

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

**Albertina
Sisulu**

RESOURCES





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Albertina Sisulu RESOURCES

Below: Albertina Sisulu (centre) and executive members at the launch of the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) in 1984. Photograph by Omar Badsha.

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I am Albertina Sisulu

Leist, R (1991) - Interview from Blue Portraits, September. anc.org.za

I am Albertina Sisulu. Metetiwe. Born in the Transkei, in the district of Tsomo on twenty-first October 1918. Educated in a lower primary school in my district. Went up to a secondary school that took me up to high school in the same district of Tsomo in a college called Maria Zell, which was a Roman Catholic church college. The years that I spent as a young girl were not comfortable years, because when I was fifteen years my parents died, both of them. And we are a family of five, and I am the second to the eldest. So because of the conditions in our country we were not highly educated as we would have loved to. Actually my brother never went to school, the

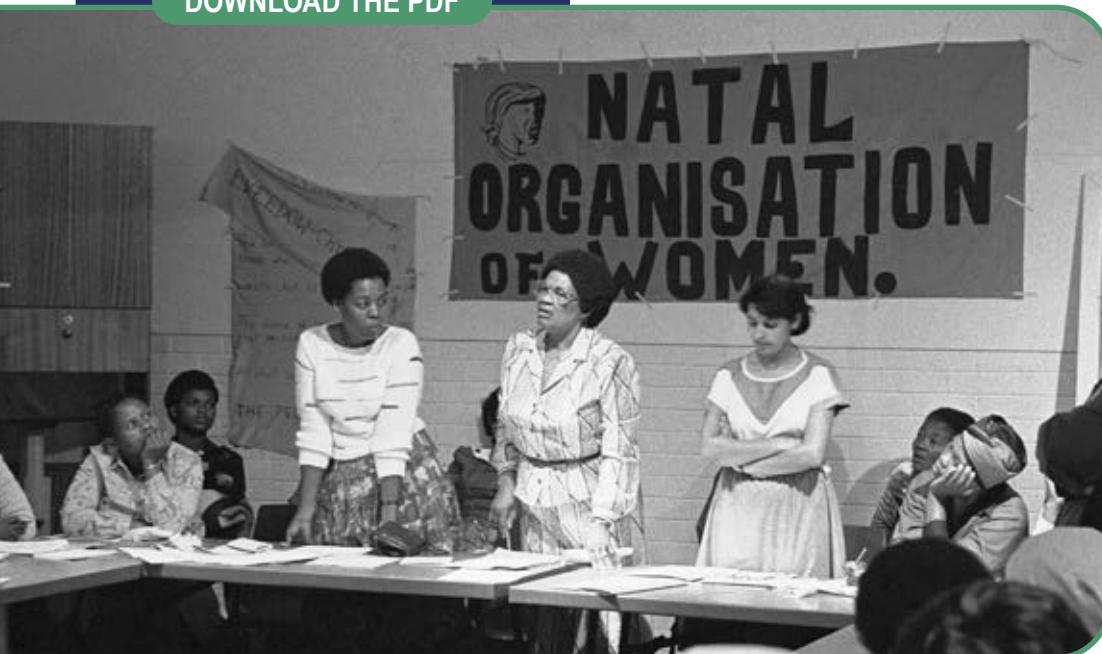
one I come after. He had to be looking after the livestock and be helping so as to get some food from the neighbours and things like that. But I managed because of the Roman Catholic Church, that gave me education.

I wanted to be a teacher. But conditions wouldn't allow me to be a teacher. So I had to take up nursing, where when you are training you are being paid. So my hope was that at least if I am being paid, I will be able to help my brothers and sister. I did that in fact. I helped him through up to Fort Hare University. He is now teaching at Stellenbosch University.

Went up to Johannesburg in 1941 to a hospital that was called those days the Non-European Hospital, General Hospital in Johannesburg. Those days it was the biggest, but today it's being owned by the Whites and instead we've got Baragwanath for the black people. I got my state-registered General Nurse in 1944, April. Got my Midwifery in 1954, came back to Johannesburg and was employed by the City Health of Johannesburg as a midwife. In those days we were doing our work on district. We used to visit our patients in the townships with difficulties, because we used to do that on foot. You know what it means to be a midwife? You have got to carry a big suitcase full of bottles and for your lotions that you are going to use, and bowls and receivers, and we used to carry those suitcases on our heads. And if you are lucky enough to have transport in that area, you take either a bus or a taxi to reach your patient. I did that from 1941 Up to 1980. Nineteen-eighty I was appointed a senior nurse running a small hospital in Orlando East. I would say I was appointed a matron of that little cottage.

Well in 1983 I was given a pension. Immediately after I was given the pension a certain doctor who was working with me in that little cottage which we used to call a hospital asked me to join him, because he was already doing his own private work. And that doctor died in 1987. He was assassinated. From there I joined the ANC Women's League. As you know, ANC has been banned for the last thirty years, and in 1989 it was unbanned. And I went to a conference in Lusaka where ANC was operating, and I was appointed the convenor inside the country. That means a person who is going to see to it that the structures of the ANC, especially the women's section, is being addressed. From there inside the country I started working with other women, and we were joined by other women after the unbanning of the ANC, from exile to help us doing the work. We first of all launched our ANC Women's League in Durban in 1990, August the ninth, which is a historic day for women. I am the Deputy President.

In 1941 I met Mr Sisulu and I was the First Lady, the only first lady who was present in their first meeting when they were forming ANC Youth League, that in 1949 had a program of action. After I got married in 1944 to Mr Sisulu I joined the Women's League. And in 1953 the government decided to give our children what they call Bantu Education. We as women wouldn't take this. We organised other women against the Bantu Education and we closed the schools. We thought of forming an organisation that will put all the women together, so that at least our fight will be easy if we speak with one voice. Now we formed an organisation which was





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called Federation of South African Women in 1954. In 1955 we joined, as Federation of South African Women, the launching of the Freedom Charter in Kliptown. In 1956 we organised twenty thousand women to go to the Union Building and protest against Bantu Education to our children. Having closed the school, we decided to have volunteers that are going to teach the children. We gave out some rooms in our houses to be classrooms. This first room was one of the classrooms of Grade One. But that failed because the government wouldn't register our schools. That now meant that the two years are wasted because the children would not be examined at the end of every year. Now we gave that up. Bantu Education was introduced to the children.

In 1957 the government decided to extend the pass laws to the women. We said, nothing doing. We are not going to carry passes. We organised women to protest and go to jail. Mark you, I'm a nurse now. And the law of the nursing profession is that if you are

sentenced by a court of law you are struck off the roll. But that didn't really worry me much, although I was already then a breadwinner in the house, because my husband was just for ANC then. He was the General Secretary of the organisation. And most of the time he is all over. He is overseas, he is with the regions. Well, I led the second batch against the extension of passes. We went to jail. We had two thousand women in one jail here at Number Four. We stayed there for three weeks awaiting trial. It was almost a month when our case ended, and Nelson Mandela was our lawyer. We were all discharged. We were found not guilty. So I was saved from being struck off the roll.

All these years I never had, you know, a comfortable life. Because from 1958 when I was in jail, that was the beginning of my life in and out of jail. Fifty-eight I was in jail, sixty-three I was in jail with my first son who was seventeen years the. We were arrested because of the Suppression of Communism Act, which meant ninety days without trial. So we went to jail with this boy, and when we completed the ninety days we were released, and after that he was harassed by the police. So I felt that he must leave the country. So he skipped the country in sixty-three.

Sixty-four, after the sentence of the man for life imprisonment, I was banned for five years. That banning order meant that I mustn't attend gatherings. I mustn't go near the educational centres, I mustn't go near the courts. But after five years I was

given another ten years' house arrest. That was the worst. Now am alone and the man is in jail. The children are looking up to me for education, for everything. So because I had five of my own children, three boys and two girls, and I had three adopted children of my late sister-in-law, Walter's sister, who died and left two children. But because I was afraid of these boys without a ether, I decided to take my children to a boarding school. I used o rob Jim to pay John. That means I borrow money from him or school fees. And because I am unable to pay I will go and borrow money from Jim to pay John. So that will carry this month until churches came to my rescue. So not completely, Because they were only concerned with the school fees. I had to do the clothing. I had to do the transport. They used to come home only once a year, because I could not manage these short holidays.

In 1976 during the unrest, I am still on ten years' house arrest. One of my girls was arrested. For the whole year we didn't know there the child was, because of the unrest. And when she was released at the end of the year, the police were following her. So I felt she must also leave the country. She left the country. You don't believe me when I say all this time I didn't even know where my first born was after leaving the country. So I had now two in exile.

In 1981 there was a death of one of the women who belonged to the Federation of South African Women. I had to go to the funeral. The funeral was next door here at the Anglican Church. I was asked to give her life story. I was arrested for furthering the aims of



the ANC, because in that funeral there was a green, black and yellow flag. So they said, You were introduced by the ANC as the People's General Secretary. So that meant I allowed myself to be used to organise for the banned ANC.

I went to jail. I was in solitary confinement for seven months whilst I was awaiting trial. Eventually I was sentenced to four years' imprisonment - two years suspended for five years. Whilst I was still suspended on bail, because I appealed the case, I was arrested for treason trial for planning to overthrow the state by force of arms. We spent almost a year in solitary confinement. They wouldn't give us bail and fortunately after that year the judge found us not guilty, and we were





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discharged. That was now 1986. The first State of Emergency, I was the first to be restricted. To be in this house and have no visitors. The State of Emergency of eighty-six carried on until a day before Walter entered that gate. The police came on a morning, on a Saturday, coming to release me from the State of Emergency. And that was now

eighty-nine, and Walter came in on a Sunday the following day. I am saying nothing about, you know, being arrested just for two days for questioning. That was the food in this house. The police would knock at the unholy hours, one o'clock. Sometimes we don't even know why they are here. They will just tell you, well it is a general check up, just to harass you.

You know, when they knock, they knock from the door and all the windows. When you open the door, the house is surrounded by police, demanding you to open. That's harassment. That third child, when he finished his Standard ten in 1986 he was arrested, because he was found transporting the cadres who were going on action. And they were caught red-handed with the arms and everything and they were sentenced to five years. He only came back at the end of 1990. None of the children in this house hasn't tasted jail.

South Africa is an Apartheid country, where people are separated according to their colour. The Whites are one side, the Blacks are one side. And the conditions for the Black are horrible. The only section that is catered for by the white government is the white section of the community. That thing is giving now the black people hardships. Education is worst, when you are a student you are supposed to have some funding from the government that will enable you to be educated. But that does not happen with the black children.

In 1976 there was uprising, which was one of the complaints from the children who were oppressed. All these years the medium of instruction in schools has been English. All of the sudden in the middle of the year, June, it had to be changed to Afrikaans. The children wanted to know, how are we going to cope? And in fact we have been taking Afrikaans just as a language, not to be used as a medium of instruction. The children were killed left and right, like flies. Along the main road here, when the children were marching, there were men, you know, men with two guns shooting

the children. The government is sowing hatred amongst the oppressed people of this country. Today there is violence in this country. It hasn't started now. It has started, you know, for a long time, because that is the strategy of the government of this country, to divide the people so as to hold them. That is why even our organisations have been terrorised, because the government is afraid of the unity of black people. Because that is why they are still ruling this country. It's because of Apartheid and the division between the black people.

But to us really, apart from what is happening, we think the country's future is bright. Because starting from so many hundreds of years back when the people were fighting, now at this level we feel that we are near the goal. That is why we are hopeful. Really, we have been always optimistic that the end of this country will end up being what the people want it to be. To be a non-racial democratic South Africa. I think we are getting to that. We are working hard for this constituent assembly that is going to draft the constitution of the country. So that is why we say, at least there are those processes that are going on. That is why we are hopeful. That really we are forging ahead.



Above: Albertina Sisulu addresses a Free Mandela rally in 1985.
Photograph: Selwyn Tait/Time & Life Pictures



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Albertina Sisulu... Treason charges dropped!

Extract from the *AAM Women's Newsletter* No. 24, Jan/Feb 1986.

On 10 December, it was announced in the Courtroom in Pietermaritzburg that the treason charges had been dropped against Albertina Sisulu and 11 of the other 15 defendants:

7 months into the trial, the State's prosecution had been looking increasingly flimsy. The case finally crumbled when "expert witness" Isaak de Vines, a lecturer at Rand University, admitted he had made "fundamental mistakes" in his testimony.

The 12 released are all UDF leaders and include Albertina's Co-President, Archie Gumede. The four who still face treason charges - which can mean the death sentence - are senior officials of the UDF - affiliated South African Allied Workers Union...

The trial was the most important since the 1956 treason trial, when all 150 defendants

were acquitted. Throughout the months since it started, Albertina and the others suffered bail conditions which effectively barred them from any political activity. Albertina still faces a 4 year sentence imposed in February 1984 for "furthering the aims of the ANC" - by allegedly singing "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (the Black National Anthem) at the funeral of FEDSAW member Rose Mbele, and draping the coffin in ANC colours...

Albertina Sisulu has had a remarkable life. She has been almost continuously banned since 1964 - longer than any other person in South Africa - and has been detained and imprisoned on numerous occasions. But nothing the apartheid regime has done had succeeded in stopping her anti apartheid activities.



Anti-Apartheid Movement Women's Committee Newsletter No 24 Jan/Feb 1986

Albertina Sisulu... Treason charges dropped!

Women confront apartheid latest news inside

Next issue: Gertrude Shope

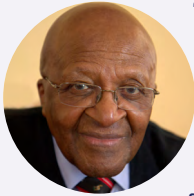
The AAM Women's Newsletter 24, Jan/Feb 1986.

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“South Africans should thank God for Albertina Sisulu,” Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu said on Friday in response to news of her death.

“She truly was a special gift to the nation. We are much poorer without her. There will be an extra bright star in the heavens tonight,” Tutu said in a statement.

She epitomised grace and humanity in the worst days of apartheid, said Tutu.

“Her husband was imprisoned for more than 20 years, her children were harassed and detained, and she was herself banned for many, many years.

“But try as they might they could not break her spirit, they could not make her bitter, they could not defeat her love.”

Tutu said it was people like Sisulu who had made the new South Africa possible.

“[It is people like Sisulu] who kept the home fires burning, who calmly and resolutely demonstrated by example that we are all members of one family, God’s family - regardless of adversity or what the National Party said,” he said.

Sisulu was a nurse and midwife. She was also a founder of the United Democratic Front and a deputy president of the ANC Women’s League. She participated in the anti-pass march to the Union Buildings in 1956 and was part of the launch of the Freedom Charter.

Extracts from Albertina Sisulu 1918-2011: Tributes

3rd June 2011, By TIMES LIVE and SAPA



From: ANCYL

The African National Congress Youth League bids farewell to Mama Albertina Sisulu, whose life and contribution to the

struggle for political, social and economic emancipation of the black majority and Africans in particular should always and forever be celebrated. Mama Albertina Sisulu is a pioneer of women’s involvement and participation in the struggles of the Congress Movement, and did so excellently in the ANC Youth League, Women’s League and the ANC.

Mama Sisulu was the only female delegate at the official launch of the ANC Youth League on the 10th of September 1944, and therefore partook in deliberations that shaped South Africa’s militant, radical and revolutionary youth wing of the ANC. The ANC Youth League has already picked up the spear of a fallen Heroine and will continue with the fight for total political, social and economic emancipation through transfer of wealth from the minority to the majority. On the gender equity front, the ANC Youth League can now proudly say that all our structures are constituted by a minimum of 50% females, and they draw

inspiration from Mama Albertina Sisulu.

In bidding farewell to Mama Sisulu, the nation should be aware and proud that that she did not only nurture a caring ANC, but politically nurtured a family of ANC activists whose commitment to the struggle of total emancipation can never be doubted. Mama Sisulu did not lock her children home even under the difficult political conditions of a racist, blood-thirsty, murderous and oppressive apartheid system. She instead said to the family that they should go out there to continue with and intensify the fight against the system, fully aware that the returns of the struggle could be death, prison and isolation from family. This feature of Mama Sisulu should be celebrated, because it is a feature that should inspire all ANC leaders.

The ANC Youth League is proud of the contribution of Mama Albertina Sisulu to the struggle for total political, social and economic emancipation of the black majority and Africans in particular. As a commemoration of her life, we will continue with and intensify the struggles for realisation of all Freedom Charter objectives.



From: The African National Congress

The death of struggle veteran Albertina Sisulu has left the ANC in shock, disbelief, and devastated at the loss of

a mother, says ruling party spokesman Jackson Mthembu.

“If she was sick, we would have expected it. Even though she was 92, she was still up and about, her death has taken us by surprise,” Mthembu said on Friday morning.

“We are devastated that an icon and veteran of the ANC has passed on. When it was difficult to be loved by your own parents during the struggle, because they didn’t understand it, she was there to give us wonderful political guidance and motherly love.”

He said the ANC remained indebted to Sisulu and her leadership when the ANC was banned, and its leaders imprisoned or in exile.

“Mama Sisulu as an icon and a leader of the United Democratic Movement gave leadership when it was unfashionable to lead.

“We owe so much of the freedom we enjoy today to people like her. We owe democracy to the likes of Mama Sisulu. We will miss her.”



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From: United Democratic Movement

United Democratic Movement (UDM) leader Bantu Holomisa called Albertina Sisulu a “shining light in the struggle for liberation”, in a tribute to her on Friday.

“We are eternally indebted to her for her monumental contribution to the freedom and democracy we now enjoy,” Holomisa said.

Holomisa extended condolences to her family, and to the ANC.

Sisulu was a former deputy president of the ANC Women’s League. Her husband Walter Sisulu, who died in 2003, was a president of the party.

She was also a founder member of the United Democratic Front, an anti-apartheid movement that worked towards the downfall of apartheid while the ANC was banned.

Holomisa was a member of the ANC before breaking away to form the UDM.

Holomisa said: “... We must hold tight to the teachings and memories of her unselfish concern for the welfare of others.

“Through mama Sisulu, the nation had the privilege of witnessing hard work, discipline and leadership par excellence.”

Extracts from Albertina Sisulu 1918-2011: Tributes

3rd June 2011. By TIMES LIVE and SAPA



From: Cosatu

Albertina Sisulu’s death marks the passing of a generation of “exceptional leaders” who represented the best values of the ANC and the revolutionary movement and did not put their own interests before those of the people, Cosatu said on Friday.

“There has been no finer role model for succeeding generations,” the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) said after Sisulu’s death.

“She knew that joining the struggle was inviting arrest, torture and death for her and her family. Yet for the 25 years when her husband Walter was on Robben Island, she never flinched, never displayed any sign of weakness,” Cosatu said in a statement

Cosatu said Albertina Sisulu had devoted her life to caring for others and had played a pivotal role in the mobilisation of women into the liberation struggle.

She joined the ANC Women’s League in 1948, and went on to become its deputy president and a founder of the Federation of SA Women in 1954.

She participated in the launch of the Freedom Charter and the women’s anti-pass march to the Union Buildings in 1956.

She led the United Democratic Front delegation that went overseas on an anti-apartheid mission in the late 1980s and was a founding trustee of the Labour Job Creation Trust set up after the Presidential Jobs Summit in 1998.

She also helped transform the nursing profession and health sector.

“For her, right was right and wrong was wrong. We hope that these values will not die with her, as today we face a new, entirely opposite, culture of individualism and greed,” Cosatu said.

“Debates are no longer about issues of principle but angling for position and business opportunities.

“Today’s leaders have a lot to learn from the inspirational example of Mama Sisulu and her generation of leaders. She will be greatly missed but certainly never forgotten,” it said.

Below: Albertina Sisulu leads supporters outside the Palace of Justice in a freedom song at the Rivonia Trial, 1963 -1964. Source: Pretoria News Library.





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Department of Basic Education Booklet featuring an article about Albertina Sisulu.

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This cartoon was drawn by cartoonist Zapiro just after Albertina Sisulu died. Source: www.zapiro.com.

Video: *Expresso celebrates the life and work of Albertina Sisulu the Mother of the Nation with her grandchildren in studio!*





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Extract from We Make Freedom

By Beata Lipman,
(1984, Pandora Press)

Albertina Sisulu

Albertina Sisulu is a former president of the Federation of South African Women. Her husband Walter is serving a life sentence on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor gaol as a leading member of the African National Congress, and her son Zwelakhe was detained as a result of his work with the Media Workers' Association. Mrs Sisulu was banned for seventeen years from joining in any public or political work; from social gatherings - even from going out in the evening - and more recently, she has been in gaol on a charge of furthering Congress aims.

'We went to Pretoria in 1956 to protest about passes for women in a group of women of all races - there were 20,000 of us, and in spite of losing that battle we gained in solidarity and strength. Of course we were forced into taking passes finally: the government said. "If you don't take the dompas, you can't stay in the town and work, you can't get your pension"; you couldn't live... so we had to, eventually.'

'I was born in the Transkei, in the Tsomo district, so I'm a Xhosa originally. But I've been in Johannesburg since 1939. I was just a girl from the rural areas when I met Walter, training at the hospital: he helped me to an

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understanding of the political situation - he used to relate what had gone on at meetings to me.'

'I'd like to see a multi-racial South Africa where everybody's going to be free; free to speak, free to move and free in every respect. And that includes women in everything - there's no difference. Here in Soweto women are reaching an equal basis with men, and the men understand that - so when we struggle for rights we are automatically including rights for us women in that struggle. Some of the men - a few here but of course more in the countryside - don't understand this yet...'

'...we have men who are "impossible", if you like, who will not work, who depend entirely on their wives - even that burden many women have to handle with a smile!'

'Women are taking far more responsibility for the upbringing of their children and for their education, than the men... indeed, the struggle for the daily survival of their families, during the dreadful resettlements, when the men are away or when they won't help, falls on us women.'

'... I've never been without work. I've been with the City Health Department for thirty-six years as a nursing sister- a midwife and a general trained nurse. I work in Soweto- when I was banned they took me off delivering babies because that involved night work that I was no longer able to do, because I had to be home by a certain hour.'

About this resource...

Women in the Anti-Apartheid Movement

This presentation is part of a resource collaboratively developed by **The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML)** and **UEA**. It is part of the CML's work to promote the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in)justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation

Many of the images and linked documents are supplied with kind permission of project partners, **The Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives**. Other sources are referred to at the relevant places in the packs.

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The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory & Learning

The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML) promotes the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle and the UK's central role within this world-changing history, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in) justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation.



Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives

Forward to Freedom tells the story of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and its campaigns to support the people of South Africa in their fight against apartheid. The AAM also campaigned for freedom for Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, and against South Africa's attacks on its neighbours.



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