

## Revisiting Albert Luthuli and the role of women as pillars of Peace and Security in Africa

*Bianca Parry, Tinyiko Chauke, Puleng Segalo*

*Our women have never been treated by us as inferiors. It is the whites, misunderstanding the laws and customs by which we formerly governed ourselves, who have done this. Having no ready-made laws in their own society to meet the needs of ours, they have declared that our women are legally minors, throughout their lives. This does not reflect the situation as seen through African eyes, and it has done great injury to the position occupied by African women ... The question which we men who lead the movement and who see the suffering of our women ask ourselves is this: just how long can our women be expected to keep within bounds their indignation? (Chief Albert Luthuli ~ from the revised edition of his book, 'Let My People Go', 2006)*

Women worldwide are leaders of movements for reconciliation and reconstruction in their communities, acting as peacekeepers, relief workers and mediators. In 2000, the United Nations (UN) acknowledged these contributions by passing the first United Nations Security Council (UNSCR) resolution on [Women, Peace, and Security or WPS](#). This UNSCR resolution recognises that women's participation in peace processes contributes to longer, more resilient peace after a conflict. The WPS agenda is often described in terms of four pillars: women's participation and representation; prevention of GBV; and protection of women and girls' human rights; as well as prioritising their relief and recovery needs during and post-conflict.

Unfortunately, statistics show that women are often excluded from formal peace negotiations, which is inconsistent with the augmented impacts of war and [conflict on women and girls](#). Indeed, the UN states that incidents of Gender-based violence (GBV), such as sexual violence and domestic violence, often increase during and after war. Yet despite these devastating impacts, women continue to play a central role in their families and communities' well-being, through sheer determination and resilience. Researchers and scholars who have interrogated the WPS state that resilience in peacebuilding is most successful in supporting individuals, societies, and states to better absorb and cope with the challenges of [violent conflicts](#). In Africa, the African Union or AU, has championed the WPS agenda, while in South Africa specifically, the Southern African Development Community or SADC has highlighted the meaningful participation of women as active agents in the peace and security process. Leading not only through policy but in practice as well, regional initiatives in Africa recognise women's resilience through on the ground efforts in

[peacebuilding](#). In recognising the different experiences of women living through conflict, and highlighting their efforts in its resolution, African stakeholders are contributing towards transformative change that seeks to bring about peace, security, and development for all communities.

We draw on Albert Luthuli and his gradual progression to gender consciousness in his autobiography and public and political engagements. Albert Luthuli argued that African men stand to benefit when African women organise to fight in the struggle against the injustices of gender, class and race. In his autobiography, titled [Let My People Go](#), Luthuli praises women's leadership abilities to mobilise fellow sisters from across South Africa. Key to Luthuli's gender consciousness and solidarity with women is [Nokukhanya Luthuli's influence](#); her influence was critical to Luthuli's outlook on women's equal participation in politics and congress methods. In his autobiography, Luthuli reminisces on the women in his life, particularly uMam' Nokukhanya, his aunt and his mother, as industrious women holding the fort in the absence of men in the family.

Most Africans can attest to a similar upbringing and family structure surrounded by resilient and supportive women who could inspire redemptive masculinities that precipitate change and solidarity with women. When we look back at the then legislative sanctions on brewing beer, [Luthuli](#) understood its impact on Africans, particularly the threat to black women's economic independence and the maintenance of their families. He empathised with and supported women's illicit sale of home brews. In her thesis on South African women's movements and resistance in the 1950s, [Zwane](#) highlights that women received limited support from their male counterparts within the African National Congress, as politics were purported to be a male preserve -- to which Luthuli took issue. He sternly challenged African men: "Men's silence and inaction to protest against these grievances are shaming us, men.". Luthuli's autobiography interprets women's resistance in the 1950s as propelled by localised challenges that would later manifest as national struggles. Thus, Luthuli's public declarations and attempts to advance women's positions in all spheres becomes useful as we reflect on and re-interpret his legacy and its relevance in the crises of gender inequalities today and examine ways of re-centering women as pillars of peace.

Ensuing from the discourse of centering women as valuable instruments for change and justice and in his insight taken from his autobiography, Luthuli praises women for their work in the movement, emphasising that since their involvement in the politics of resistance against unjust

states, [“...the weight of the resistance has greatly increased”](#). Thus, Luthuli constructs women as formidable enemies to the then-oppressive state. He further valorises and cements women’s roles in the liberation struggle and concludes that [“...had the women hung back, resistance would still have been faltering and uncertain”](#). One may interpret Luthuli’s statement as saying that in decentering and silencing women’s roles and involvements in movements for social justice, peace and solidarity, the efforts of such movements are less likely to bear fruit.

We close by taking inspiration from Chief Albert Luthuli who in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1961 asserted that “in our contribution to peace we are resolved to end such evils as (gender) oppression, white supremacy and race discrimination, all of which are incompatible with world peace and security”. There is indeed a threat to peace as women’s lives continue to be deemed disposable, with gender-based violence threatening the stability of families and by extension, the society.