Women Who Carried the Struggle

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Winnie Mandela, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Wangari Maathai

The history of Africa's liberation struggles, as typically told, is substantially a history of men. This telling is incomplete — and it is worth naming plainly why: women's contributions to African liberation have been systematically undervalued in mainstream narratives, not because they were smaller, but because they were less often written down by the people who controlled the record.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (1936-2018), South Africa

For the twenty-seven years that Nelson Mandela was in prison, it was Winnie Madikizela-Mandela who kept his name alive, kept the spirit of resistance burning in the townships, and refused — at enormous personal cost — to be silenced by the most sophisticated repression the apartheid state could devise. She was banned, legally prohibited from speaking to more than one person at a time or being quoted in any publication. She was held in solitary confinement for seventeen months, subjected to sleep deprivation and psychological torture. She was banished to Brandfort, a remote, hostile township where she had no friends and spoke none of the local languages — and turned her banishment into a political base, opening a crèche and a clinic for the community.

Honest biography requires acknowledging that her story is not simple. The Mandela United Football Club, a group of young men who acted as her bodyguards in the late 1980s, became responsible for abductions, assaults, and the 1988 murder of fourteen-year-old Stompie Seipei. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission found Winnie 'politically and morally responsible' for these acts. This is a reminder that the psychological damage inflicted by decades of persecution leaves scars that can distort judgment — a context that does not excuse the harm caused, but that simple condemnation ignores. What is unambiguous: without Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the South African liberation struggle would have been immeasurably weaker during its darkest years. She was not merely 'Mandela's wife.' She was a revolutionary in her own right, who paid a price few people anywhere have been called upon to pay.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978), Nigeria

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti's political genius lay in her ability to transform ordinary women — market women, farmers, women who had never participated in any formal political process — into a disciplined, courageous, and effective political force. The Abeokuta Women's Union she built from a small literary club into a mass organisation of over 100,000 members drew on the deep Yoruba tradition of women's collective action — the same tradition behind the 1929 Aba Women's War — and turned it into a modern political movement.

Her tax revolt of 1946-1949 is one of the most successful examples of mass non-violent resistance in African colonial history. Thousands of women demonstrated at the palace of the Alake of Abeokuta, sang protest songs through the night, and withdrew their goods from the market to demonstrate their economic power. The campaign succeeded: the unjust tax was suspended, and the Alake was forced to abdicate. Her decision to drop her English names and use only her Yoruba name — Funmilayo — in the 1940s, when social pressure on educated Nigerians to adopt European manners was intense, was a deliberate act of cultural and political decolonisation, anticipating by decades the ideas Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would later articulate theoretically. She was the mother of musician and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti; in 1978, soldiers sent by the military government attacked her son's compound and threw her from a second-floor window. She never recovered, and died shortly afterward — killed, effectively, by the same military state her son was fighting.

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), Kenya

Wangari Maathai's insight — that environmental conservation, women's empowerment, and political democracy were not separate issues but expressions of the same fundamental commitment to human dignity — was decades ahead of its time when she articulated it in the 1970s. The first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a PhD, and Kenya's first female professor and department chair, she founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, beginning with a simple, practical act: giving women tree seedlings to plant on degraded land.

The act was laden with political meaning. In Kenya under the Moi dictatorship, forest land was being seized by politically connected individuals and cleared for private profit.

The trees Maathai's women planted — over 51 million of them, by 30,000 trained women, over the following decades — were a direct challenge to this system: an assertion that the land belonged to the community, and that women in particular had both the right and the capacity to defend it. She was beaten by police, arrested, and vilified by the Moi government, which recognised, correctly, that her movement was political organisation. She kept planting trees. In 2004, she became the first African woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, with the Nobel Committee explicitly linking environmental conservation to peace and democracy — a connection Maathai had been living since 1977.

> *"It's the little things citizens do. That's what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees."*
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> **— Wangari Maathai**

Women Who Carried the Struggle: At a Glance
Winnie Madikizela-Mandela: 17 months in solitary confinement; sustained the internal resistance during Mandela's 27-year imprisonment.
Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti: built a 100,000-member women's union; forced a colonial ruler's abdication through non-violent tax resistance.
Wangari Maathai: founded the Green Belt Movement, planting over 51 million trees; first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (2004).
Shared pattern: each built mass organisation — political, cultural, or environmental — often at severe personal and physical cost that male-centred narratives have consistently underreported.

Key Takeaways

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Wangari Maathai each built and sustained mass movements — political, cultural, environmental — often bearing costs of imprisonment, torture, or violence as severe as any male liberation hero, while receiving a fraction of the historical recognition. Their stories are not addenda to the liberation narrative; they are central to it. The next lesson turns to two figures whose

primary weapon was neither arms nor mass organisation, but ideas: Kwame Nkrumah's deeper biography and Wole Soyinka, the writer as political actor.