

always wanted to marry

...the post-apartheid first ladies before her. She is hardly in the limelight, unlike Winnie Mandela, who fears no controversy and is not afraid to tell off her detractors in public. Though she privately champions the cause of women, Zanele has yet to develop Graca Machel's public charm. Graca is recognised for her fight for women's and children's rights



Former first lady Winnie Mandela, divorced wife of former President Nelson Mandela, in Cape Town's Parliament with Terror Lekota, former chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, during proceedings to vote for a new leader to fill President Mandela's seat. (Picture by AP)

loving ex-wife of Nelson Mandela, Winnie Madikizela. Winnie, who is associated greatly with the freedom struggle, has a reputation for being intimidating, telling off her opponents in public. Winnie and Patricia de Lille of Pan African Congress, one of the best known Aids victims' supporters and who has personally adopted a HIV-positive child, are the two women most likely to be seen visiting impoverished women, consoling the victims of violence, pushing a PAC policy demanding anti-Aids drugs for rape victims or anti-retroviral drugs to stop mother-to-child HIV transmission.

Though she privately champions women's issues, Zanele has yet to develop the public stance that charming Graca Machel, the immediate former first lady has. Machel is internationally recognized for her fight for women and children's rights and has played a key role in championing those rights in the United Nations.

Machel has proved a more powerful champion and role model than any other woman active on the political scene at present. Though she does not talk much in public, she is a well known, respected and loved woman in the Southern African states where she played a key role in Mozambique's freedom struggle. She also avails herself to the media if need be - this writer was able to get a detailed profile out of her busy schedule two years ago. But little is known of Mrs Mbeki.

The first lady of Africa's biggest economy is said to be a very private person who does not give interviews. Once when South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* tried to get an interview from her, her personal assistant responded: "Mrs Mbeki does not grant interviews. You should respect her privacy."

It's not surprising that the South African Embassy in Nairobi has no biographic data on her. *Lifestyle's* request for the same from the Media Liaison Director at the South Africa's President's Office remained unanswered. Her intensely private and secretive persona may have to adapt to what is likely to be an increasingly public life.

Born Zanele Dlamini in Alexandra, north of Johannesburg, Mrs Mbeki came from a decent but humble background where her father was a priest. She was one of six sisters and a brother.

Like all her sisters who were nurses, she briefly studied nursing at the University of Witwatersrand but later changed to social sciences at the University of London. In the early 1970s, she completed a doctorate in the United States.

A passionate fighter for women's empowerment in all areas especially financially, Mrs Mbeki has been involved in campaigning for gender equality, participating in the National Women's Coalition that comprises women from across the political, class and racial spectrum. She is credited for pioneering Women's Development Bank Investment Holding Company which is the only known company that sinks every cent of its profits into loans for poor rural women in Mpumalanga and the Northern provinces of South Africa. It also has a range of investments in sectors of the economy, including publishing and advertising, a non-governmental section 21 company, a trust which holds the savings of the bank's rural women clients and an investment company. She was an employee until she resigned when Mbeki was elevated to Vice President. She is now a director.

As first lady, Mrs Mbeki was quoted recently at her Pretoria home saying: "I'll spend less time at women's forums and more at educating men to help change their behaviour. Women know all about poverty and child abuse."

Mrs Mbeki is also a spokesperson for minorities. This is not surprising as soon after her marriage to Thabo, she joined the UNHCR in Zambia. With the assylum rush to South Africa in recent years especially by Nigerians, Somalis, Senegalese and Asians, the government is feeling the strain that adds up to its 42 and 4 per cent unemployment among the blacks and whites respectively. More than 800 people apply for political asylum in South Africa every month, a number that has been increasing exponentially since South Africa started accepting refugees under United Nations guidelines in

1993 but in a good month, the department of Home affairs can only process up to 30. But while it has done as well as can be expected with its limited resources to set up a progressive system that complies with international refugee laws, refugee specialists say its programme is not working. Relief workers have horror stories to tell.

"These are professionals - engineers, teachers, administrators who are particularly worried their children can't attend school until they have refugee status. They feel unwanted and they have been threatened several times," Sister Joan Pearson, a relief worker says. She and Green Paper Task Group on Migration and Immigration members such as Zanele Mbeki argue that the government in conjunction with non-governmental organisations should set up resettlement centres to provide newcomers with a base from which to work out their next steps. Currently, refugees have to find their own accommodation usually in the slums.

In spite of keeping a low profile, she is not exempt from controversy. Last year, United Democratic Movement leader, Bantu Holomisa, a former ANC hard-charging young official who was ousted after refusing to stop his attacks on corruption, nepotism and incompetence inside the party's ranks said that he would ask Judge Willem Heath's corruption watchdog to probe the involvement of close associates of Thabo Mbeki in the privatisation of tourism parastatal Aventura while Mbeki himself sat on a committee to adjudicate the bid.

According to Holomisa, Mbeki and his entire office "should have recused itself" from a Cabinet committee set up to adjudicate on the bid because his Zanele, his wife's legal adviser, advocate Mojanku Gumbi, Department of Agriculture Director, General Bongani Njube-Mbuli, and other friends are linked to one of the five companies shortlisted for the bid.

Gumbi and Zanele are directors of the Women's Development Bank, the investment arm which is one of three members of the Empowerment Alliance that holds 30 per cent of shares in

the Phalafala Leisure Consortium, a short-listed bidder.

In trying to exonerate themselves from the accusations, Gumbi told the *Mail & Guardian* that she had been unaware of any conflict of interest when she entered the legal dispute while Mrs Mbeki had resigned as an employee of the bank but remained a director when her husband became vice president.

Besides all her commitments, she still finds time for many charitable organisations. She is a director alongside Mary Slack of the Oppenheimer dynasty on the board of Business and Arts South Africa (Basa), a joint venture by the government and business to promote sponsorship of the arts. Her husband is its patron.

According to *Dispatch on Line*, Mrs Mbeki was among 104 people who received awards recently in one of President Nelson Mandela's last acts as head of state. She was awarded Order of Meritorious Service (Class II) together with Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela while her father-in-law Govan Mbeki received its Class I. The awards, which ranged from Order of the Southern Cross to *Certificates for meritorious service*, were conferred to veterans of the liberation struggle, authors, musicians, soldiers, business people and policemen while posthumous awards went to former ANC presidents Chief Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo who received Order of the Southern Cross (Class I) and Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko who received certificates among other heroes.

The couple have no children but Thabo had a son, Kwanda who was brought up by his grandmother, Ma Mofokeng until he was 18 when he left to become an apprentice welder at the state ironworks, Iscor, near Johannesburg. He later died and this is said to have greatly depressed Thabo especially when South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee could not resolve the issue.

She should be a wise counsel to Thabo in the years ahead, a politician-turned-businessman who has had many dealings with her told *Mail & Guardian* early this month.