

## **Kathryn Driscoll**

### **Mary Benson at the United Nations**

In the beginning of May 1963, a member of the United Nations Secretariat approached Mary Benson and asked if she would testify before the Committee on Apartheid in South Africa. Benson knew that she would be the first South African to testify and that the government would potentially ban her from returning home after criticizing their policies internationally. Despite the risks, Benson agreed to the task. Mary Benson's goal of talking to the United Nations was to do more than restate the facts that everyone knew. Benson wanted to make people take action. When Benson was in New York speaking to the United Nations, back in South Africa, the Ninety Day Law was in effect. The Ninety Day Law meant that anyone could become arrested for any reason and not get a trial; therefore, any activist would serve detainment for ninety days. Being tortured in detention was severe, and it was turning the country into a very violent state.

The UN invited Benson to testify because she was a successful author and researcher. Benson's speech gave her own experience of what she witnessed of ordinary people not being treated fairly and the effect it had on them; she spoke credibly on behalf of activists in South Africa who were not able to speak for themselves. Mary Benson's quiet start as a secretary for activists brought her knowledge of what was going on and allowed her to travel freely to speak to the UN, until it made her a target for the government and would lead her to a career in exile.

### **Early Work**

Born in 1919, Mary Benson grew up in Pretoria, South Africa, in a privileged family. Her father worked as a doctor in a general hospital. Their mother and a nanny raised her and her older sister named Poppy. She was well educated too. After attending school she traveled to

London and the United States, hoping to become an actress. With no luck, she joined the South African Women's Auxiliary Army: she traveled through Egypt, Austria, Germany, and Italy where she worked office jobs to help in the war efforts. After World War II ended in 1945, she returned to South Africa. Benson's memoir gives us insight into what she lived through (Benson 1989). Most importantly we learn about what prompted her to focus on the situation in her home country. It was in 1948 that she read Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which changed her life. The influence it had on her was that it "crashed open the mold in which my white consciousness had been formed"(Benson 1989, 47). Paton's book revealed the oppression of the people in the country. This is what prompted Benson to start her first research and efforts against apartheid.

Benson earned her credibility to testify at the UN from all the hard work she had done throughout the decade before. First, she created the Africa Bureau with Michael Scott. Scott was from England and was an Anglican priest who caught Benson's attention when she heard about him testifying to the United Nations about South Africa's occupation of South West Africa (Namibia). Benson was very inspired by him and got to meet him in February of 1950 in London. This led Benson to work as his secretary. Their most important work together was creating the Africa Bureau in March 1952. The Africa Bureau fought at the United Nations for the South West African people to keep their land. The Bureau also supported the protests in South Africa against forced removals from Sophiatown and Bantu Education. A goal for the Africa Bureau was to gain support from the British against apartheid, giving Benson international experience that would eventually lead her to the credibility she needed to testify to the United Nations. The Africa Bureau gave her the first experience she had in fighting apartheid, but that was only the beginning.

Working with the Treason Trial Defense Fund gave Benson the next opportunity to earn credibility as a successful writer and activist. The trials began in Johannesburg in 1956. There were one hundred and fifty-six men and women who were put on trial after being arrested, accused of betraying their country. Benson writes about how during this trial many people came together and showed unity and support in a large spirit. Ambrose Reeves, the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg, wrote to Benson explaining how the Treason Trial Defense Fund needed a secretary immediately. Benson accepted, saying that "the appeal was irresistible" (Benson 1989, 111). As the secretary, she attended the trials at Drill Hall, where she met Chief Albert Luthuli, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, and many other important figures. During the trials, Benson listened to the reasons for people's arrests. For one case she records, "He [Gert Sibande] and Annie Silinga, a huge jolly matriarch from the Cape who had been regularly imprisoned, for refusing to carry a pass, symbolized the majority of the African and Indian defendants" (Benson 1989, 112-113). She also recorded conflicts between the judge and Nelson Mandela. The judge, "referring to the ANC's objective of 'one man, one vote' questioned the value of people who know nothing participating in the government" (Benson 1989, 113). Mandela reacted angrily to this, saying "people were perfectly capable of deciding who would advance their interests" (Benson 1989, 113). She continued her job of documenting the trials through the end of the year. The Treason Trials ended in 1961, when all the accused were found not guilty. Being a part of the Treason Trial Defense Fund brought Benson even more credibility and connections to prominent figures, beginning with African National Congress President Albert Luthuli.

In 1961, Chief Luthuli had just won the Nobel Peace Prize, and being surrounded by journalists, he needed an assistant. This is where Mary Benson came in. She assisted Luthuli, whom the government had banned to his home in rural Groutville, Natal, by responding to

messages from around the world, going to the post office and reading Chief Luthuli's response. She helped him apply to get permission to go to Oslo for the Nobel Prize ceremony. In the first cable she responded to, she said, "Gunnar Jahn, Nobel Committee Oslo. Filed with sense of gratitude and appreciation. Shall be applying for travel permit. Luthuli" (Benson 1989, 133). Her work with Luthuli led to her work with Nelson Mandela, whom she had met back during the Treason Trials as well. Since they became friends there, they continued to keep in touch. This was helpful for Benson when she was researching about the African National Congress.

Benson began researching the ANC after British journalist Anthony Sampson invited her to record its history. Benson accepted the challenge and went to Johannesburg to start. In 1961, Benson wrote about Mandela telling people to stay at home in a non-violent protest. Benson describes what Mandela was doing, "as Mandela continued to elude the police and regularly issued statements calling on workers to 'Stay at Home!'" (Benson 1989, 128). The police were hunting Mandela, and despite that, he was going against what he was supposed to do. The police started arresting people and bosses announced they would fire people who didn't show up. While the protest only lasted one day, it was because Mandela called it off. Benson and Mandela met after this protest. It was in the very secretive interview that Mandela admitted even though the protest was short it was still successful. Benson writes the response Mandela had to the protest: "In the light of the steps taken by the government to suppress the Stay-at-Home, it was a tremendous success... The mobilizing of an army as well as police was striking testimony of African strength and a measure of the government's weakness" (Benson 1989, 129). Through continuing the interviews with Mandela, Benson learned more about who he was, and they became close friends. Her strong connections with influential activists led her to the UN to

testify against apartheid. When she went to New York, she used all the knowledge she learned from her early work to give a persuasive speech on apartheid.

### **Testimony to the United Nations**

In May 1963, Mary Benson testified to the UN against apartheid. Although she was unsure at first, she ultimately decided all her work leading up to now would help her educate others to take action. She explained that the reason why she wasn't sure if she would testify was that she knew what the consequences were. Benson didn't want to lose contact with her friends in South Africa. During her speech to the UN, she informed the committee that everyone already knew the facts of apartheid and she was going to bring attention to the experiences of people living there. Her speech was printed in the newspaper *Africa Bureau News* shortly after she delivered it to the UN. Benson made a strong statement in her speech to start: "Friends have suggested I should stick to the facts. But I feel you know all the facts. So I should like to speak of the effect of these facts on living human beings, within my own experience" (Benson 1963, 2). When Benson told this to the committee, it showed how important her role was as the first South African to testify. She was the only one able to explain how life in South Africa was.

Her testimony successfully called the UN to take action against apartheid violence. When addressing the committee, she started her speech by saying the only hope for the country was in the UN. She said, "But these are desperate times in South Africa. I speak to you and appeal to you because I believe that in our longing to transform South Africa into a decent, sensible country, a free country, you at the United Nations are now the only instrument that can achieve this by peaceful means" (Benson 1963, 2). In this part of her speech, she called to the United Nations to become more involved in stopping the policies of apartheid. She believed that the

country could still become unified, but they couldn't do it on their own. They needed more help from other countries using their influence to stop the South African government's unjust policies. Benson gave insight on how violence was increasing. She explained how for a very long time people had wanted to gain their freedom peacefully. People eventually had no other option than to use violence. In her speech, she explained the reason for this was the government: "Within the country the Defence Force has been increased to twenty times its size of two years ago, and by 1965 its fully trained specialist troops will be more than trebled. The police have always been well armed. Dr. Verwoerd has created a forcing house of violence. One's dread is that nothing can stop South Africa from toppling into racial chaos" (Benson 1963, 4). Her contribution here was saying that people were being forced to use violence because of what the circumstances were: people didn't have a chance when the government was so powerful and enforced violence. A few months after Benson made her speech at the UN, the Security Council asked for states to stop selling weapons to South Africa. According to a timeline about the UN and apartheid, "7 August [1963], the Security Council adopted resolution 181 calling upon all states to cease the sale and shipment of arms, ammunition and military vehicles to South Africa" (SAHO 2017, 4).

Another contribution Benson made during her testimony to the UN in 1963 was explaining how she saw with her own eyes that children's treatment under apartheid would affect them their entire lives. She said that the Bantu Education Act was preventing Africans from having any place in European society, except that they could work low-skilled and low-paid jobs. When she visited a school, she described how misbehaved the children were. She explained a school she visited in the Cape: "It was sad. It was also very frightening. The children were frustrated and rebellious... The parents I met were in despair Dr. Verwoerd is producing a generation of frustrated children, of potential delinquents" (Benson 1963, 2). After meeting a

family who was being torn apart because of the Urban Areas Act, she called out the government for limiting how long Africans could be in “white cities.” It was separating families and ruining many lives. She described what she saw with this family living near Cape Town: "Last year I visited one such family, a young couple with four children... but at the time I met them, the wife and the children had been endorsed out, were being sent hundreds of miles away into the overcrowded poverty-stricken Transkei, while he was to be labeled a bachelor and must live with thousands of other similarly enforced ‘bachelors’ in barracks" (Benson 1963, 3). After Benson brought attention to apartheid’s harm to children and families in 1963, the "General Assembly passed a resolution calling on states to contribute to funds assisting the victims of apartheid" (SAHO 2017, 1). The way Benson was telling stories of what she had seen in South Africa was affecting the United Nations, and they were doing something about it.

Closing her speech, Benson explained, "The whites of South Africa are totally incapable of helping themselves, of breaking out from under the tyranny even if they desire to. It is only through the intervention of the outside world that they can be saved" (Benson 1963, 4). Just like how she started her speech she ends it with her personal opinion, emphasizing the need of help from other countries.

In October 1963, the United Nations adopted “resolution 1881(XVIII) requesting the Government of South Africa to abandon the ‘Rivonia trial’ of Nelson Mandela and other leaders, and forthwith to grant unconditional release to all political prisoners and to all persons imprisoned...” (SAHO 2017, 4). Benson returned to the United Nations to support this statement, in a speech archived at Boston University. In March 1964, she told the UN, "Mr. Chairman, I cannot adequately emphasize how desperately, profoundly important it is to South Africa and surely to the continent and world at large that Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki—these and

other men in the Rivonia Trials—must not be allowed to hang" (Benson 1964, 2). She continued to explain to the UN the huge impact Mandela was having in South Africa. She told his whole life story of how he got to where he was. She was able to do this because of the close friendship they developed from working on the Treason Trials. She explained, " I would say Mandela's outstanding characteristic is how he has grown and continues to grow over the years. He responds—almost gaily—to challenge" (Benson 1964, 5). The appeal did not work precisely as Benson and the UN hoped it would. The trial didn't end until June of 1964, but Mandela and others were imprisoned for life instead of killed.

### **House Arrest, Exile, and Legacy**

It was not until 1965 that Mary Benson returned to South Africa. After her work with the UN, she continued living in New York for some time. In February of 1966, Mary Benson was at home in Johannesburg when she answered the door to find two men. The men showed her a document that read "Whereas I, Balthazar Johannes Vorster, Minister of Justice, am satisfied that you engage in activities which are furthering or may further the achievement of the objects of communism... Prohibit you from absenting yourself from the residential premises... at any time except between the hours of six in the forenoon and seven in the afternoon" (Benson 1989, 208). They said they were from the security police and handed her many documents which she was told to sign. She was put on house arrest at nights, weekends and holidays; she couldn't attend courts, schools, or public meetings. With all of the restrictions placed on Mary Benson, it was clear they were trying to silence her. Benson was determined to stay in the country for as long as she could. Benson debated whether it was worth it to stay in her home country. She knew that in



London she would be able to read and write while being a part of the world. Staying in South Africa would mean that she was giving up everything she wanted to do.

Even though she would have loved to stay in her home country, she left in April of 1966. When leaving Benson wrote, "It was not until the plane was high over the stark hills of Asmara that I thought: leaving is betrayal. Even one counts. I felt it might be the greatest mistake of my life" (Benson 1989, 215). The way Benson left her home shows how important her work was to her. She loved South Africa, and she knew she could help make it better. Even though Benson left South Africa, she did not finish her work on helping make South Africa a better place. From London, she continued her passion for writing, publishing *At Still Point* in 1969 and *Nelson Mandela: The Man and the Movement* in 1986. Her memoir *A Far Cry* was also written there in 1989. Not much research has happened on how much Benson accomplished in her life, but her continuing writing career contributed greatly to the global anti-apartheid movement.

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