

# Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

**Amina  
Cachalia**

**RESOURCES**





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## Amina Cachalia RESOURCES

*Right: This offset lithograph poster publicized an event at which leading women in the South African struggle were honored at the launch of Western Cape Region of FEDSAW.*



### Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW)

*Extract from article on sahistory.org*

The Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW or FSAW) was launched on 17 April 1954 in Johannesburg as the first attempt to establish a broad-based women's organisation. This was the brainchild of Ray Simons who drew in others such as Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi and Amina Cachalia who formed the steering committee for the organisation.



**Video:** Amina Cachalia interview:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isJ\\_3ySoM5Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isJ_3ySoM5Q)





## Amina Cachalia

# Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

### Extract from Muslim Portraits: The Anti-Apartheid Struggle,

Goolam Vahed, Madiba Publishers (2012) [View the full PDF](#)

Amina Cachalia (1930 – ) Amina Cachalia, younger sister of Zainab Asvat, was born in Vereeniging on 28 June 1930. The ninth of eleven children, she was inspired by her father's (Ebrahim Asvat) political activities and 'stories about his days in the struggle with Mahatma Gandhi. I would lend an ear and listen to things, not knowing what he was really talking about.' Her views were shaped too by growing up in the mixed-race suburb of Newclare in Johannesburg: 'I had no concept of race. I didn't know I was an Indian. I was just another kid on the block. In fact, I didn't know that the junior school I attended was for Coloureds. It was just a school. I knew I was a Muslim because of being born into a Muslim home, but I really did not know I was Indian until I moved to Fordsburg. It hit me when I had to go to an Indian school.'

Amina was an 'activist' from an early age: 'At school, we were supposed to stand up and sing 'God Save the King.' I would never do it. The principal called me into his office and I told him I didn't believe in what was going on in South Africa. I thought the national anthem was part of our repression. He said, 'Goodness me, you're 11 years old. You must learn to sing the national anthem.' I said, 'I do know it but I will never stand up and sing it.'

From the late 1940s the struggle became her full time work. She did not complete matriculation but did a secretarial course. She joined the Transvaal Indian Congress Youth League (TICYL) and through her political

activities met future husband Yusuf Cachalia. Amina volunteered for the Peace Council and was a founding member, in 1948, of the Women's Progressive Union which was affiliated to the Institute of Race Relations. The Union taught women literacy, dress-making, secretarial skills, and basic skills in nursing in order to make them economically independent. Amina was an active participant in the Defiance Campaign 51 of 1952, distributing literature as well as recruiting volunteers. Along with 28 other women she was involved in a protest march in Germiston. They were arrested and sentenced to two weeks imprisonment in Boksburg Prison. Shortly after the Defiance Campaign ended, Hilda Bernstein and Ray Simons proposed a women's movement which came to fruition with the founding of FEDSAW in 1954. Amina was treasurer and worked with such icons as Helen Joseph and Lillian Ngoyi. FEDSAW organised the historic women's march to Pretoria on 9 August 1955 to protest against the law requiring African women to carry passes. Amina, although pregnant at the time, was one of the 20,000 marchers. She remembers that day clearly:

'We chose that day because it was a Thursday night and that is the day domestic workers had off. We wanted to accommodate them. I was pregnant with my first child so I was taken right up to the amphitheatre to wait for the rest of the women. There were women coming up with colourful blankets, some with

babies on their backs and singing. Watching these women coming up through the gardens was so spectacular'.

The child that Amina was carrying was her son Ghaleb and a standing joke in the Cachalia family is that he was the only male marcher that day. During the Treason Trial from 1956 to 1961 Amina was involved in collecting food and money to support the families of those trialists. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and banning of the ANC and the PAC, the resistance movement was forced underground. Amina was banned for five years in 1963 while her husband Yusuf was placed under house arrest. Amina was recovering from heart surgery at the time. The Rivonia Trial of 1963, where many political leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment, was a dark period in activists' lives. 'Life imprisonment meant that they could die there,

so it was a really very difficult period for all of us. I almost felt that it was the end of our political career in this country, because here were so many of our leaders going for good.' Amina and Yusuf Cachalia visited Mandela at Pollsmoor in the late 1980s.

'I had a million butterflies in my tummy. I was worried and excited – this man I hadn't seen for so many years. The last time I saw him was when he was sentenced... I didn't even know what he looked like anymore.... He 52 looked so different from what I imagined. We talked about the children, his children and my kids and family and friends.'

When her banning order expired in 1978, Amina threw herself into political activism through the TIC and UDF who opposed participation in government created structures. Under the democratically elected government in 1994, Amina Cachalia was elected an MP for the ANC.





# Amina Cachalia

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### Extract from Praise Be to Women, Remembering the Role of Women in South African History Through Dialogue

Malibongwe Igama Lamakhosikasi, issued by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2007. Available on [sahistory.org.za](http://sahistory.org.za)

... when I went to prison in 1952 for the Defiance Campaign, that was a highlight for me, because it put me in the same cell with other people and I learned to realise so early on that my aspirations are my hopes and my desires, they were not only mine, they were throughout the length and breadth of South Africa.

We were shipped together in one cell; two cells really, one big one and one small one. And we were 29 women who went voluntarily to prison in 1952, 26 of August - the first batch of women that went to prison. That was so important to me, personally, because here I spent, for the first time in my life, time with women,

other activists in prison - slept with them, ate with them, cleaned the toilet with them, cleaned the courtyard with them...Here I spent time with all types of women, one coloured woman, ordinary African women and Indian women...And we ate the same food, cleaned the same courtyards and we sang the same songs.

We absolutely identified with the new South Africa that was going to come many decades later. It was so important for us to live together because there was always common in every group in South Africa, the divide and the rule that the racist government had achieved..."

[DOWNLOAD THE PDF](#)



### Extract from We Make Freedom

By Beata Lipman, (1984, Pandora Press)



'I was banned for fifteen years - it started in 1963... November, and it went on till 1978. The first five years were absolute hell because the kids were small; they were at primary school and they needed me to go to school with them, to go and see their teachers, to have little birthday parties at home... that part really worried me the most. I could manage with not being able to see anyone because of my banning order; even with not going out - but I was very upset with the way it affected their lives. I was cut off completely from all other friends, relations, my sister and brother-in-law were banned as well...

'In 1946 the Indian Congress began the passive resistance campaign: we were very much in the tradition that Ghandi had helped forge when he worked in South Africa. I was too young to be allowed to go to gaol, but I canvassed and did what I could. The struggle was meant for Indians, and appealed to them as a group, but at the time our unity with the African National Congress was already quite strongly established, and a few Africans did join in. Our co-operation grew from then, until by the time of the Defiance Campaign in 1952 we were really altogether. Indian women were involved in these struggles from very early on. Even in the very first passive resistance campaign - the one organised by Mahatma Ghandi - an Indian girl died just



after she came out of gaol... a girl called Vallia Mamoodlia. She was only 16. There were lots of others that went to gaol during that time... Indian women have always played a role in the political struggles. They were as active as the men, but the men remained the leaders. So they were still suppressed... it's only recently that Indian women have gone out to work; they were always economically dependent on their husbands. Now they are becoming much more free, feel they can be their own boss, earn their own living. Like the men, we are hindered by all the discriminatory laws of the country, and especially by the Group Areas Act that means we can't live and work where we please. But otherwise, as women, there is no legal discrimination against us that doesn't also affect the men.





## Amina Cachalia

### Obituary: Amina Cachalia – Woman of Courage

*From the Sunday Times (South Africa), 3rd February 2013*

Amina Cachalia, who has died at the age of 82, played a leading role in the fight against apartheid - and paid dearly for it.

She spent 15 years under banning orders, she was followed by government agents, her home was raided, her phone tapped and messages intercepted.

Although small, she was tough and feisty and used her beauty and charm to considerable effect.

In the early 1960s her husband, Yusuf, whom she married in 1955, was in jail under justice minister John Vorster's notorious 180-day detention law when he managed to smuggle a note to her. The security police found out about it and descended en masse on her small home in the Indian "ghetto" of Fordsburg in Johannesburg.

They stormed inside and found the diminutive Cachalia waiting for them, flanked by her two young children. When the officer in charge approached her she grabbed his hand, bit it and told him to "leave my house immediately".

In 1963 she played the key role in the most audacious jailbreak in the apartheid era when she managed to charm a white Afrikaans guard into leaving a cell door unlocked, allowing prisoners Arthur Goldreich, Harold Wolpe, Mosie Moolla and Abdulhai Jassat to walk out of the Marshall Square police headquarters in Joburg.

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That same year she was served with her first five-year banning order while recuperating from serious heart surgery. As each banning order came to an end she was served with another. When her close friend Nelson Mandela became president in 1994, she was invited to meet Tini Vorster, the wife of the man behind so much of her anguish.

"You know, I hated your husband," she said to Mrs Vorster. "I am sure you did," Mrs Vorster replied quietly.

Cachalia was born on June 28 1930 in Vereeniging. Her father, Ebrahim Asvat, was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and helped to organise South Africa's first passive resistance campaign in 1907.

He died when Cachalia was 12 and she came under the influence of a teacher who was later secretary of the Transvaal Indian Congress and who, along with her older sister Zainab, a medical doctor who in 1969 left South Africa on an exit permit, greatly increased her political awareness.

Cachalia asked to be sent to school in Durban so that she could participate in the soon-to-be-launched women's passive resistance campaign.

However, the organising committee decided she was too young and frail [she had a heart condition] to go to jail and stopped her.

She returned to Joburg, but left school to learn shorthand and typing and get a job so that she could help to support her struggling family. As a result of her experiences in the workplace, she started the Women's Progressive Union in 1948 to foster training, skills development and financial independence for women.

She became active in the Indian congress - when the police raided their offices she served them tea, sandwiches and charm while her colleague, Ahmed Kathrada, removed incriminating documents from under their noses - and was arrested while participating in the 1952 Defiance Campaign.

Two years later she was part of the launch of the Federation of South African Women to oppose the extension of pass laws to black women, and was one of the leaders of the 20000-strong march of women on the Union

Buildings in Pretoria in 1956.

In the early 1960s she and Helen Joseph drove 11000km to visit people who had participated in land revolts and been banished by the government to remote and far-flung corners of the country. They investigated their plight and brought it to public attention.

In 1994 she was slated to be an ANC member of parliament, but family commitments prevented her from accepting.

Cachalia is survived by two children.



**Above:** Amina Cachalia and Nelson Mandela

## About this resource...

# Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

This presentation is part of a resource collaboratively developed by **The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML)** and **UEA**. It is part of the CML's work to promote the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in)justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation

Many of the images and linked documents are supplied with kind permission of project partners, **The Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives**. Other sources are referred to at the relevant places in the packs.

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AAM ARCHIVES

### Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives

*Forward to Freedom tells the story of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and its campaigns to support the people of South Africa in their fight against apartheid. The AAM also campaigned for freedom for Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, and against South Africa's attacks on its neighbours.*



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