

ALBERTINA SISULU

Centenary

2018



ALBERTINA SISULU BIOGRAPHY

Mama Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu was a political activist, nurse and community activist, and also one of the high-profile leaders of anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa. She was born on 21 October 1918 into the Thethiwe family in a village called Xolobe in the Tsomo district of the Transkei in the Eastern Cape.

In 1926 she began primary school in Xolobe village where she was a model student. Her commitment earned her a bursary to complete her high-school education at the prestigious Mariazell College in Matatiele.

In 1940, while she was a trainee nurse in the 'non-European' wing of the then Johannesburg General Hospital (now Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital), she encountered racism directly. At the time it was common for black nurses to experience discrimination. This sparked her political consciousness, which further developed when she met Walter Sisulu in 1941; a young militant man who was also a member of the African National Congress (ANC). In 1944 Albertina Sisulu was the only woman to attend the launching conference of the ANC Youth League.

The couple got married on 15 July 1944 and were blessed with five children – Max, Mlungisi, Zwelakhe, Lindiwe and Nonkululeko (Nkuli). She stood side by side with her husband who was at the centre of the Defiance Campaign of 1952, including the Congress of the People 1955 and other major political

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campaigns of the 1950s. These activities led to her husband being arrested and charged in the landmark 1956-1961 Treason Trial, where 157 leaders of the ANC were arrested country wide.

In mid-1955, Mama Sisulu was also active in the campaign against the introduction of Bantu Education; a system of inferior education for African children. In protest against the imposition of Bantu Education, the Sisulu family's Orlando West home was one of the many places used as a classroom until the apartheid government made it illegal to run unregistered schools.

In 1948 she joined the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) and was the founding member of the national executive of the Federation of South African Women. She helped organise and participated in the historic demonstration of 9 August 1956, when over 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest against the apartheid government ruling that all African women had to carry passes.

In 1958 Mama Sisulu was among the hundreds of women who were arrested in Johannesburg for marching in protest against new pass laws. She spent six agonising weeks in jail, unable to breastfeed her 10-month-old baby, Nkuli. Defended by Nelson Mandela, the women were tried and found not guilty of refusing to carry passes.

In 1963 she was again arrested a few months after her husband went underground. She was the first woman to be detained under the notorious 90-Days Act, which gave the Minister of Police and senior police officials the power to imprison any person "incommunicado" without trial for 90 days.

In 1964 Mama Sisulu received the first of a series of banning orders, after Tata Sisulu was sentenced at Rivonia. She was banned for 18 years, longer than any other person in South Africa. In July 1981 her banning order expired. In 1983 she was arrested and detained in solitary confinement. She was charged with furthering the aims of the ANC at the funeral of ANC activist Rose Mbele, and she was subsequently sentenced to four years in prison. In 1983 she was also elected co-president of the United Democratic Front while in jail, a powerful umbrella body of anti-apartheid and civic organisations aligned to the ANC.

In 1990 when the ANC was unbanned, Mama Sisulu worked on a committee that re-established the ANCWL; at the time she was elected the deputy president of the ANCWL. She was also elected to the ANC's national executive. In 1994 she was elected to the first democratically elected Parliament in South Africa, along with her husband. After serving for four years she retired from political life and Parliament in 1999.

Following a lifetime of selfless service, Mama Sisulu passed on peacefully on 2 June 2011 at her home in Linden, Johannesburg.

South Africa this year celebrates the centenary of the life of Mama Sisulu and several commemorative events have been planned in her honour. The theme for the centenary is: "100 Years of Albertina Sisulu, A Woman of Fortitude", in recognition of her courage, discipline, integrity and love for her country.

A Woman of Fortitude