



Albertina Sisulu, Linden Johannesburg, 2002.
Photograph by Gisele Wulfsohn.



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



SPECIAL PROFILE

ALBERTINA SISULU 1918 - 2011

Albertina Sisulu was a political activist and nurse and one of the most important leaders of anti-Apartheid resistance in South Africa. She is often referred to as the 'Mother of the Nation'. She acted on her ideal of human rights throughout her life, assisted by her husband and fellow activist, the late Walter Sisulu (1912-2003).

It was with Walter that she attended the first conference of the ANC Youth League where Albertina Sisulu was the only woman present. In 1948 she joined the ANC Women's League and in the 1950s she began to assume a leadership role – both in the ANC and in the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). She was one of the organizers of the historic anti-pass Women's March in 1956 and opposed inferior 'Bantu' education. Her home in Orlando West in Soweto was used as a classroom for alternative education until a law was passed against it.

Both Albertina and her husband were jailed several times for their political activities and they were both constantly harassed by the Security Police.

In the 1960s the ANC moved toward the armed struggle. Umkhonto we Sizwe (the ANC's armed wing) was formed by Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela in 1961. Walter was responsible for framing the organizational units of the National High Command, Regional Commands, Local Commands

and cells.

But in 1963 while he was awaiting the outcome of an appeal against a 6 year sentence, Walter decided to forfeit bail, and to go underground. Apartheid Security Police visited Walter Sisulu's house and found that he had fled. Soon afterwards they arrested Albertina and her young son Zwelakhe. She became the first woman to be arrested under the General Laws Amendment Act. The Act gave the police the power to hold suspects in detention for 90 days without charging them. Albertina was placed in solitary confinement incommunicado for almost two months while the Security Branch looked for her husband.

During this time the Security Police taunted her psychologically. She described one of the cruel forms of torture used by her captors - they would come and tell her lies. They told her that one of her children was seriously ill, and that her husband was dying. Because Albertina was cut off from all interaction with the outside world she had no idea that the police had raided Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia and had arrested her husband and 16 others. She only found out three weeks after she was released from detention.

Just under a year later the Rivonia trial concluded. Six of the accused were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. Walter was one of them.



Denis Goldberg was also sentenced to life in prison but he went to Pretoria Central Prison instead of Robben Island (at that time the only security wing for white political prisoners in South Africa).



CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Source: 1



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

Source: 2

An article from Eyewitness News published this quote: *During a 1997 interview, she spoke of the difficulty women faced alone during the struggle. "The women of South Africa have been leading the struggle hand in hand with the men. There has never been any difference except that the women's side is more vulnerable to any oppression, the side of their home and the children," she said.* - Source: www.ewn.co.za

Questions:

1. Look at the cartoon and write down all the things the cartoonist is expressing about Albertina Sisulu and her character.
2. Read the excerpt from Eyewitness news.
 - a) What did Albertina Sisulu say about the role of women in the struggle?
 - b) Why did she say that women were more vulnerable than men in the struggle?
3. Write a paragraph entitled "Why Albertina Sisulu was a great leader". Use the information provided in the special profile, as well as the cartoon and the excerpt from Eyewitness News.

As Walter and his co-accused left the courtroom, Albertina Sisulu, some ANC Women's League members and other supporters rushed out to form a guard of honour to meet the men. The court officials turned them away, but they sang 'Nkosi Sikele i'Afrika' in Church Square in Pretoria in solidarity and mourning.

For her activism Sisulu was detained and put in solitary confinement again in 1981 and in 1985. She also suffered bannings and house arrest, but still managed to keep links between jailed members of the ANC and those in exile.

In 1983 Albertina was elected co-president of the United Democratic Front (UDF), and in June 1989, the government finally granted her a passport. The following month she led a delegation of UDF leaders to Europe and the United States. She met the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher and the American President, George Bush Snr. In October 1989, the last restrictions on the Sisulu family were lifted and Walter was released from Robben Island.

In 1994, Albertina Sisulu served in the first democratically elected Parliament. She and her husband and son Zwelakhe have won numerous humanitarian awards. On the 2 June 2011 she died at her Linden home in Johannesburg, aged 92.