

Elinor Sisulu

***“Mrs Sisulu’s husband”:
Subversion of gender roles in an
African marriage***

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This lecture was presented by Ms Elinor Sisulu, Southern African writer and human rights activist during a lecture tour in Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Grenada, Jamaica and Barbados in 2007 organized by SEPHIS and the University of the West Indies.

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Abstract

Walter Sisulu and Albertina Thethiwe were born in small rural villages just a few miles apart in Transkei, deep in the Eastern Cape hinterland. From these humble beginnings, they would go on to become two of South Africa's most respected and beloved leaders, legendary for their unswerving commitment to the struggle for liberation of all South Africans from the tyranny of apartheid. Walter is widely acknowledged as one of the architects of the modern African National Congress, its primary kingmaker who recruited Nelson Mandela and many others to the organisation. Albertina is revered for her fearless devotion to continuing the political struggle, and for raising seven children during her husband's 26 years of imprisonment on Robben Island.

The story of Walter and Albertina Sisulu has been captured by Elinor Sisulu in her award-winning biography entitled "Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime." Most biographies about great leaders of the liberation struggle in South Africa have focused on the public persona and have revealed little about gender relations or the domestic spaces of their lives. In this lecture, Elinor Sisulu gives insights into what it meant to write the biography of her famous parents-in-law. Her book is unusual in that it explores both the public and private domains, showing how, despite the political pre-eminence of Walter Sisulu, Albertina stood as an equal partner in their marriage. The unexpected and intimate role reversals seen in their long and loving partnership provide not only fascinating insight into their personalities, but also a useful case study in terms of the specificity of African feminisms and their contexts.

“MRS SISULU’S HUSBAND”: SUBVERSION OF GENDER ROLES IN AN AFRICAN MARRIAGE

“I got my freedom the day I married.” The first time I heard my mother-in-law Albertina Sisulu make this statement, I was taken aback. I had never heard any woman liken marriage to freedom. In my experience, the prevailing view is that marriage is an institution that constrains women’s freedom rather than enhances it. At first, I assumed that her conviction arose from a rather romanticized view of marriage. As I interviewed her for the biography I was planning to write, it became clear to me that this extolling of the virtues of marriage arose from her ongoing experience of a truly unique marital relationship; and that in her case, the notion of associating marriage with freedom was not that far-fetched.

Few things are as moving and as appealing to the human psyche as a love story, especially that of love’s triumph over adversity. The story of Walter and Albertina Sisulu is one of persecution, bitter struggle and painful separation. It is also one of patience, hope, enduring love and ultimate triumph. It is an epic saga of two people who rose from humble beginnings to become two of the most influential South Africans of the twentieth century. I was to discover in the course of tracing their histories, it was as much a romance as it was a political epic. At the time I decided to write the biography of Walter Sisulu in 1989, Walter and Albertina Sisulu had been married for over 45 years; yet their attachment to each other was as great as a couple on honeymoon. When Walter was released from prison in October 1989, the South African police dropped him at the gate of his house at the crack of dawn. Albertina was woken up by her daughters with the news that her husband was about to enter the house for the first time in 26 years. She recalled the moment for me: “I was so confused. I stood there trembling from head to toe. I was nervous as a new bride. I had to be dressed like a child.” This was a poignant insight into the emotions of a woman who normally conveyed a sense of unwavering strength and power.

I had intended to write the biography of Walter Sisulu alone, but my initial research made me realise that it would be

difficult, if not impossible to write about one partner without the other, because the story of their marriage was central to their life trajectories. It was during these years that they emerged as political icons, each in their own right, but also as a couple whose love was able to survive 26 years of separation. The love and strength they derived from each other had a direct bearing on their development as activists and political leaders, as well as their ability to sustain their political engagement. This meant that their love story was crucial to the roles they played in the struggle against apartheid, and thus critical to the biography. Therefore, the only way I could do justice to their contribution to South African political life in the twentieth century was to write a joint biography.

This represented a major departure from the biographies and autobiographies of leaders of the South African political struggle that I had come across at the time. The most famous of these – Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* – is very much the solitary struggle of the heroic individual. It fits the genre of the epic, in which the hero performs feats of power and courage, and from which his family (or any trace of domestic or romantic life) is either absent, or symbolic of the haven to which he returns at the end of the saga. In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela does describe his marriage to his first wife Evelyn, the births of their children and their divorce, albeit in a rather stilted fashion. The narrative is more lively when he recounts how he fell in love with Winnie, and how much he misses her when he is in prison. One of the most moving sections of the book is his account of how he learns the news of the death in a car accident of his eldest son Thembekile. Nevertheless, it is clear that Mandela is not entirely comfortable writing about his personal life, and one feels that there is much left unsaid. Anthony Sampson’s excellent *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* does go into more depth about Mandela’s personal and family life, but it remains primarily a political biography.

Most of the other biographies I came across at the time I was conducting my research followed this pattern. They are too numerous to mention, but a few examples will serve to demon-

strate. The absence of the personal was especially obvious, for instance, in Brian Bunting's biography of Moses Kotane. In his review of the Kotane biography, Pallo Jordan's main criticism was that "Large chunks of Kotane's life are treated in the most cursory fashion.... Moses Kotane courts, marries, has two sons, divorces, courts again and remarries – this is covered in two paragraphs?" (Jordan, 1976).

In his autobiography *Let My People Go*, the late ANC president and Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Chief Albert Luthuli writes of how he met his wife, Nokukhanya Bhengu, who, as a teacher trainee at Adam's College, had been one of his students. She later became a teacher but resigned when she married and went to establish a home in Groutville, Chief Luthuli's home town. The Chief comments: "For all we knew at the time, this separation might have to persist throughout our lives, since we had no idea that my public duty would ever place me in Groutville. As it turned out, we were fortunate. We lived away from each other for only eight years" (Luthuli: 46). "Only eight years!" I reacted to this statement with some shock. Either it says a lot about Luthuli's attitude to married life; or it is a sad reflection on the impact of influx control on African families to the extent that there was nothing uncommon about married couples living apart for extended periods of time. As my mind was buzzing about what this meant for Nokukhanya, I read on: "To my ageing mother my marriage brought at last relief from toil. It was a great joy to me that I was able to offer repose to one who had laboured so long and unremittingly largely for my sake. We welcomed the opportunity to serve her in our home until our death." This raised even more questions for myself as a feminist biographer – to begin with, how could Chief Luthuli say that he was able to offer repose to his mother when he was not even present in the household? I could not help wondering what Nokukhanya thought of this arrangement. These are questions that must go unanswered because in the next sentence the Chief states quite deliberately: "Over the inner reality of my marriage and the depth of attachment between my wife and me I draw a veil" (Luthuli: 41).

Chief Luthuli's autobiography clearly follows the convention of Victorian biography, which adhered to the belief that even "the happiest of marriages was entitled to its privacy... (indeed) the closer the family ties the more securely the curtain of discretion was likely to be drawn." (Alan Shelston, *Biography*, quoted by Carol Sanger in her review essay "Curriculum Vitae (Feminae): Biography and Early Women Lawyers.")

It is worth mentioning that even struggle biographies of senior women figures in the anti-apartheid movement follow this pattern. In her monograph, *Representation and Reality: Portraits of Women's Lives in the Western Cape 1948-1976* (HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2007), Helen Scanlon notes that the communist union organizer, Ray Alexander Simons (who, together with her husband and fellow activist Jack Simons, were the first whites to be enrolled into the armed wing of the ANC-in-exile) obliterates almost all mention of family life from her autobiography *All My Life and All My Strength* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004). Her few throwaway allusions to domestic life demand attention from feminist biographers, but have received little so far. For instance, Scanlon notes that:

while Ray was consistently confrontational in her political life, this same trait never manifested itself in her personal relations. Thus, when Jack wrote on her behalf to the F&CWU [the Food and Canning Workers Union] tendering her resignation on two occasions (because he felt she was neglecting the children), she duly signed the letters. Only after the union protested did he agree that she could carry on with her work (Scanlon, 2007).

Like her male political comrades of that generation, Ray Simon disapproved of commentary on her personal and domestic life. For example, an unpublished work cited this extract from a letter Alexander wrote Shelagh Gastrow, lamenting the impact her political engagement had on her children:

When Becky [Rebecca] Lan took over my position as general secretary of the Food and Canning Workers Union and she got engaged the next year, she came with her fiancé to our house and Mary (Ray Simon's daughter) said to him: 'Bennie, I'm not going

to congratulate you because you won't have a wife and your children won't have a mother'. Now that gave me a big shock. I said 'Mary, how can you say that? I'm a good wife to your father. Aren't I a good mother?' (Scanlon, 2007).

Ray Simon's discomfort with this kind of material appearing in a biography is understandable, but it falls within a broader pattern of dismissal of the personal in political biographies. When AnneMarie Wolpe began her 1994 memoir (*Long Way Home*, David Philip, Cape Town) of her life as the spouse of anti-apartheid activist Harold Wolpe, who escaped from detention and fled South Africa in highly dramatic circumstances in the 1960s, she informed Harold that she wished to convey the impact of his and their political choices on their marriage and family life. His response was that this would be too "boring" to be of interest to anyone. (AnneMarie Wolpe, personal communication, Harold Wolpe Memorial Colloquium, 2006.)

Another couple in the struggle, Hilda and Lionel (Rusty) Bernstein, wrote separate memoirs of their experiences. Hilda's book *A World Apart* documents the activism of her and her husband Rusty in the early sixties, activism that culminated in Rusty's arrest alongside Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and others at Rivonia in July 1963. Rusty was the only one of the Rivonia accused to be acquitted. To avert the likelihood of further arrest, Rusty and Hilda went into exile in England, only returning with the collapse of apartheid in the 1990s. Three decades after Hilda, Rusty published his memoir *Memory Against Forgetting*. Knowing that they had to leave three young children behind when they went into exile in 1964, I wished when reading their biographies that they had explained in more depth the trauma that this entailed and how they dealt with it. Through my interaction with their daughter, filmmaker Toni Bernstein, I gathered that Rusty and Hilda managed to combine their activism and writing with sound parenting and in the midst of all the upheavals of their lives, they brought up three well-adapted socially conscious children. Though both Bernstein memoirs provide fascinating accounts of their years in the struggle, their narratives would have

been considerably enriched by a greater focus on the dynamics of the relationship between and family lives of these two gifted and creative people. As dedicated Communists, Hilda and Rusty were engaged in a political struggle that focused on the collective not the individual so they would probably have considered increased attention on their private lives as bourgeois indulgence.

The biography of Oliver Tambo deals in a much more satisfactory way with the family life or lack thereof of the legendary leader. Unfortunately this recently published biography was not available to me in my early years of research on the Sisulu biography.

The fact that biographies of anti-apartheid activists tended to erase or elide domestic life, often by marking it as private territory, and that the gendered genre of the epic (in which only public life was worth recording) applied equally to male and female activists, further piqued my interest. There was little analysis of the impact that a strong marriage and a happy family life could have on the performance of public life and duties.

After a perusal of these biographies, I was at a loss as to how to proceed. I knew that I wanted my biography to be different but was not quite sure how. As a daughter-in-law writing about my parents-in-law, I faced an extra set of challenges. The fact that I was both the writer and a character in the narrative complicated matters from a stylistic point of view. The third person authorial voice is much easier to handle than a first person narrative and in a way I had to be both. It was relatively easy for me to relate Walter and Albertina's story as a historian relying on the accounts of others, whether through secondary sources or interviews. It became complicated when I had to recount my own involvement in the Sisulu family. Fortunately my editor, Helen Moffett, competently helped me to deal with the issues of voice and subjectivity.

By virtue of being closely connected with the subjects I had access to information which most biographers would not have. In the process of getting to know them as family members, I was able to effortlessly gain insight into their personal lives. I was conscious that readers would expect this insight to be reflected in

the book. The challenge was how to interweave the minutiae of daily life with the grand political narrative in a seamless and integrated fashion. I was not finding this in the struggle biographies so I had to look further afield.

I found some of the answers in three biographies that lift the veil over the private domain, thereby challenging the notion that these are separate and unrelated spheres of life. The first is the biography of Canon John Collins written by his wife Diana and entitled *Partners in Protest: Life with Canon Collins*. Canon Collins was the driving force behind the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), which supported thousands of political prisoners and their families during the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. He played a major role in alerting Christians in Britain to the immorality of apartheid, and in encouraging them to support the anti-apartheid movement. In her tribute to the work of her husband, Diana Collins strikes a perfect balance between describing and paying tribute to the life of the great man while at the same time, without overstating her own importance, chronicling the supportive role that she played in his mission. As the title states, she saw herself as a partner in protest; for her, their work together was a joint achievement. (*Partners in Protest: Life with Canon Collins*, Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1992.)

The next two biographies were of special interest to me because they are of daughters writing about their mothers. In *Balm in Gilead: Journey of a Healer*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot provides a tender and moving account of the life of her mother, Margaret Lawrence, one of the first African-American women to graduate from Columbia University's medical school. Lightfoot-Lawrence is meticulous in providing an historical and political context to the life of her parents, Margaret and Charles Lawrence. At the same time, she provides a deeply personal account of their family backgrounds and their relationship. While the book focuses primarily on Margaret, it also chronicles the enduring and lifelong partnership of two remarkably talented people. (Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA, 1989.)

In *Alva Myrdal, A Daughter's Memoir*, Sissela Bok also tells the story of her famous parents, Sweden's notable political

couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, probably the only husband and wife who were both Nobel laureates in separate field, he for economics and she for her work on disarmament. With great sensitivity and understanding, Bok reveals the tension between Alva the passionate and dedicated feminist academic and activist; Alva the wife of the brilliant Gunnar Myrdal; and Alva, the mother. Bok deftly reveals how her mother had to juggle all these roles while her father remained free to pursue his intellectual and political pursuits, unaffected by these tensions. Bok's portrays her mother as a towering intellectual who could engage with world leaders yet at the same time was not removed from the domestic demands of a wife and mother. (*Alva Myrdal, A Daughter's Memoir*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading, MA, 1989.)

In their book *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron refer to a "new generation of biographers" who have asked unprecedented questions about the reciprocal influences of famous couples in artistic and literary fields, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, or Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Steiglitz. Chadwick and de Courtivron explain the importance of this new approach: "The essays in *Significant Others* suggest that although most of the artists and writers concerned have not escaped social stereotypes about masculinity and femininity and their assumed roles within the partnership, many have negotiated new relationships to those stereotypes. Perhaps because as feminist scholars we have until recently focused on social constraints, we have not fully understood the richness of private interactions that operate within relationships." (*Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993: 7-9.)

I found myself in agreement with the view of Whitney and Chadwick that "couples are endlessly fascinating in the diversity of their interactions," and that studying these relationships can point towards models of a "far more fluid, equitable and enriching partnership." I had no doubt that scrutiny of Walter and Albertina Sisulu's relationship would provide readers with a glimpse of such a model.

Nevertheless, I was conscious of the pitfalls of writing a joint biography of two subjects whose lives spanned the greater part of the twentieth century, and who had such a profound impact on South African history that each merits a biography in their own right. A political biography of Walter Sisulu would no doubt have produced a more complete assessment to his immense contribution to transformation of the African National Congress from its early beginnings to a mass political movement capable of spearheading the struggle for a democratic, non-racial South Africa. It might have dealt more comprehensively, for instance, with Walter Sisulu's role in and relationship with the South African Communist Party. Similarly, a biography dedicated to Albertina alone could have provided a more detailed analysis of her role in women's political organisations and the United Democratic Front, the mass-based coalition of political organisations that fronted political activism within South Africa during the last decade of apartheid. The decision to write a joint biography meant that I had to forego some of this political detail. Nevertheless, I believed that I could not do justice to the broader impact of their political contributions without considering them as an inseparable partnership.

In his review of the Sisulu biography, Raymond Suttner wrote that at first he had been worried that the political pre-eminence of Walter Sisulu would make a joint biography of the couple unequal, with Albertina treated as a footnote to her "senior partner". Thankfully, he comes to the conclusion that this was not the case. According to Suttner,

what distinguishes this work from other political biographies and autobiographies in South Africa is that, without theorising, it shows how one couple grapples with the relationship between the 'personal' and the 'political'. Many revolutionaries have grown up reading of 'revolutionary love' and 'love for the people'.

Many revolutionaries did not have the opportunity to pursue intimacy or romantic love or build families or were forced to leave loved ones behind to join MK, often without the opportunity to say farewell. There are stories of great pain and loss and guilt and resentment that many people carry with them to this day.

But what this biography shows is that despite terrible conditions of separation, constant harassment of Ma Sisulu and other members of the family, the 26 years of incarceration of Walter, there is nevertheless an opening for them to continue their relationship and love for one another and their children.

Suttner touches here on questions I had grappled with as I attempted to write the story of this remarkable couple. How did they maintain a loving relationship and raise a family in a broad political context that was inimical to black family life (given the system of black migrant labour that dictated that men live apart from their wives and children), together with the political persecution that would place Walter in prison on an island over a thousand miles from his wife and family, and that would often detain or ban Albertina, confining her to house arrest?

In trying to address the question of what it was that enabled Walter and Albertina to successfully fight the political battle with the apartheid state while at the same time keeping their love alive and their family intact, I looked at the degree to which their formative years provided the ingredients for their powerful partnership.

Walter and Albertina Sisulu were born and raised in small villages in the Xhosa heartland of the Transkei, barely seventy kilometres apart. Walter was born in 1912, the year of the formation of the African National Congress, the organisation he was destined to lead. Albertina was born six years later, at the height of the influenza pandemic that killed millions of people worldwide, and indeed there were fears that neither the mother nor her infant daughter would survive. They came into a world in which the political and economic subjugation of the Xhosa people was complete – after a century of resistance, the Xhosa had finally succumbed to British colonial expansion in the mid-19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, the society into which Walter and Albertina were born was distinctly shaped by a combination of indigenous patriarchal traditions and late-Victorian bourgeoisie morality.

Yet both found themselves in personal circumstances that countered the strictly patriarchal and prescribed roles afforded

men and women in their communities. Walter's mother, Alice Manse Sisulu, was a strong character who had been brave enough to venture out of her sheltered environment to seek work in white households and boarding-houses in the Transkei in an era when strong patriarchal constraints made it rare for young African women to engage in wage labour. She defied convention by having a relationship with a white man and bearing two children by him. Throughout her life, she struggled for economic independence in an extremely hostile racist and patriarchal environment. When Walter was a toddler, she was forced to leave him with her older sister Agnes, described by Walter as a "very powerful person whom I admired. She milked the cattle. She looked after the livestock. She milked the cows. She was in charge." Walter was clearly admired and was drawn to strong and independent women. For example, he described his first romantic interest, a girl in his village called Nondingo, two years his senior, as a young woman "who was feared by the local young men and exercised a strong influence over other girls."

Albertina showed signs of the extraordinary strength of character that would one day attract Walter at a very early age. Her father died in 1933, when she was fifteen years old and her mother, who had always suffered ill health, died a few years later. The scene at her father's deathbed was a defining moment in her life. Her father told them he was dying; then, breaking all social and cultural precedent, he gave her the responsibility of looking after her two younger brothers and her sister:

It could not have been easy for my elder brother who was standing next to me, but I resolved that day that I would honour my father's trust in me. This was a formative moment in my life. My father, who had loved me and cared for me, now gave me the responsibility to be a person in my own right. He did not require me simply to fit into the traditional male-dominated hierarchy of responsibility. (Interview with Charles Villa-Vicenzio: 1992.)

It was very unusual for a Xhosa father of the time to favour his second-eldest child – and a daughter at that – over an older son. It seems that the dying father recognised something special

in his daughter, something that her future husband would also recognise years later when he proposed to her: her absolute, dogged determination to duty. Albertina took the responsibility of raising her younger siblings so seriously that she resolved not to marry, but to undergo professional training so that she would be in a position to support her siblings. While completing her high school education at a Catholic boarding school, she decided to become a nun, but changed her mind when the priests and nuns advised her that this would mean cutting all contact with her siblings. She opted to become a nurse instead, because she would be paid as she trained and would hence contribute to the upkeep of her siblings. In 1940 she went to Johannesburg to begin her training.

Albertina's life changed when she met Walter Sisulu in 1941. She was a shy girl from the country who lived in the sheltered environment of the nurse's home at Johannesburg General Hospital. In contrast, he was a sophisticated urbanite who ran an estate agency and was already making his mark as a rising star of the African National Congress. Despite these apparent differences, the couple fell madly in love and it was not long before Walter proposed. He would often recount with amusement Albertina's unexpected response to his proposal:

I was so taken with her from the moment we met that in a short space of time the question of marriage came up. She replied that before we considered marriage there was something she had to tell me about herself. She went on to say "I have children". We were holding hands when she said this. I was so shocked and flabbergasted that I dropped her hand. "How many children?" I asked. "Three," she replied. My mind was racing ahead – getting married to a woman with children was regarded as a social stigma. I timidly asked how old the children were. She appeared to be hesitant to reply and I was in complete confusion.

Albertina went on to explain that she had assumed responsibility for her younger siblings after her parents died, and that she had vowed that she would make a home for them. Far from being deterred, Walter was impressed by her sense of responsibility and gladly announced that he would share that

responsibility with her when they married (Interview with Walter Sisulu: 1993).

Walter introduced his fiancée to politics, with the result that she was the only woman present at the inaugural meeting of the Congress Youth League in 1944. In later years, Walter would teasingly remind her of her presence at the historic meeting: “Admit it my dear, you only had eyes for your boyfriend.” The Youth League was very much a young man’s organisation, and at that time, Albertina attended in a supportive capacity without any thought of becoming a member herself.

The ANC itself was an overwhelmingly male organisation, women having been admitted as full members after changes to the constitution in 1943. Previously, women had only been able to join as associate members. When Walter and Albertina married in 1944, the best man, the brilliant Youth League leader, Anton Lembede, warned Albertina that she had married a man who was already married to the nation. Unfortunately, Lembede, who died tragically in 1947, never lived to see Albertina emerge to become a formidable leader in her own right, no less “married to the nation” than her husband.

So it would seem that the union of Walter and Albertina was cemented by the similarities in their upbringing and their shared world-view. They were both raised mainly by extended family members, and both had a strong desire to build a stable home not only for their own children, but for members of their extended families as well. They had a deep love for children and were happy to raise the children of relatives and friends. Walter was generous to a fault and would happily give away his salary and all his belongings to the poor. A woman less generous and more materially minded than Albertina would probably have lost all patience with him.

In their early years of marriage, Albertina was very much the conventional wife and mother. In her biography *Call Me Woman* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1990), Ellen Kuzwayo described Albertina as “the smiling and pleasant wife of Walter Sisulu, a kind hostess who served the committee members of the Congress with tea after long and intense meetings” (Kuzwayo:

139, 245). Between 1945 and 1949, Albertina and Walter had three children, in addition to Walter's sister's son, whom they took in and raised as their own when he was eight months old. Not surprisingly, Albertina remained at home while Walter's involvement in politics intensified. However, the image of the smiling and pleasant wife serving tea in the background began to change during the 1950s.

The turning point can probably be pinned down to 1949 when Walter was elected Secretary-General of the ANC. Because he was conscious of the amount of work that his new post would entail, Walter gave up his estate agency work (which was in any case not making much profit, largely because of his kind heartedness to impoverished clients) and devoted himself full-time to ANC work.

The ANC Eastern Cape leader and renowned academic, Professor Z. K. Mathews was shocked when he heard about Walter's decision: "Walter, this is irresponsible, absolutely irresponsible. How do you aspire to lead the nation if you cannot even provide for your own family?" (Interview with Walter Sisulu: 1993). Professor Mathews had no confidence in the ANC's ability to pay Walter the promised salary of five pounds a month. Walter soon learned that Professor Mathews was right: "It was five pounds by word of mouth", recalled Walter. "In reality I never received it because the movement was always short of money." In 1952, former ANC president Dr Xuma dismissed as ridiculous an ANC Executive decision to increase Walter's salary to ten pounds, pointing out that he was not even receiving the five pounds which he should have been getting. (Interview with Walter Sisulu: 1993).

Walter and Albertina had discussed the implications of his decision to work for the ANC full-time. She fully supported his decision, and was more than happy to become the sole breadwinner of the family. By then a trained midwife, Albertina was working at Orlando Clinic, near their Soweto home. While Walter's mother, Alice assisted with the care of the children, Albertina took over the earning and management of the finances of the home. She even subsidised the ANC by paying Walter's

monthly railway ticket. It was not easy by any means; the couple had three more children between 1950 and 1957. They also had to support a number of relatives who joined them from the Transkei, where drought and scarcity of employment had had a devastating effect on the rural economy.

During this period, Walter was at the heart of the political campaigns that transformed the ANC from an ineffectual protest movement to a radical mass movement. He was subjected to increased harassment by the police and periodic spells of imprisonment. Despite the fact that he spent less and less time at home as political repression mounted, he was never a distant father. His children remember him warmly as a nurturing, gentle parent who would bath and dress them and indulge them. Albertina on the other hand, was such a strict disciplinarian that her children nicknamed her “Bhubhesi” (meaning “Lion”). She was unwavering in her determination to instil a strong work ethic in her children, and when it came to household chores she did not distinguish between sons and daughters. “My first three children were boys, the girls came later,” she would tell me. “Therefore there was no way they could escape work and leave it to their sisters. I trained them well to do everything in the house.” She was the parent who went out to work, while their father, when he was not engaged in political work, was more often at home and likely to be engaged in domestic matters during the day. During his various stints in prison Walter had learned how to polish floors to a high shine, a skill that he passed on to his children. The children recall their father telling them to hurry up and get on with the housework, “because your mother will be here soon.”

The Albertina of the 1950s was an increasingly powerful figure not only in her household, where she commanded the kind of respect usually afforded the paterfamilias of the home, but in the political arena as well. Like thousands of other African women, she was drawn into active politics through the Defiance Campaign of 1952, in which protesters courted arrest by deliberately defying petty apartheid laws. She was furious when the ANC would not allow her to defy on the grounds that Walter had already been arrested and they “could not allow both parents

to be arrested – because then what would happen to the children”. Albertina joined the Federation of South African Women when it was launched in 1954, and she was one of the organisers of the famous 1956 march of 20 000 women to Union Buildings in protest against the extension of pass laws to black women. She was imprisoned during the pass law demonstrations of 1958, the first of many stints in prison. Prison strengthened her determination to become even more involved in the political struggle and she developed a demeanour of stoic resistance. A young female activist described her as always showing a stiff upper lip. Albertina believed strongly in never revealing one’s emotions to the enemy. During my first visit to my mother-in-law’s home in 1986, I learned, in dramatic fashion, what people meant when they talked of the rock-like strength of Albertina Sisulu.

It is difficult to describe the trauma of being woken up in the early hours of the morning by loud and insistent banging on front and back doors of a small township house, followed by aggressive gun-wielding soldiers storming into the house, shining their torches into the bedrooms, While I quaked with fear, clutching my six-week old baby, my mother-in-law scolded them roundly: “You should be ashamed of yourselves! How dare you wake up decent people at this hour of the morning! Women old enough to be your mothers. What do you want. What are you looking for.” I have no doubt that the unwelcome visit was cut short by this response. At the crack of dawn Albertina was outside trying to repair the damage that heavy police jackboots had inflicted on her garden. When I expressed my shock at what happened, she responded calmly: “Don’t let it worry you. They have been doing this for years. We are used to it my dear.”

In July 1963 Walter Sisulu and other senior ANC leaders were captured at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia. They were joined by Nelson Mandela, who was already in jail for leaving and re-entering South Africa without permission, and charged with treason for masterminding the Umkhonto We Sizwe sabotage campaign that had been launched in 1961. In the famous Rivonia Trial that followed, Mandela was the first accused and Walter the second. The trial attracted international attention and speculation

was rife that the accused would be sentenced to death. In his historic statement from the dock, Mandela gave one of the greatest political statements in history, ending with the statement that he was prepared to die for freedom. Walter's responsibility was that of providing evidence-in-chief, something he did with great calm and clarity. For five days, he withstood vicious cross-examination by the fanatical chief of prosecution, Percy Yutar. All except one of the Rivonia trialists were found guilty, and they and their families knew that they faced the possibility of the death sentence. During Albertina's final visit with Walter on the day before sentence was passed, she asked him to be strong and not show any emotion if they were given the death sentence: "Please do not disgrace us," she said.

The history of South Africa would have been very different and a great deal more grim if the Rivonia trialists had been sentenced to death. Fortunately, Judge De Wet handed down a life sentence on 12 June 1964 and Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and their other co-accused were sent to serve their sentence on the bleak Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town, a leper colony in the early colonial period converted to a high-security prison, during the apartheid era to.

During Walter's 26 years in prison, Albertina's stature grew by leaps and bounds. Correspondence between the two revealed Walter's admiration for her role in raising their children in his absence and his joy at the rise in her political stature. While he was distraught whenever she was sent to prison, he never once suggested that she should desist from political activity, much less in order to attend to maternal duties. Instead, he constantly expressed his appreciation of and confidence in her abilities. He was overjoyed when she was elected co-president of the United Democratic Front in 1983. On that occasion and many others, he sent her a congratulatory note in which he saluted her courage and affirmed her participation in the struggle against apartheid.

Albertina for her part, deferred to Walter as the head of the household in a way she had never done before he went to prison, a fascinating inversion that served to keep Walter deeply engaged in all the minutiae of domestic life. This strategy enabled her to

reconstruct their marriage in such a way that their partnership could survive what was virtually a permanent physical separation.

In the first few years of his imprisonment, Walter was allowed only one letter every six months. This was gradually increased over the years until he was able to correspond regularly with family and friends. As for personal contact, for much of his incarceration, family visits were few, short, and conducted through a thick pane of glass. The first physical contact that Albertina had with Walter since his imprisonment in 1964 was in 1983 when she was allowed to see him in hospital. Contact visits (in which visitors could sit in the same room as the prisoner) were only allowed after 1983 after Walter and his fellow prisoners had been transferred to Pollsmoor Prison on the Cape mainland.

Yet within these extremely limited, closely controlled and censored conditions, he and Albertina maintained a lively and loving marriage. She consulted him about any alterations made in the house and kept him informed of even the most insignificant happenings in the family. She constantly sought his advice on how to handle their children and looked to him for comfort when they were difficult. In cases of important, but intimate decisions, such as names for new babies born to relatives and children, Albertina would insist that Walter be consulted, or take full responsibility for these decisions. It is clear from his letters that this degree of personal engagement gave him a great deal of pleasure during his grim years on Robben Island. Nevertheless, by strange paradox, Walter had time to mull over family matters, which, increasingly, Albertina did not, as she performed the “superwoman” role of holding together a family, earning a living, coping with constant police surveillance and harassment – all this while playing an increasingly vital and senior role in the struggle.

In my biography, I deal at length with Walter’s prison correspondence because it provided valuable insight into his inner life and his relationship with his family. The strict censorship policy on Robben Island proscribed any reference to politics in the correspondence of prisoners. Prisoners and their families were therefore forced to confine their correspondence to domestic matters. Walter seized this opportunity; these letters became the

main means by which he kept his finger on the pulse of family life. He would become very distressed if his children failed to respond to his letters promptly. In a typical letter to his son Lungi, encouraging him to be a better correspondent, he wrote: "Through these letters we can understand each other. It is the only way I can hope to shape the character of my children."

Having set an intimate tone for these letters, an intimacy unusual in a man of his generation and culture, Walter became the children's counsellor in academic and emotional matters over the years. In almost every letter he emphasised the importance of their intellectual development and exhorted them to be serious about their education. He made it clear he considered his male and female children equally free to choose any path in life, and encouraged them equally to achieve academic and career excellence. He considered that women could, and should, experience no boundaries. Walter had been so fascinated by the launching of the Russian spaceship "Sputnik" in 1959 that his youngest daughter, Nonkululeko (Nkuli), was nicknamed "Sputnik" because she was born in the same year. When his other daughter Lindi wrote to him after the first man landed on the moon in 1967, saying that she wanted to be "the first African woman in space" he was delighted by her ambition and encouraged her to pursue it, commenting that "the 20th century is the century of women."

Albertina relied heavily on Walter's emotional support and advice on how to proceed on family matters. As their children entered their teenage years, problems increased and at every turn she consulted Walter. His influence extended far beyond the prison walls because his letters would be passed around the family and his words held great authority.

Albertina always recalled with deep emotion how she had to turn to Walter during a particularly difficult moment in the history of both their family and country. Following the severe repression and banning of the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress and many other organisations in 1960, the leaders of these organisations were either banned, imprisoned or forced into exile. This period was followed by a lull in political activity until the mid-1970s when a new generation of activists,

inspired by Steve Biko's black consciousness message, came to the fore. The influence of this generation became apparent in dramatic fashion in the Soweto uprisings of 1976. Starting in Soweto and extending the length and breadth of the country, the revolt of South African youth, determined to shake off the shackles of apartheid, resulted in unprecedented political upheaval. The Sisulu family was in the eye of the storm – their house was metres away from where sixteen-year old Hector Peterson, the first victim of the uprisings, was shot and killed by police. Jongumzi, Walter's cousin's son brought up by Albertina and their youngest daughter, Nkuli, both high-school students at the time, were among the demonstrating students. Zwelakhe Sisulu, the third son of Walter and Albertina, who was working as a journalist, had to cover the story. He has never been able to forget the sight of corpses of young people piled up at a Soweto police station.

In June 1976, Lindiwe Sisulu, Walter and Albertina's fourth child and eldest daughter, was at home taking care of her five-month-old baby just a few days before the Soweto uprisings when security police descended on the Sisulu home and arrested her. Albertina got home from work to find the baby left with a neighbour who could only tell her that the police had taken Lindi away. At first, Albertina kept the news away from Walter; but after four months elapsed without any sign that Lindi would be released, she decided that she had no option but to let him know what had transpired:

Lindi was arrested on 14 June. She was taken to John Vorster Square in town. She was there only for two months. Beginning of August she was removed to Pretoria. She is now at Brits, still in Pretoria District on the way to Ermelo. We understand she is arrested under Section 6 (the Terrorism Act). She has not appeared in court as yet but defence has been arranged. In these four months she has been seen only once by Sheila and she says she is looking well, only worried about her baby. Though we are allowed to give her clothes to change we are not allowed to see her.

In addition to Albertina's letter, Walter received a newspaper report, smuggled in by one of the prisoners, that Lindi Sisulu had

been severely tortured in detention. Walter expressed his anguish and outrage in a long and powerful letter to Jimmy Kruger, the then Minister of Justice. Relentless in its argument and exhaustive in its detail, it was both a plea by a concerned parent and an indictment of the practice of detention without trial in South Africa. After a long description of the illegal and heinous purposes of detention without trial under apartheid and elsewhere under undemocratic regimes, Walter went on to speak as a parent:

I fear for my daughter's wellbeing. Prolonged detention, especially in solitary confinement is bound to cause severe mental injury and as Lindiwe is only 23 years old, the damage may be irreparable. Lindiwe and I have exchanged one letter each. Despite her attempt to be light-hearted, she admitted experiencing acute depression.... I am without information about her treatment at the hands of the security police and I fear and imagine the worst. Deaths have occurred through unnatural causes. Whether it was suicide or not matters little – what matters is that detainees have died through causes that are not natural. Should this happen to my daughter Lindiwe, I will lay her death at the doorstep of the police and therefore at yours, and blame the existing social system which has generated a conflict which is yet to claim many more lives on both sides.

There are times when I believe that the sins of her parents are being visited on her head. The security police are not free from malice and improper motives. Powerless as I am ... to come to my daughter's assistance in these trying days, I would be failing in my duty as a father to a daughter as one voteless and voiceless non-citizen to another and as one human being to another if I were to remain silent and not voice my protest at this outrage committed to my child. I am in prison for only one reason – to do the utmost, my share in the process of releasing the nameless millions from this bondage. I have done this for over 40 years for people most of whom were unknown to me. By the same token, it is only natural that I do this for my own child.

This extraordinary letter demonstrates an integration of the personal and the political that remains rare to this day. It is clear that Walter considers his passionate anguish for his daughter and his political commitment to “the nameless millions in bondage” to

be part and parcel of the same trajectory of compassion and courage. This integration of the public and private domains indicates that Walter had somehow escaped the patriarchal legacy that splits these realms and holds them at arm's length.

It is difficult to say whether Walter's letter had any effect or whether Lindi would have been released anyway. Whatever the case, Lindi was finally released eleven months after the date of her arrest. Shortly thereafter she joined her brother Max in exile and was not to see her parents for another twelve years.

Over the years, Walter continued as a guide and mentor to his children and later to his grandchildren. Despite the physical distance that separated them, the children often found him more approachable than Albertina. Walter continued to support and praise his busy wife at the same time as gently nudging her in certain directions. For instance, in July 1979, after 35 years of marriage, Walter wrote to congratulate Albertina on the way she had taken care of the family:

Concerning the progress you have made with regard to family matters and the manner in which you have handled them, I can only repeat what I have said in the past – absolutely superb. I have never felt as comfortable as I am. I am really happy about all the children.

He went on to ask about Nkuli:

Let her not miss the chance of university while she is still interested. By the way Tini, she needs your attention and guidance on her love affairs. I know you think she has had no boyfriends. She told me that she has one. We ought to know what kind of boy he is even if there is nothing serious at this stage: at least it is a way of educating them.

A letter from grandson 15 year-old grandson Thulane in 1988 demonstrated his closeness with the third generation:

These December holidays while staying at Katie's house (Mom's friend) I had an encounter with everyone there, telling me to be proud of having you as a grandfather and that I should write to you. I didn't really find 1987 that nice. There were a few good

points like meeting a few girls although nothing happened.
Somehow I have a feeling that this year will be a good one.

Thulane goes on to tell his grandfather that he would like to take a girl to the matric dance, but his father is not keen. Walter's response was to write to Thulane's mother Beryl to encourage her to allow the young man to ask a date to the dance. Beryl was amazed and delighted to find that her teenage son was communicating with a grandfather about things that he could not talk about to her. It soon became a standing joke in the family that Walter, sitting in prison thousands of miles away, knew more about what was going on in the family than anyone else!

During the 1980s, Albertina was thrust even further into the political limelight during the tumultuous events of that decade. In 1983 she was elected co-president of the United Democratic Front (UDF), the newly-formed umbrella body of civic associations determined to take the fight against apartheid to new levels. At the time of the election she was in prison, having being detained and charged under the Suppression of Communism Act for furthering the aims of the ANC. She was tried and found not guilty, but she would face another trial in 1985 and would spend most of the next few years in and out of prison. As the UDF grew from strength to strength and the resistance against apartheid increased, state repression correspondingly increased and thousands of activists were detained for long periods without trial. The apartheid state also employed a vicious "dirty tricks" campaign that resulted in hundreds of extra-judicial assassinations of political activists.

The Sisulu family was particularly hard hit by the spiralling political conflict of the 1980s. Zwelakhe Sisulu, by then the editor on the anti-apartheid newspaper *New Nation*, was detained like his mother for long periods in 1983 and again from 1985-1987. Jongumzi Sisulu's involvement in the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe earned him five years in jail after a dramatic trial. Albertina's eldest grandson Lungi became involved in the Soweto Youth Congress, one of the student organisations that bore the brunt of repression. Through it all Albertina persevered with

her work, never losing hope that freedom would be achieved in her lifetime and that her husband would return home.

Walter's 70th birthday in 1982 was celebrated within the country and by the anti-apartheid movement worldwide. In 1987, Nelson Mandela's birthday boosted publicity for the Free Mandela campaign to unprecedented levels, and the clamour for his release reached a crescendo. Pressure on the Pretoria regime mounted as the combination of popular protest and the ANC's international diplomatic offensive began to bear fruit. It had become clear that the apartheid regime would face serious international repercussions if Nelson Mandela or any of the Rivonia leaders died in prison. In 1987, the oldest of the Rivonia prisoners, 77-year-old Govan Mbeki was released to a tumultuous welcome by the vast majority of South Africans. The release of Nelson Mandela and others was just a matter of time. By the time Walter Sisulu and the other Rivonia prisoners were released from prison on 15 October 1989 it was clear that apartheid was in its death throes and South Africa was moving swiftly into a transition from apartheid. Nelson Mandela's release in February 1990 finally signalled the realisation of the long-cherished dream of "Freedom in our Lifetime".

After two and a half decades of harassment and surveillance, Albertina was finally free of banning orders and the constant threat of prison and detention, Walter was free to be with his family and those of their children who were in exile were free to come home. The extended family reunion lasted for months. One of the unintended consequences of Walter's return home was that younger members of the family inundated him with personal problems and requests for advice on matters of the heart. Albertina was heard to say, somewhat crisply, "All you children waited for your father to come home to present him with your problems!"

Another set of unanticipated adventures awaited the newly reunited couple; after lives of great confinement, they became international globetrotters late in life, constantly on the road from 1989 onwards.

Before Walter's release, Albertina had led a delegation of UDF leaders on a trip to Europe and the United States early in

1989. In the US, Albertina and her delegation met President George Bush Snr. This was a highly publicised visit because it was the first time a US president had met with representatives of the internal anti-apartheid movement. In October 1989, upon his release, Walter barely had time to bask in the euphoria of freedom before he and Albertina were whisked, together with the other released ANC leaders and their wives, to Zambia and Tanzania and Sweden. Over the next few years they would travel to, among other places, Britain, Singapore, Australia, the then Soviet Union, China, the US and Canada.

It was during their 1991 visit to the US that Walter found himself in the unusual position of playing second fiddle to his wife. Beyond Nelson Mandela, the North American public knows little about individual ANC leaders. Outside of the anti-apartheid circles, few of the people they met in the US had heard of Walter Sisulu but many, especially in women's organisations, knew who Albertina was and they constantly recalled her 1989 visit. "Your mother is so popular in America," Walter would tell us with a combination of pride and amusement, "that in many of the places we visited I was introduced as 'Mrs Sisulu's husband'". Many men would be offended to be referred to as an appendage of their wives, especially men whose public profile was far higher than that of their spouses. Yet Walter was not perturbed. Instead he revelled in attention paid to Albertina, taking delight in playing second fiddle to her star turn.

From 1994 to 1999, Albertina served in South Africa's first democratic parliament. Walter, who had virtually retired from political life by that stage, was content to move out of the limelight. Throughout their married life, he had openly praised those qualities of his wife more commonly associated with masculinity, often openly flaunting gender conventions. His recognition of and admiration for Albertina's strength and leadership qualities meant that he never allowed himself to be constrained by prevailing stereotypes about the roles men and women should play in the family.

Walter Sisulu died peacefully at home in Albertina's arms in May 2003. Though he had never held a formal position in South

Africa's democratic government, he was given a State funeral, a formal recognition that he was one of the foremost architects of the freedom that South Africans currently enjoy. Albertina was utterly bereft. In the weeks that followed Walter's death, she was completely oblivious to the accolades and tributes that poured in from all over the world. She never fully recovered and the combination of illness and advanced age has added to her frailty. Naturally she often looks back to the 58 years of marriage that she enjoyed with Walter and still maintains that she got her freedom on the day she married. Indeed, it was the anecdote about being "Mrs Sisulu's husband", told with such relish by Walter, that convinced me that this remark of Albertina's should not be dismissed. Here was a woman whose husband revelled in his wife's political success and was quite happy to be relegated to a subordinate role. Her husband's encouragement of her political growth and his constant praise and affirmation made marriage an empowering and fulfilling experience for Albertina.

Possibly the most important element beyond their deep and abiding love for one another was their willingness to subvert the gender relations demanded of mid-twentieth-century marriage. They were not threatened by conventions that demanded that Walter's status as a man and a husband required him to fulfil expectations such as supporting the family financially. They were sufficiently socially flexible and romantically secure to swap economic and child-rearing roles with ease when the situation demanded it. Today, partners who defy socially defined roles by having the wife earn the income while the husband takes over domestic duties have an easier time of it, but still face societal obstacles. Walter and Albertina Sisulu were truly a couple ahead of their time.

What is more, post-apartheid South Africa can no more afford to ignore the legacy of their relationship of mutual respect and equality than it can afford to lose their political legacy. Today, the new democracy both fought so hard for is plagued by a virtual epidemic of violence, especially sexual violence, against women and children. Worse still, this tide of rising violence is fuelling the HIV-Aids pandemic, a pandemic the elder Sisulus had

identified as the next great enemy to fight. Even at their advanced age, Walter and Albertina were prepared to get into the trenches in the battle against HIV-Aids, disclosing, for instance, that they themselves had lost grandchildren to the dreaded disease. And they were beyond appalled at the increasing rates of intimate and brutal assaults on young girls and even babies – they were in fact utterly bewildered.

Feminist scholars and local analysts have identified many factors feeding the tendency by South African men to attack and ravage women and children within their own communities, including the overnight collapse of the highly-structured vertical hierarchy of apartheid, in which subordinates were kept in place by violence or the threat thereof. Pumla Dineo Gqala has noted that by touting equality for women at the same time as refusing to critique patriarchy, the liberation movement made a tactical and ideological error for which South African women are now paying dearly (Ruth First Memorial Lecture, November 2006, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg). Helen Moffett has pointed to the tension between South Africa's heritage of overlapping patriarchies (colonial, apartheid, Calvinist, missionary, traditional African) and the post-democratic rights-based Constitution (which guarantees political equality for all groups, including women), and their inevitable clash. She argues that this clash has widened the split between the public and private spheres, creating a devil's bargain in which women are accepted as equal in the former as long as they remain subordinate in the latter, with sexual violence enforcing this shift from equality to submission (““These women, they force us to rape them’: Race, rape and citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, March 2006).

Certainly, the anxiety about gender equality, and the truly terrifying statistics on rape, child abuse and HIV-infection in South Africa, throw into focus the rigidity of men's and women's prescribed gender roles, particularly within marriage and the family. This insistence on narrowly defined and enforced gender roles during a period of political transition is perhaps understandable, but it is literally lethal.

Having helped construct the new democratic South Africa, Walter might yet save us again – if we had the wit to embrace his own gender flexibility; his sense that his masculine pride and identity lay in loving and nurturing his family members rather than policing them or establishing his dominant role in the home; his belief that mutual love and respect, rather than socially pre-determined roles, should be the guiding force in our homes, families and communities. The story of his domestic and marital life, while perhaps considered irrelevant by traditional biographers, offers an alternative and constructive view of masculinity in a world in which the role models for young men grow ever more morally impoverished. If more South African men modelled themselves upon this great man, then more South African women could claim, like Albertina, to have found freedom in marriage.

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