

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

**Dorothy
Nyembe**

RESOURCES





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Dorothy Nyembe RESOURCES



Above: Poster issued by the African National Congress in 1984.

An Unmistakeable Figure

By Thomas Boatman,
from [South African History Online](#).

In late December 1931, Dorothy Nomzansi Nyembe was born and she would become one of the premier freedom fighters in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. She would also become the face of women's anti-apartheid activism despite and because she served the longest prison sentence given to a female political activist in the history of South Africa. Dorothy Nyembe began defying the unjust laws and confronting the daunting South African regime from a young age. She was an active leader in the African National Congress, specifically, the ANC Women's League, the Federation of South African Women, the Natal Rural Areas Committees, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and more during the fight against apartheid. While she was imprisoned for fifteen consecutive years for harboring terrorists under the Terrorism Act and Suppression of Communism Act, she became the face of women in prison and of the women's struggle for freedom, as she not only endured, but overcame the double burden of being black and a woman in Apartheid South Africa.

Dorothy Nyembe was significant not just because of what she represented, but also because she became the longest serving woman political prisoner in the history of South Africa. From her first run in with the law when she was just sixteen, to enduring multiple stints in prison, enduring treatment much crueller than what most African men experienced in prison, being released, and

finally witnessing the end of Apartheid, she became a founding mother of the South African democratic constitution and was an original member of the National Assembly. Her story is one of overcoming trials and tribulations. She was born and raised near Dundee in northern KwaZulu–Natal (formerly Natal) and was the granddaughter of Chief Ngedee Shezi. Her parents were poor farmers who were later forced to give up their livestock and become farm workers, which ultimately created a spark that ignited the fight in her from a young age. Nyembe gave birth to her only child at the age of fifteen and then just a few years later she began her political career as an activist while making a living as a hawkker. In 1952 she joined the African National Congress (ANC) and participated as a volunteer in the Defiance Campaign, which protested against unjust laws, in Durban, where she had her first brushes with the law on several occasions. Following this, in 1954, she actively participated in the establishment of the ANC Women's League in Cato Manor and became the chairperson of the "Two Sticks" Branch Committee in which she displayed impressive qualities of a fighter.

The year 1956 proved to be a highly active year for the freedom fighters, and especially for Nyembe, who continued to move up the ranks becoming an integral leader on the front lines in the Natal region. During this time, she continued to be an active community member around Durban and Cato Manor where she was a leading figure on the front lines, opposing the forced removals of persons from Cato Manor. While she continued her role as a leader of rapidly growing organizations, she remained active and visible on the front lines, leading many different protests and demonstrations.

One such example of her leadership was noted in the Dictionary of African Biography which stated that Nyembe led, "boycotts against the government - controlled beer halls, as well as against laws which forbade women from brewing beer at home." Brewing beer at home was one of the few ways that women could earn an income. Later that same year she was elected as vice – president of the Durban ANC Women's League and became a prominent member of the Federation of South African Women. As an activist, she did more than just boycott the beer halls. On August 9, 1956 Nyembe organized and helped lead the Natal contingent of women, where she led women to the Union buildings in Pretoria to object the introduction of passes for women. Thanks to the help of Nyembe and countless other women, August 9 is now celebrated as "Women's Day" in South Africa, remembering this march to the Union buildings in Pretoria. On a different note, she capped off this busy year by being arrested along with 156 others and was charged with high treason for her participation in the ANC Defiance Campaign, but those charges would be dropped shortly after her arrest and she was freed before the new year.

The decade of the 1960s tested the resiliency of Dorothy due to both the escalation in the fight for freedom and also her multiple prison stints. In 1961, the ANC's militant branch, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), recruited Nyembe to join the armed struggle. Here, she worked alongside many famous leaders such as Nelson Mandela. However, in 1963 Nyembe was arrested and charged with furthering the aims of the banned ANC in which she was sentenced to three years in prison. This three year prison sentence



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was the longest sentence that had been handed to her thus far in her young political and activists career. In 1966, following her release, she was given a five year banning order and sent to Durban where she was confined to the city limits. While she was banned, Nyembe continued organizing demonstrations and directing the allocation of resources and people, while working underground so that she would not get caught. But just three years into her ban, she was detained along with ten or so other people and charged on five counts under the Suppression of Communism Act. In March of 1969, after a grueling court case, Dorothy Nyembe, the only woman in the group, was found guilty of, “assisting and harboring members of the UmKhonto we Sizwe, and was sentenced to fifteen years in jail.” While Dorothy was imprisoned, she continued to defy the white authority and protested for better conditions and treatment of prisoners, including her facilitation of “a hunger strike to protest the abysmal treatment of women in prison.” While in prison, Nyembe took on the double burden of being black and a woman, and she was often times tortured, deprived of basic human rights, and stripped of her dignity. Despite this, she continued to stand tall and continued to fight for equal rights for all persons, even while imprisoned.

In her 1969 trial, Nyembe was found guilty and this highlighted how often political activist groups were infiltrated as illustrated by former comrades who betrayed their fellow activists by testifying on behalf of the prosecution. Jabulani Sithole noted the impact of the arrest of Nyembe. He stated that, “The arrest of Dorothy Nyembe, who had been a part of the

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ANC underground in the Greater Durban area in south – western Natal after 1966...sent shockwaves through the ranks of the small underground units in Natal” but furthermore, “Her arrest threatened to expose and implicate the others.” Because she was already under intense scrutiny and surveillance from the government, her arrest prompted some of her comrades to even testify as a state witness in order to save themselves from being exposed and arrested. Sithole suggests that this is why Chief Gatsha Buthelezi was a state witness in testifying against Nyembe, in order to protect himself from being jailed, although he was not nearly as active as Nyembe in the joint fight against apartheid.

In March of 1969, Nyembe began her fifteen-year sentence that would commence her transformation from a leader on the front lines to a leader for women on the “inside” of prison. In order to commemorate the poise and efforts of Nyembe, the ANC’s magazine, *Sechaba*, released in their August 1969 issue, several articles that displayed Nyembe on the front lines fighting for freedom. The article, “Day of Our Women Militants,” showed her leadership qualities during the August 9, 1956 march to Pretoria to protests passes for women. The article illustrated Nyembe and this march in 1956, as an example of revolutionary leadership, and stated, “we remember Dorothy Nyembe who is serving 15 years in jail for participating in the armed struggle.” A couple of pages later, this same issue of *Sechaba* explained her activism that resulted in the charges against her and the court’s ruling. The article, “South African Women in Gaol”, stated that, “Dorothy Nyembe of Durban...

Dorothy Nyembe being greeted by supporters on her release from prison for ANC and MK activities in March 1984. Photographer Omar Badsha. From [UCT Libraries Digital Collections](#).





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had been charged under the Terrorism Act with attempting to establish bases for armed attack in the country: and also with attempting to establish contacts in a military underground.” She was considered one of the top women leaders and was not afraid to escalate the fight to a level that many were afraid to do. As a result, she was given the longest prison sentence ever given to a woman political prisoner.

Nyembe brought her activism from the front lines, to the prison as soon as her sentence began in order to continue the same fight against oppression, but in a new environment. Even though she was not allowed to read or even listen to the radio, this did not deter her. She organized and led a protest against dreadful conditions of the prison, the treatment of all prisoners, but especially for women. Jean Middleton, an anti – Apartheid activist, wrote an article titled, “Women prisoners condemned to live in South Africa’s forgotten gaol” that

highlighted the horrid conditions of Barberton prison in the Eastern Transvaal, where Nyembe was first held. Middleton stated that along with the terrible conditions and inhumane treatment, she stated in respect to Dorothy, “... that Dorothy Nyembe, whom I knew as a fine, handsome, vigorous, intelligent woman, is serving fifteen years. Her crime was to oppose the system that produced the gaol which now holds her.” Middleton further noted that the prisoners that comprised Barberton prison were sent from all over the country, including other gaols as a means to, “defeat and to punish these prisoners.” The aim of Barberton was to be so cruel and so defeating that the prison did not allow visitors, and even more crushing was that prisoners were not allowed to sing, even on Sunday mornings, as Middleton recalled. The worse the prison became, the more Nyembe fought for better treatment for women behind bars.

In 1975, the United Nations Unit on Apartheid

published the document, “Women Against Apartheid in South Africa,” which stated that, “In the seven years she has already served, Dorothy has had no visitors and rarely gets letters” but she is, “One of the outstanding leaders in the struggle for freedom.” Recognized by the international community for her efforts on the frontlines, the UN Unit on Apartheid’s document acknowledged that one of the movement’s most vocal leaders, Nyembe, was not only halfway through her sentence, but was also still one of the faces of the women’s fight on the outside as well as on the inside while behind bars.

These brief statements by Middleton and the UN Unit on Apartheid summed up the character of Nyembe as an embodiment of resilience. The 1974 copy of *Sechaba* Volume 8 Number 8 and 9 August/September issue did a profile on Nyembe which displayed the impacts of her efforts as a woman and as a black person in South Africa. The profile was wrapped into the conclusion and focused on how the system of apartheid is to ensure the subordination of black to white people, but the apartheid policy itself creates another form of subordination of black women to black men. The profile and conclusion portrayed Nyembe as a shining example of a black South African woman who is constantly overcoming this double barrier and understands all men and women must unite in order to liberate themselves from Apartheid.

As her remaining sentence time began to

dwindle, Nyembe was about to come out of prison as the face of women in prison and even more so, one of the faces of all women during the struggle against apartheid. The poster on the following page was created by the ANC in 1984 as a means of showing gratitude for everything Nyembe had endured. The poster was also a way to simply welcome Nyembe home, while also commemorating all women who have engaged and participated in the struggle for freedom, thus making Dorothy one of the faces of women in prison as well as one in the struggle against Apartheid. The magazine, *Dawn*, published by the UmKhonto we Sizwe, further honored her that year by having journalist Grace Motaung write an article in *Dawn* that remarked, “...1984, must be a year of action. As we know that Comrade Dorothy Nyembe is coming out, after a long spell of imprisonment, she must be welcomed fittingly, by united action. Our welcome should prove that the ideals she was condemned to imprisonment for will never be lost.” The ideals that Nyembe fought for withstood time just as she withstood a fifteen-year prison sentence.

Fresh out of jail, Nyembe, already the face of women in prison, wasted no time reinstating her position as one of the most significant women leaders in the struggle against Apartheid. Julie Frederikse, an American journalist who covered apartheid in South Africa, interviewed Dorothy Nyembe a year and a half after she had been released from her fifteen-year imprisonment, in August of 1985. Frederikse asked Nyembe if her prison experience had adversely affected her feelings towards whites, to which Nyembe responded, “No, really – I don’t even against them, even now” (No missing words, taken



Left: Dorothy Nyembe and Lilian Ngoyi leading a 1952 Durban march. From [South African History Archive](#)



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directly from transcript). Even after all she had endured while in prison and on the front lines before being imprisoned, she remained steadfast in that she would not give up the fight even after being released. Nyembe was asked if she thought she had sacrificed enough and if someone else should take up the fight. To this, Dorothy responded, “When there’s a year coming I was just thinking to come outside (and) stand on a platform...and tell them how much I wish to fight against this apartheid”, but furthermore, she added, “I know I will go back. I know I will die inside in jail, but I am not planning to remain and sit fold up my hands – no.” Nothing could deter her from continuing the fight and continuing her role to the extent that she had before her imprisonment. But now as the face of women in prison and as one of the numerous faces of women against apartheid in general, she remained as focused as ever and strived to fight for equal rights. Nyembe continued to believe that everyone should have equal rights and stressed that everyone, even whites, can live in South Africa. She said in response to whether or not white persons born in South Africa should leave, she stated, “No, white and black, Coloureds and Indian they must live together in South Africa as a human being, not hate each other, so that we must teach each other... and those who are not understand to sit together with other people we will teach them to know that this South Africa’s belong to anybody.”

While she did stand for equal rights for everyone, following her release from prison in March 1984, she joined and became active in the Natal Organization of Women (NOW), thus exemplifying her continued efforts even

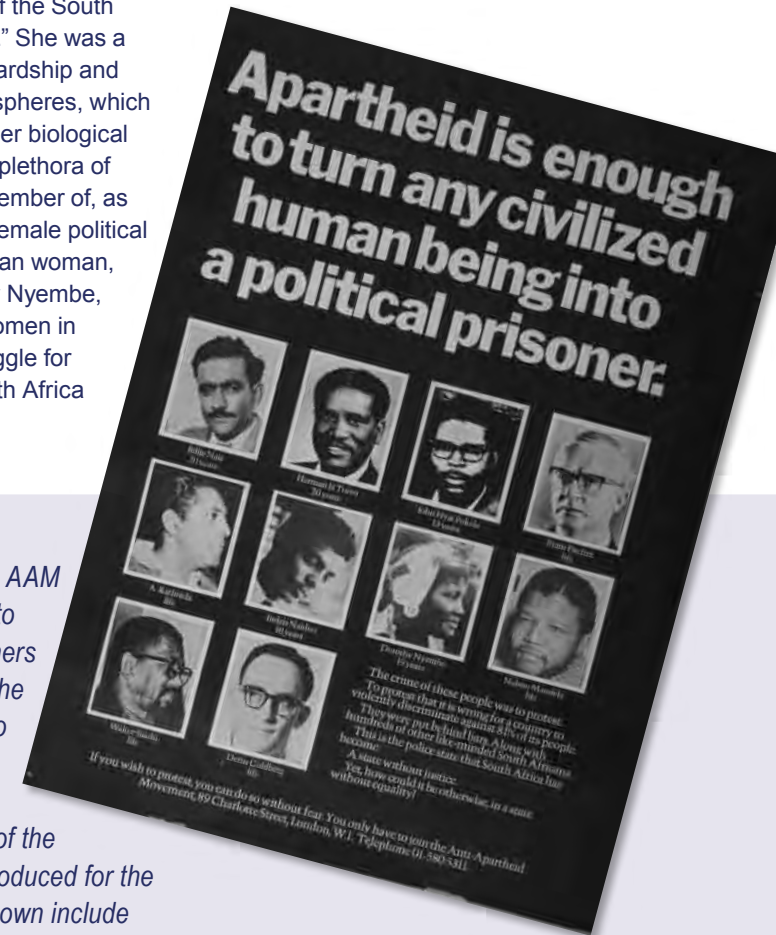
after serving the longest sentence for a political woman prisoner. While working with NOW, she continued to advocate for better opportunities for all women, particularly in regard to education and developing leadership skills, while continuing to advocate on behalf of women with respect to concerns such as rent increases, transportation costs, poor education and lack thereof, and lack of child care facilities. All of these factors, which were common tactics employed by the apartheid regime, were done so in order to suppress women. Grace Motaung, the journalist from the same issue of Dawn, listed Nyembe along the likes of other notable women as role models that young women should emulate. Motaung wrote that, “Young women in South Africa... must learn about the struggles of other nations and their courage to fight for their people, and the heroism displayed by women like... Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela, Dorothy Nyembe, Florence Matomela, Ida Mntwana... These are the women who could not fold their arms while their children were faced with starvation, disease, inadequate education and other evils by apartheid. Young women of our country must follow in the footsteps of these heroines with determination and fight for freedom in their life-time.” This was the standard that Nyembe set as an activist, leader, woman, and human being which set the bar for her peers, comrades, and for future generations of people, especially women.

Dorothy Nyembe, although not as well-known as other figures in the fight against apartheid, was the face of women in prison and of the women’s struggle against apartheid. Even though there is not much written about her,

the few things that are written about her hold true as, “she was one of the pioneer Members of the National Assembly and one of the founding mothers and fathers of the South African democratic constitution.” She was a living example of overcoming hardship and discrimination on two different spheres, which were the color of her skin and her biological sex. As an active leader in the plethora of organizations that she was a member of, as South Africa’s longest serving female political prisoner, as a black South African woman, and as a human being, Dorothy Nyembe, rightfully became the face of women in prison and of the women’s struggle for freedom against apartheid South Africa

Right: In February 1971 the AAM set up a special committee to campaign for political prisoners and detainees. It called on the South African government to include political prisoners in the amnesty announced to mark the tenth anniversary of the republic. This poster was produced for the campaign. The prisoners shown include Nelson Mandela, Bram Fischer and Dorothy Nyembe.

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Dorothy Nyembe Brought Insurgents to Kwaphindangene

By Vusi Sosibo, *Clarion Call*, May 1984. From [South African History Online](#).

When Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe were liberated through the armed struggle some black South Africans were extremely convinced that it is the only strategy blacks can follow to achieve liberation” Chief Buthelezi told about 40,000 chanting crowds at Jabulani Amphitheatre in Johannesburg.

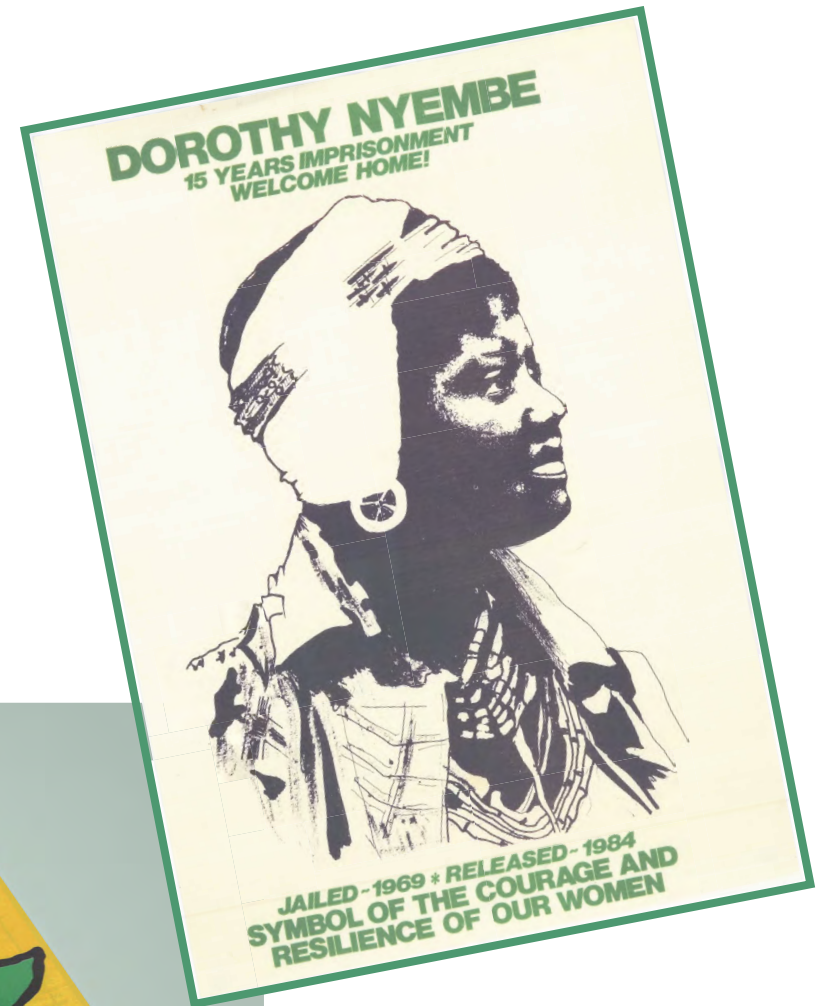
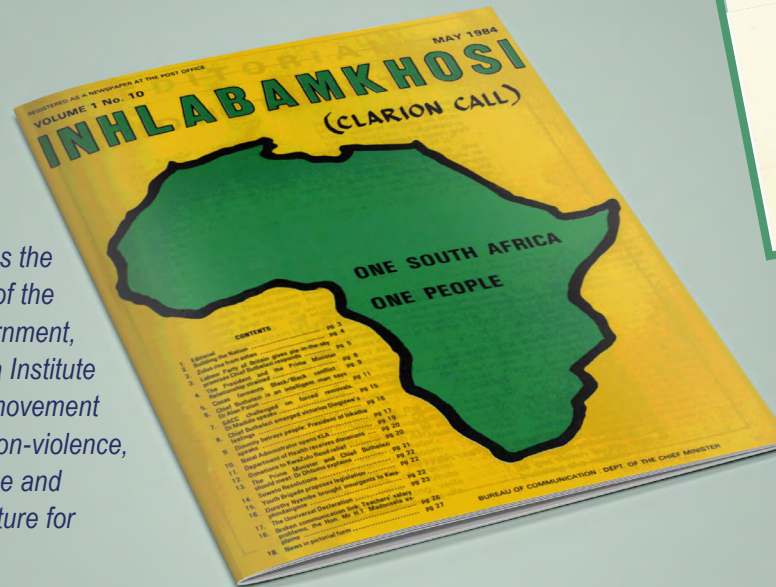
Addressing this historic gathering, Chief Buthelezi said that the armed struggle is not the solution to South Africa’s political problems. Apart from non-violence being a noble cause, all logistics did not favour the armed struggle as a means of liberating blacks in South Africa. All African state’s troops can never stand against South African troops, he said.

Commenting on the Nkomati Accord he said that this has vindicated his unwavering stand and argument that blacks just have no chance at the moment of challenging the Racist Regime through the armed struggle so called. “My attitude was not only based on my convictions on the strategy of non-violence, but even on the basis of pragmatism, the armed struggle was to me a non-starter for the foreseeable future, he said. Chief Buthelezi then said that he was dismayed at the bitterness that the Accord had generated in some quarters. There is a feeling in certain quarters that Mozambique has let us down but what did we expect President Samora Machel to do after two raids by the South African Defence Force? Did we expect him to pay tolerance to more and more raids, he asked. It must also be remembered that South Africa also assisted the Mozambique Resistance Movement.

This Accord has caused the whites to imagine that this can solve the South African problems. This mis-reading of the situation on both sides of the colour line spells disaster.

About Miss Dorothy Nyembe’s confinement about which the fallacious lies have been spread that he is responsible for it, Chief Buthelezi said this was a trap to him since among the insurgents of the External Mission of the ANC she brought at KwaPhindangene were already on cahoots with the Security Police. The Security Police encouraged this man to come with Dorothy Nyembe to bait me, he said.

Clarion Call was the official journal of the KwaZulu Government, and the Inkatha Institute - “a liberation movement committed to non-violence, peaceful change and a negotiated future for South Africa”



Above: Green, black and white poster. Artwork of Dorothy Nyembe. Commemoration of her release from 15 years in prison, 1969-1984. From [South African History Online](#).



Dorothy Nyembe

Profile - Dorothy Nyembe

Sechaba November 1981, from [South African History Online](#).

Dorothy Nyembe, known for the respect she commands as Nkosazana (Princess), was born in Natal in 1930. Brought up in an ANC family, she joined Congress in her early 20s. She was a courageous volunteer in the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of 1952, during which she served two short terms of imprisonment. Four years later, she led the Natal contingent of women to the historic demonstration against the extension of passes to women, outside the union buildings in Pretoria. At this time Dorothy was vice chairman of the ANC women's league, Durban branch. She was also a leading activist in the Federation of South African Women. In December 1956, she was arrested together with 155 others and charged with high treason. Dorothy spent most of the next

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year at court until the charge against her and sixty others was withdrawn on December 18. Dorothy was an energetic organiser in Cato Manor where she worked as a part time street trader. In 1959, after disturbances in the area, the City Council pressed for the banishment of Nyembe and other leaders from Durban. But the full City Council, by a majority of 1 rejected the recommendation. In that year, 200 delegates from the ANC women's league conference in Pietermaritzburg, elected Dorothy as their Natal president.

In 1962, after the banning of the ANC, Dorothy Nyembe was elected chairman of the Natal rural areas committee at a conference held under very difficult conditions. The following year saw women in nearly every rural area of Natal refusing to fill cattle dipping tanks. Instead, they destroyed them. The women argued that the racist authorities compelled them to fill tanks without any pay and in most cases they were made to

carry the water from water holes or rivers at some distance from the tanks. During this campaign, which became known as the Natal Women's Revolt, Dorothy was arrested again, charged with furthering the aims of the banned African National Congress and sentenced to three years imprisonment. On her release in 1966, she was banned for five years, restricted to Durban, prohibited from certain types of employment and from attending any gatherings. But this did not deter her. With the decision to move to armed struggle, Dorothy was, despite all obstacles to be found at her post. In 1968 she found herself back in the hands of the security police and was held in solitary confinement for many weeks. Eventually, in January 1969, she was brought to court along with ten men and charged on five counts under the Suppression of Communism Act. All but one of the accused were found guilty and sentenced to terms ranging from 5 to 20 years imprisonment. Dorothy Nyembe was found guilty of one charge- that of 'harbouring terrorists', for the aid she gave to Mk militants, she was sentence to 15 years imprisonment. Although young in years, Dorothy Nyembe displayed natural qualities of leadership. With a deep felt loyalty to the ANC, she learned from and worked with leaders of the calibre of M.B. Yengwa, Moses Mabhida and Harry Gwala. Dorothy began her prison sentence in March 1969 in Barbeton Prison. She was later moved to Kroonstad and is now with the other women political prisoners in Pretoria Maximum Security Prison. Her defiant spirits and confidence in her people and her organisation remain uncowed. Last year, along



Above: Rally at Cato Manor. From [South African History Archive](#)



ANC publication, *Sechaba*, [South African History Archive](#)

with other women prisoners, she took part in a hunger strike in protest at the appalling treatment they were suffering at the hands of the prison authorities. Dorothy Nyembe is due for release in 1984. LET US FIGHT FOR THE IMMEDIATE AND UNCONDITIONAL RELEASE OF DOROTHY NYEMBE AT ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS!



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Above: Dorothy Nyembe – 15 Years Imprisonment, Welcome Home! Dawn, Volume 6 Number 8 August 1982. From [South African History Online](#).

Video: SABC News The unveiling of a statue of struggle icon, Dorothy Nyembe, in Durban
<https://youtu.be/8UqvZwfGn6l?t=22>



Left: Dorothy Nyembe's statue at The Long March to Freedom – an outdoor exhibition of 100 life size bronze statues at the National Heritage Monument in Cape Town.
[The Long March to Freedom website](#).

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

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The development of the resources has been made possible with generous support from the **National Lottery Heritage Fund** and UEA's **Impact Fund**.



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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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