

Biography of Fatima Meer

Fatima Meer is considered one of South Africa's most distinguished twentieth century leaders. As a political leader, publisher, writer, and human rights and gender activist, she has worked tirelessly to improve race relations, and promote justice, reconciliation, and non-violent action in such fields as education, social work, poverty alleviation, and health care. Professor Meer was an important anti-apartheid activist and has continued her activism after 1994 in support of the poor.

Professor Meer earned her BA and MA in sociology at the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal), at a time when very few women of color graduated from South African universities. She was a professor at the university from 1956 until 1988, and was the first woman of color to be appointed as a lecturer at a designated-white South African University. She has produced over forty books, some as author, some as editor, and some as publisher, including the first authorized biography of Nelson Mandela, *Higher Than Hope* (1988).

Professor Meer began her political activism as a high school student, starting the Student Passive Resistance Committee in 1946 to support the Indian Passive Resistance Campaign. When the National Party came to power in 1948, she became more heavily involved in politics and spoke out publicly against apartheid. In 1949 she helped found the Durban and District Women's League—the first women's organization with joint Indian and African membership—in order to build alliances between Indians and Africans in Durban after violence between those groups that year. In 1952, she was banned for three years by the government under the Suppression of Communism Act, confined to the city of Durban and prohibited from all public gatherings and from having her work published. In 1955, she

helped found the Foundation of South African Women, which led a famous anti-pass march on the government buildings in Pretoria in 1956. In 1975 she was again banned, this time for five years, and in 1976 was arrested and put in prison for six months.

Professor Meer was married to Ismail C. Meer, a prominent leader in South Africa's Indian community who was arrested in the Treason Trial of 1956. He was imprisoned for two years until the charges against him were dropped. The two were close friends of Nelson Mandela and his family. The Meers' son Rashid was also an anti-apartheid activist and was forced into exile in the late 1970s.

Since the 1980s, Meer has worked with NGOs, fighting for the rights of shack dwellers and rural migrants. She organized a number of institutions aimed at improving the quality of education for Africans and providing job training skills for communities in and around Durban. Meer also helped found Jubilee South Africa, in order to lobby for the cancellation of Third World debt. She has connected the struggles of South Africa's poor to the struggles of poor people around the world.

Since 1994, she has served in a number of advisory positions for the government, including advisor to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology, a member of the Advisory Panel to the President, and a member of the Board of the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Professor Meer has won numerous awards for her activities, including the Union of South African Journalists Award (1975), the Imam Abdullah Haroon Award for the Struggle against Oppression and Racial Discrimination (1990), the Vishwa Gurjari Award for Contribution to Human Rights (1994), and one of the Top 100 Women Who Shook South Africa (1999).