

Warrior Women



Displacement is not unfamiliar to my family. I am South African of Indian descent. Being Hindu, my mum wanted me to have a traditional name according to Hindu astrology, but my dad, being the communist and atheist that he is, would have none of that. He named me Zoya after Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, a Soviet partisan that was executed for committing acts of sabotage against the Nazis. She was extremely defiant to her captors and was posthumously declared a heroine of the Soviet Union. She is still very revered.

Much like my namesake, I have been raised to defy injustice and inequality and stand up for what I believe in. I am the 4th generation in a family who gave their lives to fighting against apartheid in South Africa. Growing up, I was afforded a very unusual but special upbringing with exposure to the struggle from an early age. I was also introduced to a value system that was forged by the many generations before me. This value system was influenced by the teachings of Gandhi, Dadoo, Sisulu, Luthuli, Mandela and many others of that time. With these values as the foundation to my life, I found joy in learning important lessons from my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The history of my family starts in the 1800's, with my great grandparents amongst the first to join Ghandi's satyagraha movement. Although all members of my family were entrenched in the ideals of freedom and equality, the women have been my biggest inspiration. It was their relentless, unwavering dedication to fight for what they believed in, whilst taking care of their families and serving their communities, that moulded me into the person I am today.

My great-grandmother Veeramal marched across borders to organise the coal miners and sugar cane worker communities to bring them out of strife, and was arrested for this whilst heavily pregnant; my grandmother Manonmoney, whose children were either detained, in exile or banned, was at the forefront of the famous South African Women's March of 1956 in which more than 20,000 South African women of all races marched against the racist pass laws which segregated blacks and whites; and my aunt Shanthie, who was imprisoned and tortured for refusing to testify against Winnie Mandela and then forced to leave her family and country to become a refugee, have all greatly influenced my thinking, my ideals, and my life.

The untold stories of these brave, fearless, and resilient women in my family have been a constant source of inspiration to me. Despite societal norms and expectations, their commitment to their causes were unwavering. They acted selflessly and sought no rewards.

My aunt Shanthie is one of the strongest women I know. She was forced to stand for five days and nights whilst the security police fired questions at her. She lost all sense of time, but refused to turn on her friends. She spent 371 days in detention, most of it in solitary confinement. Upon her release, she was banned – which meant that she had to report to the police station each Monday and was not allowed to attend social gatherings or speak to friends and family who were also banned. This was quite challenging, as she and my dad, who was also banned, were living in the same house. In 1971, my aunt applied for an exit permit to leave South Africa, and in September 1972, one month after I was born, she left her home, her family, her friends, and her country.

Shanthie was a refugee for 20 years, only allowed to return home after the unbanning of the African National Congress and other South African political organizations. I met her for the first time together with other exiled family members when I was 19 years old. I remember looking at this tiny woman standing in front of me, thinking about how strong and amazing she was and how robbed I felt of the times we could have shared together. I did, however, grow up knowing of her ideals and courageous battles.

She and the other strong women in my life have been the best role models a young girl could have. I firmly believe that these strong women have instilled in me and continue to instill in me, the passion and desire to stand up, speak up, and fight for what is right and just much like my namesake Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya. I am a humanitarian and I come from a long line of humanitarians. I have always known that whatever I ended up doing, it would either be in public service or civil society.

Through MSF's Urban Spaces Project, I have been exposed to the plight of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers and the unique identity issues they face in South Africa on a daily basis, much like many of my family members who were forced to leave their country and seek refuge elsewhere. My only hope is that I am able to live out the ideals instilled in me and pass them onto the next generation, the way that Shanthie, Manonmoney, and Veeramal did for me.

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