister Strijdom's office. To his closed door, Ngoyi declared, "The women of Africa are outside. They built this place and their husbands died for this" (in Wells 1993, 112). After they left these petitions, Ngoyi led them in a half hour of utter silence, followed by a round of the ANC anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika" (God bless Africa). Then they sang, "Wathint'abafazi, wathint'imbokodo. Strijdom uzo kufa!" (You have touched the women! You have struck a rock! Strijdom, you will die!) and "Malibongwe! Igama lamakhosikazi!" (Praise the name of the women!) (Joseph 1966, 79–85).

Conclusion: Why public motherhood continued to matter

Within a decade of these marches, FEDSAW would be destroyed by state repression of its leaders. FEDSAW women did not abolish pass laws, although their activism deferred implementation: it was not until February 1963 that it became compulsory for all African women to carry passes. The Bantu Education policy continued, and basic rights of citizenship would remain violently circumscribed for over three decades. But FEDSAW women's strategies for getting around and confronting the state as public mothers had three significant consequences for the antiapartheid struggle, and for the present.

First, FEDSAW women insisted on a dynamic, relational role in struggles against gender, racial, and class oppression. Men could cater their meetings and watch their children while they engaged in protest. This was not radical egalitarianism, but it did underscore how gender and family were performative, things that could change as women and men changed through political struggle.

The performative dimensions of public motherhood led to the second major consequence of FEDSAW women's activism: the entrenchment of a political culture of dissemblance. A "culture of dissemblance," as the term originated in African American women's history, is one in which black women "created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (Hine 1994, 37). In the American context, this culture responded to the sexual violence of slavery and segregation by promoting ideals of unim-

peachable womanhood; it could be both protective and repressive, aspirational and exclusionary. In South Africa, political performances of maternal authority could efface unconventional forms of love and could make it difficult to talk about familial struggles. For the FEDSAW women who loved women rather than men, who were childless by choice or fate, or who struggled with estrangements from their own children as they proclaimed their maternal authority publicly, a real limit of motherhood as a political strategy may have been its pain.

They also faced the pain of increasingly direct state repression against women. Tamana was banned after traveling for the World Congress of Mothers. Mpama was banned just before the October 1955 march. Ngoyi and Joseph were charged in the December 1956 Treason Trial, along with Baard, Mashaba, Mkhize, Mtwana, and a few others involved with FEDSAW. Most defendants in the Treason Trial were men, but it was significant, and new, that women were visibly among them. The third major consequence was thus that FEDSAW women forced the state to see them as political agents—but as political agents who could be especially powerful because of their relational identities. When you struck a woman, they insisted, you also struck her kin—with the implication that a mother and her family might strike back as one. Women's politics could be dangerously multiplicative.

Public motherhood would therefore remain a fertile site of politics. This became clear not only in efforts to relaunch FEDSAW in the late 1980s (Govender 1987). Performances of maternal authority have enabled women to make diverse rights claims—even as apartheid and postapartheid crises rendered women's control over their lives, their families, and their homes tenuous (Gobodo-Madikizela 2011; Stevenson 2011). A South African state and society rooted in solidarity and mutual care—in Ngoyi's words, where “as mothers a child is a child”—yet remains to be realized.

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