



Wes-Kaapse Provinsiale Parlement
Western Cape Provincial Parliament
IPalamente yePhondo leNtshona Koloni

**ALBERTINA SISULU
1918–2011**

FACT SHEET 19

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This year the country celebrates the centenary of the birth of one of the great daughters of the African soil, Mama Albertina Sisulu, who dedicated her life to fighting for the emancipation of women and the liberation of South Africa. In this fact sheet we explore her life from her birth in 1918 until her passing in 2011.



- Albertina Sisulu, political activist and nurse, was one of the most important leaders of the anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa.
- Affectionately known as Ma Sisulu, she pursued the ideal of human rights throughout her life, accompanied by her husband and fellow activist, the late Walter Sisulu (1912–2003).
- She grew up in the former Transkei. As the second of five children and the eldest girl, she took on the role of mother in her family when her mother fell seriously ill. This meant she had to stay out of school for long periods, resulting in her being two years older than the rest of her class in her last year of primary school.
- She lost out on a high-school scholarship when, after being placed first, she was disqualified due to a new age rule. An article appeared in a local newspaper about her unfair treatment, which caught the attention of the local priests and she was offered a high-school scholarship at Mariazell College in Matatiele in the Eastern Cape.
- After successfully completing her schooling, she started to train as a nurse at the Johannesburg General Hospital in January 1940.
- Albertina Thethiwe met Walter Sisulu in 1941, when she was working at the hospital, and they were married in 1944.
- In 1948 Ma Sisulu joined the ANC Women’s League and in the 1950s she assumed the first of many leadership roles in the ANC and FEDSAW (Federation of South African Women).
- She was one of the organisers of the historic anti-pass Women’s March to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956.
- She opposed the inferior “Bantu” education and her home in Orlando West in Soweto was used as a venue for alternative education until a law was passed against it.
- Both Sisulu and her husband were jailed several times for their political activities.
- In 1963, while awaiting the outcome of an appeal, her husband went underground. She was arrested under the General Law Amendment Act and held in solitary confinement for nearly two months until he was arrested, although she did not know this.
- A year later the Rivonia trial was concluded and her husband, one of the accused, was found guilty and spent 26 years of a life sentence imprisoned on Robben Island.
- Albertina Sisulu was detained and put in solitary confinement for her activism in 1981 and 1985.
- In 1983 she was elected as co-president of the United Democratic Front (UDF).
- In June 1989 the government finally granted her a passport. The following month she led a UDF delegation to the UK and the USA and met with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and American President George Bush Snr.
- In 1994 Albertina Sisulu served in the first democratically elected Parliament of South Africa.
- She, her husband and their son Zwelakhe have won numerous humanitarian awards. In 1986 she received honorary citizenship of Reggio nell’Emilia, a town in Italy.
- For more than 50 years Sisulu committed herself to the Albertina Sisulu Foundation, which is dedicated to improving the lives of small children and older people. She was honoured for her commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle and her social work when the World Peace Council, based in Basel, Switzerland, elected her as its president from 1993 to 1996.
- She passed away at her home in Linden, Johannesburg, on 2 June 2011 at the age of 92, leaving a legacy that will never be forgotten. At the time of her death, Ma Sisulu was survived by her five children, Max, Mlungisi, Zwelakhe, Lindiwe and Nonkululeko, her niece and nephew Gerald and Beryl, 26 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.