

Profile for Commissioner Thenjiwe Mtintso

High Commissioner Thenjiwe Mtintso was born on 7 November 1950 in Soweto, Johannesburg, where she grew up. Her mother, Hanna Mtintso, was a domestic worker, and her father, Gana Makabeni, was a trade unionist and a member of the African National Congress (ANC). Due to financial constraints, she was forced to leave school and work full-time in various factories to finance her part-time studies at secondary school. She matriculated at Damelin College and went to study Bachelor of Social Science degree at the University of Fort Hare.

Being born to an activist father, it was not surprising that at university, she became a member of the South African Student Organisation (SASO) and Black Consciousness Movement. Her activism in student politics led to her being detained several times by the security police in the 1970s and her eventual expulsion from the University of Fort Hare.

After being expelled for political activities, she moved to King Williams Town and worked as a political organiser with the Black Consciousness Movement leaders Steve Biko and Mamphela Ramphele. She was also a reporter for the *Daily Dispatch*, a liberal newspaper edited by an antiapartheid campaigner Donald Woods. During the 1970s, she was subjected to banning, detentions, solitary confinement, and severe torture by the South African police. After Biko was murdered while in police custody, she went into exile in 1978.

While in exile, she joined the ANC and its military wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK). She underwent military training and rose through the ranks to become a commander of MK. She was sent for further training in Cuba at the *Fé del Valle* School. After receiving military training, she worked in Lesotho with the Regional Political-Military Council, which coordinated the ANC's political and military activities in that country. She later served as head of the Regional Political-Military Council in Botswana (1986–1989) and as the ANC's first chief representative to Uganda (1989–1991).

Mtintso remained in exile until 1992, when she returned to South Africa and enrolled for her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Sociology at the University of Witwatersrand. She was appointed into the Transitional Executive Committee and thus became an active participant in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) negotiations. After the first democratic elections in April 1994, she became an ANC Member of Parliament.

Mtintso turned down an offer of a ministry and chose not to contest her seat again. She was elected to the ANC National Executive Committee in 1994, 1997, and 2002. In March 1997, Mtintso was appointed the first chair of South Africa's Commission on Gender Equality and chairperson of the board of Gender Links. She resigned a year later after being elected as the first woman ANC Deputy Secretary-General in December. Mtintso also served as a member of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party (SACP). Meanwhile, she also enrolled for a Master of Arts (MA) degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1998.

In 2004 she resigned from being the ANC Deputy Secretary-General, partly because of continuing health problems caused by her torture. She served as South Africa's ambassador to Cuba (2003–2008), Italy (2009–2012), Romania (2014–2016), and Spain (2019–2022). In addition, Mtintso was South Africa's high commissioner to Malawi from 2016 to 2019. In 2022, she was appointed South Africa's High Commissioner to Namibia.

Mtintso has been active in various gender and women's structures throughout her life. She has engaged in gender training, especially for women in politics in Africa. She has written articles published in various local and international publications on women, patriarchy, gender relations and defence. She has presented papers and participated in various national and international workshops, seminars and conferences on women, gender, democracy, and defence.