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& Struggle Archives



RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN
KWAZULU-NATAL

Oral History Project of the Alan Paton Centre,
University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Interview with Else Schreiner
conducted by Pat Merrett
on 25 August 1995
in Pietermaritzburg

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**“RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN
KWAZULU-NATAL”**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE ALAN PATON CENTRE,
UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL, PIETERMARITZBURG**

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**First interview with Else Schreiner,
conducted by Pat Merrett on 25 August 1995 in Pietermaritzburg
(‘S’ shall signify the Interviewee and ‘M’ the Interviewer.)**

M: It’s the 25th of August 1995, and I’m Pat Merrett and I’m interviewing Else Schreiner, firstly about her involvement in Black Sash and later on about your involvement in the National Council of Women. Else, before we actually start, would you like to give some biographic background.

S: Certainly, sure. My parents were Bertha and Conrad (Kops?). And I have a brother Conrad, who has no interest in politics, community affairs, in fact he thinks we were all crackers. Mum was a farmer, with roots in the Eastern Free State, near Ficksburg, and Dad was a lecturer at Wits. He tried for a number of years to farm but I - it was no occupation for him, a mathematician; he gave that up. So for - we had a brief stay in Cape Town and then moved to Johannesburg when I was about twelve.

M: That would have been 1930?

S: 1934. ‘34, thereabouts. Both Mum and Dad were always interested in politics, they were deeply involved in community work - mostly amongst Black people, from what I can remember. And even on the farm, when they were farming, they were interested in what was happening to people who lived on the farm. They were involved for a long time with the iZenzeleni Institute for the Blind. I think that was their main interest, but Mum also did welfare work amongst poor Whites whom she didn’t like. She said they had no self respect. And Dad was active in the Rand Aid Association for many years. The Rand Aid Association was a sort of umbrella welfare group, welfare body, which had various facets. It had old age homes for

1 instance, it ran the Rand Epilepsy League, and the farm and so on. Dad chaired that
2 for a long time. A lot of our family friends were politicians. For instance, Donald
3 Martino, Fred Ballinger, Margaret Ballinger, Jack Kirk, Renee de Villiers, Dr
4 Xungwa, Seretse Khama. Black friends in the house, in fact were commonplace.
5 They would often invite Black friends who were colleagues who came to dinner.

6 M: Do you remember Seretse Khama coming to the house?

7 S: Yes, I do, because when he used to come to the house, I must have been about 16, 18,
8 18, 19. So do I remember the man, the most charming gentleman, he loved arguing
9 politics. Always was happy to tell us how bad the South African politics were.

10 M: Do you remember the debate about his marriage and all the scandal?

11 S: Yes, I do. I remember how many of our White friends were shocked. In fact a
12 number of people whom one wouldn't expect to be shocked, were shocked and I think
13 the current phrase was 'Well, of course, it won't last.'

14 M: Else what particular liberal organisations were your parents involved in?

15 S: Well, those days when I was still a schoolgirl and then when I was at 'varsity, the
16 main, what you might call liberal, involvement was with the Institute of Race
17 Relations. The Hoernles? Were very close friends and often at the house and I think
18 that would be their main involvement. They were involved in the United Party and
19 worked quite hard there. But when the Liberal Party was formed later on, they left the
20 United Party and joined the Liberal Party. So that was quite a big change in our lives.
21 Right, now you wanted to know where I went to school? Well, I went to government
22 schools because they seemed to be the best schools, two, which was where we lived.
23 Then Parktown Girls High, and then the last two years must have been at
24 Potchefstroom Girls High because the Ramsbottoms ran Parktown Girls High and the
25 sister Enid, was at Potchefstroom Girls High, so my Mum thought it would be good
26 for me to have a boarding school discipline; Potchefstroom Girls High was where I
27 went. And there again, under the same kind of influence because the Ramsbottoms
28 and Dorothy Langley tacitly accepted that if what one was going to do with ones life
29 was any good at all, was being involved in helping other people. So the idea of
30 community service, community involvement was there from home as well as from
31 school.

32 M: Was it an English-speaking school?

1 S: Oh yes, ja, ja. And a very good school, it was very nice. And then after school, Wits
2 University; I did a BSc degree, rather slowly. Too much student affairs, too much
3 hockey, too much swimming! But I made it. Then I worked for the Institute for
4 Medical Research for a couple of years and then at the Experimental Station in
5 England where I had an agricultural, British Agricultural Research Grant; lived there
6 for a couple of years.

7 M: How usual was it for a South African woman to win those sorts of grants?

8 S: Ja, not very - this was post-war. There was the beginning of quite a movement. I was
9 rather driven to that move because the man I intended marrying was moving to
10 Cambridge in England, so I thought I had better go there too.

11 M: I see. Ulterior motives?

12 S: Ulterior motives, yes. Deneys was then at Trinity College in Cambridge and we got
13 married in 1949.

14 M: In England?

15 S: In England, in Cambridge. I remember my mother sending huge parcels of food over
16 for the wedding reception, because there was no food in England and I worked at the
17 North Experimental Station and then was lent some space, loaned some space at the
18 Adult Path' Labs in Cambridge, where we got married. And worked there until our
19 first son was born in 1951. Then we left, we went to America and our second son was
20 born over there, in 1952. And we stayed in America, which is not my favourite
21 country, until 1953, then we came home to South Africa.

22 M: What didn't you like about America?

23 S: I found it terribly materialist, I found it mattered awfully much to the people one met
24 how much your husband earned. In fact I was actually asked by a woman I met at a
25 cocktail party 'What does your husband earn?' And I was so shocked that I told her
26 'It was perfectly adequate, thank you.' And the hostess said I had been very rude. It
27 was - 1953 was a bad year, a bad time to be there probably. Very strong xenophobia,
28 after the war.

29 M: Was that during the McCarthy era?

30 S: It was during the McCarthy era, it was horrible. In fact, Deneys - all the academic
31 staff at Pennsylvania State University, which was where we were, were asked to sign
32 an oath of allegiance to the United States Government.

1 M: Even if they were not patriots?

2 S: Yes, Deneys, as a visiting professor from another country, said he obviously couldn't
3 do that. But the. I think it was the American Legion who were saying if every single
4 member of the Faculty does not sign, we will cut the grant. So they came back to
5 Deneys and said 'Please.' So he drafted a document which said that he undertook not
6 to attempt to overthrow the United States Government by force. And they suggested
7 they would accept that. So then Deneys literally - he's a very wicked guy, and he said
8 'No, there was a rider...' and he put as a rider: 'except in the event of South Africa
9 declaring war on the United States.' And they accepted that as well!

10 M: Did they have straight faces when they accepted that?

11 S: Perfectly straight faces, they were terrified of the whole thing. The - Englishmen on
12 the campus went home. The Australian on the campus went home, the Yugoslavian
13 on the campus looked at Deneys' document - and said 'I want to sign one like that
14 too.' But the McCarthy period was a bad, was a very bad period. One didn't know
15 what was happening - very ugly. Then we came home in '53, to Johannesburg, almost
16 immediately to get involved in the election. On behalf of the United Party, in
17 Westdene, where, if you were putting up posters, you had one person putting up the
18 poster, one standing guard, and two people guarding the car because of Nationalist
19 Party supporters with bicycle chains and lead packs up their sleeves. Really a very
20 ugly election indeed. So ...

21 M: So you missed the 1948 election?

22 S: Yes, we were overseas then. In fact we were in Cambridge when Smuts came over to
23 speak to the South Africans. He didn't come over to speak to the South Africans, he
24 came to Britain and he came to Cambridge and spoke to the South African students at
25 a cocktail party sort of thing. And I remember so clearly his saying 'We have not
26 given up or been beaten, we are only sitting down at the side of the road.' And I
27 remember saying to him 'If you sit too long at the side of the road, you'll never go
28 forward again.' He said 'Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense, we'll be alright.' It was a
29 fairly shocking experience, anyway. So back to South Africa. And then we joined the
30 Liberal Party, of course, as soon as that was formed. Left the United Party and joined
31 the Liberal Party and we were both very actively involved. Useful having parents who
32 live in the same town when you want to go to a conference in Cape Town or Durban,

1 you leave the children with the grandparents!

2 M: Now this is 1954 - the Liberal Party?

3 S: That`s right, yes, that`s right. So that was `54 and then we left Johannesburg and went
4 to Maritzburg in 1959 and we`ve been here ever since.

5 M: In the same house? At 14 ...

6 S: In the same house, at 14 Wendover Road.

7 M: Else when did you first become involved in any political women`s organisation?

8 S: That was when - my first involvement was when I joined the Black Sash in 1955. I
9 would have taken part in the first march of the Black Sash - the "Women`s Defence
10 of the Constitution League", as it was called then. women - were marched from
11 Joubert Park, in Johannesburg, to the City Hall. We didn`t know how many women
12 were turning up. We thought it would be a very small march. In fact it turned out to
13 be an enormous march - with hundreds of women. It was a fascinating performance.
14 And it was at that stage that I was asked by Jean Sinclair and Ruth Foley whether I
15 would join the executive of the Black Sash as a member of the Liberal Party. They
16 felt this would counter the apparent United Party domination of the Women`s Defence
17 of the Constitution League and they didn`t want it to be seen to be linked to a political
18 party, hence calling Else Schreiner, she belongs to the Liberal Party, which was how I
19 got in. And that was the beginning of my involvement in those organisations.

20 M: Why did you join though - what was - what actually motivated you to become
21 involved in that organisation?

22 S: Simply, I think, anger at what the government was trying to do to the common voters
23 roll by the removal of the Coloured people. You remember that I was in a family that
24 had been involved in politics, Margaret Ballinger was Native Representative in
25 parliament. The family was oriented towards bringing a single country into existence,
26 and the removal of the Coloured people from the common voters roll seemed to be an
27 extraordinary recessive retrograde step, apart from its immorality and the
28 distastefulness of the whole performance. And I think that`s why when the Women`s
29 Defense of the Constitution League was formed, it seemed a perfectly natural thing to
30 join.

31 M: And at that stage did anybody query whether or not it was worth fighting for a
32 constitution which was actually very racially based and unequal?

1 S: Yes. I think the majority of White South Africans had simply accepted the racial
2 divisions in the country without really being conscious of them. I think if you go back
3 into the early history of South Africa, you go back to the colonisation patterns of the
4 country, you go back to the early missionaries in particular, everything was preparing
5 for a country of White domination, a country of White activities. It had been
6 inculcated into peoples' minds and philosophies for generations. But there were
7 certainly people who had started, by the turn of the century, or people before that, who
8 felt that it was wrong. But I think when the Women's Defence of the Constitution
9 League was formed that was the beginning of a generalised feeling that this was
10 wrong, we shouldn't split the country up into boxes. So I think that was why it took
11 off so well. Also, I think, there was a fear that if the government started tampering
12 with the constitution, who knew when it would stop?

13 M: Yes, I believe that was a very powerful, emotive force in that ...

14 S: And in fact, not very long after the Women's Defence of the Constitution League got
15 really organised, another organisation was formed by men on the Reef and in Pretoria,
16 which was called the 'Covenant' who covenanted themselves together to defend the
17 constitution. So it was really triggered by the removal of the Coloured people. But
18 the whole focus for quite a while was the fear of what was happening to the
19 constitution.

20 M: And can you describe the June 1955 march to the Union Buildings to present the
21 petition to Strydom?

22 S: Yes, I can. It was a very nervous period in the development of the Women's Defence
23 of the Constitution League because we didn't know if anybody was going to come.
24 We had by that time established branches of the League in various other areas, and I'll
25 tell you just now about the establishment of the Natal branches and there were hopes
26 that people were coming from the Cape, from the Free State, from Natal, but we
27 didn't know. But as it turned out it was an enormous performance. And I remember
28 the march up the hill, round the back of the Union Buildings and through into the
29 amphitheatre. I remember the shock when we discovered that our Prime Minister was
30 not there and that one of his deputies was going to take over - receive the petition
31 forms. And I remember the anger when the women who had deposited the documents
32 in his room came out and said 'He didn't even take his pipe out of his mouth.' But,

1 prognostications about all sorts of people who said you won't make it, you'll be
2 broken up, you'll be driven out, it's too cold, you won't be able to stand it. But we
3 did. Our husbands, our parents, grandparents, whatever looked after children, there
4 were young women, there were old women, there were homemakers, there were
5 working women, there were intellectuals, it was the most amazing mixture of people
6 from all over the country. I remember the carload of people who came up from the
7 Eastern Cape had a car smash on the way. A car that overtook another on a blind rise
8 and drove into the middle of them. They arrived late, bruised, cut, black eyes, but
9 they arrived and they stayed. And I think that was indicative of the strength of feeling
10 about what was happening to the country. I think we all realised that the country was
11 in for a really difficult nasty time.

12 M: Well, it must have been a fascinating experience because, certainly in my lifetime I
13 don't know of any such massive response by women, except of course the 1950...

14 S: '58 march, ja.

15 M: '58 march, but I was very young then. Certainly in the later years there's been nothing
16 of that order.

17 S: Well, it was interesting - Ruth Foley and Jean Sinclair were marvellous organisers and
18 they were both quite superb at walking around amongst people and keeping peoples'
19 spirits up and jollifying people along. People around and finding somebody who
20 suddenly turned out to have something interesting to say and said 'Oh, stand up. This
21 is so and so from such and such, and she's got such and such to say.' and somebody
22 would find themselves launched into a five minute talk. It was absolutely fascinating.

23 M: And it must have taken some organisation in terms of food.

24 S: It took a lot of organisation, it took a lot of organisation. We did have help from the
25 men, but mostly they turned up at night with a strange protection gang that they
26 thought they were running. We were a bit scornful of the protection, we thought we
27 could look after ourselves better without them. But, yes, it took a lot of organising,
28 but once it got started, it ran on its own momentum. The first few hours, the first half
29 a day perhaps, one wondered was it going to make it, but once it got going, people
30 turned up and said 'Oh I've brought a handful of food, oh I've brought you some
31 sandwiches,' and that sort of thing. So people in Pretoria and Johannesburg wanted to
32 be involved by coming to give. It was a wonderful experience.

1 M: Quite wonderful?

2 S: So that was the first major involvement. The next involvement which I think is
3 important was the second march from Joubert Park to the City Hall, which actually
4 mourned the desecration of the constitution, where the symbolic coffin was carried by
5 hundreds of women marching to a muffled drum beat. It was a strange woman who
6 turned up actually at the first march, wearing a green dress and a black beret and
7 carrying a great big drum who said she had come to lead us, we didn't know who she
8 was or where she came from. Alright, there she was, so she lead us, and she turned up
9 for the second march, again, this time with a muffled drum and led us all the way and
10 at the City Hall, in front of thousands of people the symbolic constitution was placed
11 on a bier, on plinths. And we took it in turns, four at a time, one on each corner to
12 stand at attention, with head bowed for half an hour, without moving and then we
13 would step back and four others would come. Husbands who had been in the army
14 during the war telling us how to rock from toe to heel, to keep the circulation going,
15 how to tighten your calf and thigh muscles so that you didn't pass out and that was
16 quite - it was always quite a problem. The next day, Bob Connelly, who was the
17 cartoonist at the Rand Daily Mail, who was, incidentally a very close family friend
18 had the drawing of the Book of the Constitution, draped with a black sash of
19 mourning and that's where, his drawings, where the new name of the organisation -
20 Black Sash came from, and the book that - wore the little sash of black, came from
21 Bob Connelly's cartoon.

22 S: I should perhaps have had talked earlier of moving the idea of the Women's Defence
23 of the Constitution League into other parts of the country. From my - my part I was
24 deputised to come into Natal, and do the Natal route. On my own, there weren't very
25 many of us who were organising things and it was bit thin on the ground at that stage.
26 We did have contacts and I was told to come down here and start trying to form
27 branches, links. I remember being lent Dora Hill's car because our little, tiny motor
28 car wouldn't have got me here and back. So I came down in Dora Hill's car, she was
29 also on the executive, national executive. And I went first to Durban where I held two
30 meetings. I can't remember the contacts of any of the people that I spoke to in
31 Durban, but there were two public meetings - one was a preparatory meeting and one
32 a public meeting, trying to explain the idea of - this is before the Pretoria march,

1 trying to explain what we were defending, why we were defending it. And then to
2 Pietermaritzburg, to do the same thing and I do remember meeting Mrs Russell. One
3 didn't forget missing Mrs Russell. Phoebe Brown, whom, I already knew from the
4 Liberal Party. Olga McDonald-Meidner?. I think Mamie Corrigan was at the first
5 meeting, but I'm not sure. But those are the three main people I remember are Phoebe
6 and Mrs Russell and Olga Meidner. Mrs Russell, very sceptical.

7 M: Why was she sceptical?

8 S: She didn't really think it was a very successful sort of thing to do. We'd only had the
9 one big march - the very first one - which has some fantastic illustrations in the
10 current - the then current issue of the Illustrated London News, which had pages of
11 photographs of that march. Mrs Russell was not very enthusiastic, Olga McDonald,
12 Olga Meidner was quite unexcited by the idea. Phoebe thought it was interesting.
13 Anyway that was the extent of my brief, was to put it to these people and leave them
14 to talk to people about it.

15 M: So you didn't have a public meeting in 'Maritzburg'?

16 S: No public meeting, I met with the group and the contacts were quite often - they were
17 either Liberal Party contacts or Torch Commando contacts that we had in the various
18 places. So from 'Maritzburg I drove onto the next day, to Howick, spoke to some
19 more women there and I can't remember any of the people in Howick. Then onto
20 Mooi River - Puck Woods, I don't think you know her - well, she's my age. Puck
21 Woods had arranged that we meet there, then onto Estcourt, on again to Ladysmith,
22 Eileen Christopher, Mrs Kidmann, I think. I've forgotten now some of those names.
23 The only thing I remember very clearly about Ladysmith was the attempt of a
24 commercial traveller to pick me up in the hotel that night. I was terribly shocked, very
25 funny. He learnt that lot? And then onto Newcastle, which wasn't much good, and
26 Standerton, and then home, back to Johannesburg. An exhausting ten days, absolutely
27 exhausting ten days, meeting strangers every day, trying to put forward a message
28 which was brand new and very foreign to people's thinking. Nobody had thought of
29 mounting a massive nation-wide women's protest before. There wasn't much in the
30 ways of women's organisations existing, except for the National Council of Women,
31 which didn't operate that way, and the Vroue Vereeniging, Vroue Federasie, which is
32 also quite an old organisation. So it was quite a battle.

- 1 M: Was it the ACVV?
- 2 S: Ja. And then back to Johannesburg and then it was via that, other people had gone to
3 the Eastern Cape, to the Free State, down to the Western Cape, up into the Eastern
4 Transvaal, we went subsequently, I remember I was on the Eastern Transvaal thing as
5 well. But the others were prior to the big Pretoria march, the 48-hour vigil in Pretoria.
- 6 M: But when you came to say 'Maritzburg, presumably the women that you spoke to
7 were aware of the current debate about the constitution?
- 8 S: Oh yes, oh yes.
- 9 M: So it wasn't as if you were trying to spread a gospel which had no - where there was
10 no understanding.
- 11 S: No, there was understanding of what had happened was happening and there was
12 anger about what was happening. The idea of trying to get a great big womens'
13 uprising, I suppose is what it looked like going, was new.
- 14 M: But I'm surprised about Mrs Russell not being more interested.
- 15 S: She was very angry about the - what was being done to the constitution but she didn't
16 think the other one was going to work.
- 17 M: Why do you suppose it was so? Do you think that these women didn't believe that
18 women could possibly be so ...
- 19 S: I'm quite sure. I'm quite sure. Mrs Russell was a member of the National Council of
20 Women, which was a remarkable organisation which did a remarkable amount of
21 absolutely top class work, but didn't do it that way. It objected to the tampering of the
22 constitution, it expressed itself by sending memoranda to the government, fully
23 researched, well-documented memoranda were sent to organisations, to big business,
24 to the government, whoever seemed to be, to need to be put on the right track. And I
25 think people like Mrs Russell had for so many years been members of the National
26 Council of Women, were used to that way of doing it but the idea of mobilising
27 public protest out on the streets didn't go down too well. At that stage.
- 28 M: Well, I suppose we it was a totally new approach.
- 29 S: It was.
- 30 M: As you say, it was very, very public protest which was quite unusual for the women.
- 31 S: Yes, it was, it was. There had been protests before. If you go back as far as the Boer
32 War and so on, I mean the Afrikaner women did a lot of fighting then, but in a lot of I

1 don't mean war fighting, I mean standing up for rights and so on, they did the same
2 thing during the Great Trek and the pre-Great Trek era, when Afrikaner women really
3 stood up for human rights as they saw them in those days, but by - when the Black
4 Sash started, the Women's Defence of the Constitution League started, it certainly
5 was not an acceptable thing for a group of women to get up and make public
6 exhibitions of themselves, which was a phrase that came time and time again. 'Why
7 aren't you back in your house?' You'd have it too, when you'd been standing in
8 protest. And I think that was probably the problem.

9 M: So it was a very significant movement?

10 S: Mmm, it was, it was. It really shifted the whole way of thinking about expressing
11 one's anger about what was happening in this country.

12 M: So how soon did 'Maritzburg people respond by forming a branch? Was it quite soon
13 after you had been here, came and...?

14 S: I don't know when the branch here was formed. It existed and was functioning
15 actively when we came here in '59. Since I was here in '55, I should think, it actually
16 got going quite quickly, but that initial couple of hours that I spent in an office with
17 them in town was a bit disappointing, I left here wondering if it was going to get
18 anywhere at all. It actually did, but it didn't seem very hopeful when I started. When
19 we came down here in 1959, the Black Sash was already an active and existing
20 organisation and I had no knowledge at all of what happened between that first, rather
21 tentative meeting that I had in town and when we arrived it existed. The people that I
22 recall from when we arrived were Mrs Russell, Ma Russell, whom I admired
23 tremendously, she was a woman of tremendous energy, she was a woman of
24 marvellous intellect, she terrified me, scared me stiff. But she was a marvellous
25 person, I remember Mamie Corrigan, with whom I got on quite well, but I always had
26 the niggling feeling that Mamie didn't think that there was much in me. She seemed
27 to me to think I was rather light weight, which was always a bit hard on ego - isn't it.
28 And there were people who subsequently became very close friends, like Meg Strauss,
29 who was always a very quiet member of Sash, but who did a lot of jolly hard work to
30 get - keep things going and so on. Phoebe, of course, Olga Meidner, Bunty Biggs, a
31 remarkable person, Bunty, a Quaker, a woman of enormous compassion and
32 enormous understanding. I don't know whether you know the post-war in Germany,

- 1 Bunty had been involved, quite high up, in the displaced persons organisations.
- 2 M: I believe so.
- 3 S: Ja. did some wonderful work there. And it seemed natural that Bunty would be in an
4 organisation like Black Sash, particularly later when the forced removals started,
5 Bunty already knew what happened to people who had their roots torn up. She'd seen
6 it before in Europe and she was now seeing it again here and I think the situation was
7 horrifying for her.
- 8 M: I can't remember if Bunty was a member of the Liberal Party?
- 9 S: I don't think so. Bunty was not a South African and if you were not a South African,
10 as far as I remember, you could not join a political party, I think. I don't think Bunty
11 was a member of that. But she was a really remarkable person. she was, I have to say
12 that I was ? With Bunty with the Black Sash and also with Kupugani, originally as a
13 plug-in manager to try and help pull Kupigani straight when it started to go to pieces
14 in about 1962.
- 15 M: You were involved in Kupigani?
- 16 S: Ja, and then we succeeded in getting it big and strong and rather frightening for a
17 person who had no business experience at all, I resigned as manager and they
18 promptly put me on to the Board of Directors, still involved in running an
19 organisation not knowing about it. Anyway, that was a different picture altogether, but
20 those first years in 'Maritzburg, my involvement with Sash was not a very deep one
21 because I had four small children in a brand new environment. I didn't have my
22 support system, I'd left my support system behind in Johannesburg. It was a bit
23 difficult. The boys were at school, at Cowan House, but the two little girls were very
24 small. Barbie was only a few months old when we moved down here, so I didn't get
25 much involved in doing things.
- 26 M: So, basically your support system in Johannesburg had committed you to be actively
27 inspired?
- 28 S: That's right, there were always family, there were always friends who for one reason
29 or another didn't believe in getting involved in the politics. There's always been this
30 'I don't like being involved in politics.' People seem to forget that running a
31 community, taking decisions about things are to work, they're all politics, we're all
32 involved in politics every day of our lives, but there's this fear of 'politics'. That

1 people who didn't tend to get involved in Sash activities because it was political,
2 perfectly happy to baby sit, but I was minus that when I came here, for quite a while,
3 so it took a bit of time.

4 M: Of course, in 1959, Black Sash was still quite a conservative organisation, it was at
5 that stage, still tentatively involved in the whole business of defending the
6 constitution, it hadn't yet moved into an active political organisation.

7 S: No, it hadn't and it wasn't doing any of the kind of monitoring that it did later until
8 we left Johannesburg to come down here, most of our activities consisted of standing
9 in a row in the street when the Minister was about to step off a train or a 'plane or
10 standing outside a new Police Station. Along the Reef, when I think it was Blackie
11 Swart who was the Minister of Police at that stage, was coming to open the police
12 station; there we all were, lined up in front of the police station. His car drove past us
13 and he got out and stepped over the wall, went in through the back. Some of them
14 didn't know how to handle it, (name indistinct). He used to treat us as if we were on
15 parade and he used to walk past and watch our shoes and say 'You didn't polish your
16 shoes properly this morning.' as he walked off down the line. That was our main
17 activity, sitting at street corners, trying to get people to sign petitions, trying not to
18 duck when people spat or threw tomatoes at you. Trying not to speak back when
19 people said 'Do you sleep with your garden boy?' That sort of thing, and the kind of
20 broader issues that Sash began to tackle didn't come until very much later I think.

21 M: Yes, I believe 1960, the Sash Conference decided that it was going to in fact move
22 towards a more active political - take more active political role ... and it was then that
23 the membership started declining. Do you remember that process in 'Maritzburg?

24 S: I think, I can recall the excitement of seeing the organisation, feeling the organisation
25 accepting its responsibility to move into broader issues and I can remember that some
26 people dropped out, but after a while, other people who wouldn't have joined us
27 earlier, because we were seen as elitist group playing politics, started coming in, so it
28 balanced itself out again.

29 M: When did you become involved, actively, in Sash in 'Maritzburg?

30 S: I should think probably the early '70s, ja probably, the '60s my girls were still very
31 wee, Barbara was only born in '58 and I believed very strongly that I should be home
32 for the kids when they were home. I had taken on the responsibility of raising a

1 family and that was my prime concern, I had a duty to the children, and other things
2 had to wait. So I suppose I really got involved in the early 70s.

3 M: So before that you were a member, but not on the committee, is that what you are
4 saying?

5 S: I was on the committee in Johannesburg when I had a support system which allowed
6 that to happen. There is one other aspect of Sash activity which I think I would like to
7 mention here because it is very important. It played a very important role here in
8 'Maritzburg and you can still see the hang-on after it. And that was Sash's attempt to
9 break down the compartmentalisation which had happened because apartheid was
10 such a successful system. And I don't remember whether it was, I don't remember
11 whether you were involved with - I think not. I think it was probably in the 70s. We
12 held each month, on a Saturday afternoon, we held a tea party in a member's house, or
13 in a friend's house, in a White suburb, in a township, in a Coloured area, in an Indian
14 area. I remember meeting at Mrs Hoskin's house in Woodlands, in Mrs Ferreira's
15 house in Woodlands; I remember meeting in Bharwu Ghela's house, Mrs Bundoo's
16 house, Labia Motala's house. I remember going to Purity Gule's house in Edendale
17 and her husband being the speaker for the afternoon, talking to us about traditional
18 Zulu medicines, he was a qualified doctor who was very interested in the traditional
19 medicines. And if Marie hasn't already spoken about that, it was - we - for a long
20 time we were involved in making the quilt and we would all sit there - well those who
21 could sew, I'm not much good at sewing, we were busy making pieces for the quilt.
22 But it was the task of the hostess to arrange some kind of activity for the afternoon, to
23 give us a focus. I remember Fleur Webb inviting a cosmetician, is that the word do
24 you think? From Nagel's, to come to her house one Saturday afternoon and to talk
25 about make-up - for white skins, black skins, brown skins, for all skins and she got
26 four volunteers from the group to sit in a row and she brought all her different make-
27 ups for different kinds of skins and made up these four members. It was very exciting
28 and a great deal of fun was had by all.

29 M: Do you think that was in the seventies?

30 S: I think so.

31 M: Because about the time when I got involved, in 1980, there was no such ...

32 S: No, I think it was the 70s. It was people of my age, it was me, it was Meg Strauss, it

1 of the National Council of Women, so was Mrs Bundoo, they never joined Sash.
2 Sheila Kunene was a member of the National Council of Women, she never joined
3 Sash. I don't know why, I don't know why. It was perhaps, at the beginning of active
4 political harassment. The National Council of Women remember was an old
5 organisation, which formed in 1909, it had always been non-racial, and because of its
6 method of protesting, because it sent memoranda, because it was a research
7 organisation, and so on, it didn't suffer the same police harassment that Sash did.

8 M: So many people were threatened by it.

9 S: They did ?

10 M: Do you think the Sash, as a largely middle-class White organisation, perhaps it wasn't
11 very welcoming to.....?

12
13 End of first side.

14
15 Second side.

16
17 S: I admired what it did....

18
19 S: I think the people who belonged to the Liberal Party, which was where I knew people
20 of colour from, the fact that the membership of Sash, the actual women who joined
21 Sash, were middle-class and upper middle-class people who were a bit elitist and they,
22 the people of colour, would not feel happy with them. So, perhaps a combination of
23 not wanting to join an elitist White group and the beginnings of political harassment.
24 Well, not really the beginning, but the intensification of political harassment, so that
25 one stayed out.

26 M: But it has been said that the big, the statement Black Sash made was by limiting their
27 membership right from the start. If they had opened the membership right from the
28 start, there might not have been this lack of Black involvement in the organisation.

29 S: That was where the Sash, well, Sash and I rather parted company.

30 M: Could you explain that?

31 S: Yes, I remember it very clearly I remember it with some pain, with some amusement.
32 There was a meeting in Mrs Russell's house, in Scottsville, that amazing house that

1 she lived in full of Siamese cats ... to discuss this very point, and Mrs Russell was
2 very strongly against opening membership to people of other races - she insisted that it
3 had to be a membership of people who had the vote. I believed just as strongly, just
4 as strenuously that Sash ought to be open to women of all races, whoever they were,
5 that any woman who was concerned with what was happening to the country, should
6 be welcome to join Sash. At that meeting Mrs Russell and I had a quite a stand up
7 fight. She was an intimidating lady, she was a very large bosomed lady who stood up
8 and spoke down at you. She was angry with me, and she certainly was, she gave me
9 hell, and I fought as hard as I could for what I wanted to say, but was overpowered,
10 intimidated and squashed out and I lost the argument. We then broke for tea and Mrs
11 Russell was charming. The next day Mrs Russell 'phoned me about something, she
12 used to call me 'my child' and she said 'My child, your voice sounds funny? Do you
13 have a sore throat?' So I said 'It's a bit scratchy.' It was a terribly hot day, and a
14 couple of hours later Mrs Russell arrived here on the drive with two brown paper
15 packets, one enclutched in each hand, one had some lemons in and the other one had
16 some honey in it and she had brought me lemons and honey to deal with my throat.
17 That's the kind of woman she was.

18 M: And she was in her eighties by then, wasn't she?

19 S: She was getting on and she would give you hell, but when that argument was over, if
20 you had been honest and she felt you were sincere in what you were saying, if you
21 weren't - she never forgave you. But if she felt you were sincere and you were honest,
22 when the argument was over, it was over and you went on socially from then on? It
23 was quite right.

24 M: Very admirable.

25 S: And at that stage, I stopped active involvement in the Sash and I joined the National
26 Council of Women because it was a non-racial organisation, because I felt it was
27 desperately important to be involved in a non-racial set-up.

28 M: So you joined; this debate about the membership should, could have been, ? In the 60s
29 and in then '63 did open it's membership, but presumably by then you had already
30 joined the National Council?

31 S: I had already joined the National Council, very soon, very soon I was given the
32 portfolio of Native Affairs, the National Council of Women worked on the portfolio

1 system, it had a portfolio for every ministry in the government and some more. And
2 very soon I was given the portfolio in the 'Maritzburg branch of Native Affairs, which
3 put me very much involved with the Black community, with the Department of Native
4 - the Municipal Department of Native Affairs and so on where I felt I was meeting the
5 kind of people I wanted to meet, working with the kind of people I wanted to work
6 with and that the elitist attitude that was worrying me didn't hold.

7 M: Today's the 12th of September. Else I wonder if I could ask you to explain why you
8 felt that Sash was elitist and did any other of the women at NCW at that time also
9 consider it elitist?

10 S: I don't know what the women in NCW thought about it at that stage, but I though it
11 was elitist I suppose for two reasons. The women I met in Sash all seemed to be
12 middle-class, upper middle-class, upper class White women who were comfortably
13 off, who could spare the time to get involved. The absence of active contact with
14 Black people, made me feel that there was a 'we're White, and we'll do it.' sort of
15 attitude and I expressed, perhaps an unconscious about mixing with Black people
16 because they weren't quite up to it whereas that was not the case with NCW, which, if
17 you remember, was founded as a non-racial organisation in 1912 or 13, whichever it
18 was, there's some hesitation about it. And working together with Black women and
19 Black organisations was a norm in NCW, which it was not in Black, in Sash. I think
20 that's where I had that perception, certainly the Black women that I worked with in
21 NCW, although they admired the work that was being done by Sash, felt that Sash
22 was elitist.

23 M: Right.

24 S: And certainly the younger White women that one met on the campus and so on, felt
25 Sash was elitist, but it was because of the economic stratification, and possibly, as I
26 said subconscious feeling of not mixing with Black people.

27 M: I see, class-related..

28 S: You did things for one, you didn't do things with ...?'

29 M: Thank you.

30 S: I think I must add to that the fact that, for instance, when my daughter Jennifer was in
31 her teens and was a varsity students, she felt very strongly about Sash's Whiteness and
32 about Sash's eliteness, based on what I've just said. But that perception changed and

1 those same people, later on in the eighties and so on. thought that Sash was an
2 absolutely magnificent organisation. I noticed it with Jenny's change of attitude, that
3 by the beginning of the eighties, the middle of the eighties, she thought Sash was
4 doing a wonderful job and needed every possible support it could get. so I think that's
5 important.

6 M: So the elitist is really an earlier perception. but by the eighties you're suggesting Sash
7 had proved something to society.

8 S: Ja, I think so.

9 M: Thank you. Else. what I was - before we go onto NCW, I wonder if I could just back
10 track to your education and your upbringing. I just wondered, is there anything in that
11 background which specifically encouraged you as a woman to gain a higher
12 education? Can you remember any one, any person in your family who possibly
13 encouraged you, anything in your background, your German forebears which might
14 have had an impact?

15 S: No, I can't. I can - my most specific memory - it's just there was a general feeling in
16 the family that one had brains, one had to use one's brains to the limit of those brains
17 and if you had the money to go and get a further education, then that's what you did.
18 You used your brains as long, as to, as higher level as they could handle. I know my
19 grandfather tried to persuade my mother to go to University when she failed to get
20 into the Bedford College of Education because she wasn't very - wasn't tall enough,
21 but she said 'no' she didn't want to go to university, she'd rather play tennis and farm.
22 But it was just assumed, in fact.

23 M: Now her father was German, is that correct?

24 S: Her father was German, her mother was English.

25 M: Did her, when did her father come to South Africa, do you know?

26 S: He came to South Africa in the 1900s, Mum was the oldest child in the family and
27 was born in about - when was it? 1898, she was born, in South Africa. He married
28 my grandmother, as far as I know, in South Africa.

29 M: So he was educated in Germany?

30 S: He was educated in Germany and came out here. Interestingly enough, he spoke very
31 good English, almost unaccented English. Whereas my father's father, who was also
32 educated in Germany, spoke English with a very strong German accent and my

1 father's mother never really learnt to speak English at all. But I think it's also
2 important that Dad was an academic, Dad was a lecturer, at Wits, in Mathematics and
3 Physics and the family, when we left the farm and lived in Johannesburg, very much
4 involved in academic circles.

5 M: And what was his father?

6 S: His father was a surgeon.

7 M: Right.

8 S: But friends of the family who lived in Johannesburg in the early twenties, middle
9 twenties and early thirties were largely academic people - Kate Ballinger, Eddy
10 Lourie, all those sort of people - were university women, lecturing on the campus
11 staff. So I think it was just assumed that one would go on - there was no positive
12 drive towards that.

13 M: Right. I wonder, if - picking up also on that issue of the role of women in society,
14 could you just expand on your ideas of the role of women in society? For instance,
15 in terms of their child bearing responsibilities, how do you feel about women getting
16 involved in politics and ...?

17 S: Right, this is a very, very complicated issue. It's one that I've always thought was a
18 very complicated issue because I have always felt... I can remember no conversion
19 period, it just seems to be that I have always assumed that women had as much right
20 to be involved in what they wanted to do, as men did. But, that their position became
21 complicated by the fact, that biologically they bore the children, and biologically they
22 appear to have more of the nurturing nature than men do, but whether that is in fact
23 due to the way men are brought up or not, I don't know. Maybe. But so the
24 perception is of women having the stronger nurturing nature. So you have the
25 complicated situation - a woman has a child - she may be a single parent, let's look at
26 the position then. She may have to work, but by opting to have a child, she has taken
27 on a responsibility to a small developing being that has no choice, so her
28 responsibility towards that child, particularly in its very early couple of years is very
29 strong and I believed, over-riding so that when my children were infants, I did not
30 work outside of the home. I started getting involved again when they reached pre-
31 primary school, nursery school age, and even then and right through until they were in
32 their teens, I tried to see to it that when they had finished with their pre-school, or

1 their primary school, I was home for them, when they came. Whether they came
2 home excited, with happiness or came home furiously angry, I believed that it was my
3 - my responsibility and my right to be there for my kids when they came home.

4 M: But you had a husband to support you...

5 S: I had a husband who supported and when he came back from work in the evening,
6 child rearing, child rearing was very much a shared performance. He wasn't much
7 good at getting up in the middle of the night should the children have cried, because
8 he's quite difficult to wake at night. So, he would sleep easy? It wasn't that he didn't
9 want to, but he just didn't wake up very easily.

10 M: Something about the young women who do not have a partner to support them...

11 S: Okay, let's look at the position of my own two daughters. Jenny is virtually a single
12 mother, Anthony works and lives in Johannesburg, Jenny works and lives in Cape
13 Town. She has a tremendously strong commitment to community activity. At the
14 moment happens to be as a Member of Parliament and before that it was in the United
15 Women's Organisation, Trade Unionist.. Women's Trade Unions and so on. She has
16 a child, a little boy who is now three and half. Her love for that child, and her
17 commitment to that child is as strong as her commitment to anything else but she has
18 to have him in a care situation, so he's been with child minders, or at creches ever
19 since he was a few months old - five or six months old. He's a fine kid. He seems to
20 be a very well adjusted little boy, he seems to be a very happy little boy. When Jenny
21 picks him up in the evening and brings him home she has to put the day's cares aside
22 and concentrate on Nikita. That's not easy, it's a strain on her, the strain on her will
23 react on the child. It's a very difficult situation for a single mother. Barbara, in
24 Johannesburg, has just adopted a five-month old little boy. She says there are so
25 many kids in orphanages, and the world is over-populated, she has no intention of
26 producing a baby, so she's just adopted a little boy. She's in the same position. She's
27 a deputy Director on the Gauteng Environmental Desk of the Gauteng Government, so
28 she's pretty busy. Monde is with a child care, child minder, who also looks after the
29 infant baby of two Lesbian friends, who have also just adopted a baby, who is now
30 five months old. Same thing holds. But she had to go to Denmark recently for a
31 three-weeks conference, no problem at all, Monde went too. The people in Denmark
32 were warned, 'I'm bringing a five-months old baby.' She says the child was

1 thoroughly spoilt. She had to reassert some kind of routine. They are shortly going to
2 Cuba, Jenny and Barbie, and both little ones are going too, when she comes back, she
3 has to go to Germany for a two-weeks conference in Berlin, and baby's going too.
4 And if Jenny goes to workshops, if she's running workshops for the SACP in
5 Johannesburg, the SACP sets up a child minding system for the delegates and the
6 people. There's been such a big change that I think one's worry about kids being
7 deprived if the mother works, may no longer be valid. But it's still true that one has to
8 do an awfully careful investigation of what the child minding system is, how caring
9 the people are and how well the establishment is run.

10 M: It's interesting to me, what you've said Else, because I know that in England, there are
11 a large number of single parents who send their children out to child minders and it's
12 accepted as a normal phenomenon.

13 S: Ja, it is. I think one of the interesting comments that Jen' has made, and I think it's
14 going to come from Barbie too now, as she experiences the same problems, that the
15 SACP always remembers to arrange a child minding - or creche - or something if they
16 have workshops, meetings or whatever, the ANC usually remembers - but sometimes
17 they forget. Jenny says a very large number of NGOs will ask you to come and speak
18 and address them, and when you arrive there for a conference, you find there are no
19 facilities whatsoever for looking after the infants of people who have come to speak.
20 And she commented that all the Sash conferences that she spoke at the last couple of
21 years, there was no one to look after Nikita. She has no hesitation, under those
22 circumstances, she just takes the baby in with her and if you haven't child caring
23 facilities, well then you're probably going to have a difficult session. But I think it is
24 something which is becoming very normal here - is to arrange - whenever the
25 Women's Coalition holds meetings, there's always somebody around who is prepared
26 to run a child minding system. Here, it's always Penny Haswell. But that I think is
27 important. You mentioned earlier the problem of my involvement in politics and my
28 brother's total lack of interest in politics, in fact he's almost anti-politics. But it's
29 only one way of looking at it. I happened to use politics and that sort of thing as my
30 own way of expressing my concern for oppressed communities, people in danger,
31 people who had been hurt. My brother has done it a different way, but he has done it.
32 He is a doctor and that is how he has expressed his care. He worked with Barra',

1 extraordinary long hours for a pittance, many years ago, he worked in Soweto and in
2 the townships - that's how he expressed his caring for the community. So although
3 he's uninterested in politics and has a very common attitude towards politics 'it's a
4 dirty business' , he does have the same caring involvement in community work,...

5 M: Just expressed in a different way.

6 S: Just expressed in a different way, ja.

7 M: Could we turn now to your main focus which has been the National Council of
8 Women. When and how did you get involved in the NCW and what attracted you to
9 it?

10 S: I knew women of my mother's vintage in Johannesburg and of Deneys' mother's
11 vintage in Johannesburg who were members of the National Council of Women, it
12 was a name with which I was familiar. I had heard of the kind of work it did, when
13 we came to live in 'Maritzburg, which was then a very xenophobic village, and I
14 remember - that - we had been for three, or four or five years and people still
15 introduced us - 'Do you know the Schreiners. They come from Johannesburg?' There
16 came a time when one was accepted, and I remember we had been invited to dinner -
17 with- to a drinks party with the elderly Tathams. Our vintage of Tathams, slightly
18 older, quite a bit older. And there I met a woman called Mrs Morgans, who I found
19 intimidating and terrifying and she said to me 'Young woman, I think you ought to
20 join the National Council of Women.' And I was so scared by her, I said 'Yes,
21 alright.' And that's how I got into the National Council of Women. And that was, I
22 suppose, well, it was early sixties, I can't remember when I actually joined NCW, but
23 that's how I got in. And then very soon after that I was persuaded to take over the
24 portfolio of Native Affairs.

25 M: Else, before we get more deeply into the principles and ideological problems of NCW
26 which emerged in the early 1980s, could we discuss the period of the sixties and the
27 seventies, what you were involved in, what campaigns you were involved in and who
28 the other people who were involved in the NCW in 'Maritzburg'?

29 S: Right. I wasn't actively involved in NCW until I had that fight with Mrs Russell
30 about opening membership of Sash to all races, from then on I was very actively
31 involved, for quite a long time, with the portfolio of Native Affairs and the main
32 thrust of my involvement at that stage was looking at wages, salaries, paid to Black

1 people in Pietermaritzburg and how they varied from category to category and what
2 sort of changes were taking place. The Native Affairs, the Municipal Native Affairs
3 department, remember in those days there was still municipal native Affairs
4 Department down in what was called the slave market,. Was most helpful and gave
5 me, each year, complete access to their records of the offering wages which was all
6 they had. They had no way of finding out and nobody was going to tell me from the
7 industries, what was actually being paid to people, but I could get the information of
8 when people, when an industry or domestic employer asked for a worker, which is
9 how you got Black people in those days, you went and applied for a person, through
10 the Labour Bureau, you would have to stipulate what the starting wage was, and that I
11 could have and every year I had got that and compared it with the year before, for
12 domestic workers, forestry workers, cleaners, people of various categories of industry.

13 M: And when you approached local businesses and industries, were they not prepared to
14 give you figures of salaries?

15 S: No, it was, it was a very difficult thing, people hummed and ha'd, and said 'well
16 you've got to take into account this that and the other.' I think, on the whole, business
17 and industry knew that they were under-paying people badly and they didn't want
18 things brought out. Things seen from the point of view of business and domestic
19 employers, we're running along quite happily and if you could pay a domestic worker
20 the equivalent of ten rands a month and give them some food and some secondhand
21 clothes, and they didn't up in arms and run around, why worry about offering anything
22 higher? We did try to publicise that in the papers and I think there were some reports
23 in the Natal Witness, for what it is, but that was really my main involvement from the
24 labour point of view, but then I was also involved with African welfare organisations.
25 The African Welfare Society in Sobantu, the Edendale Welfare Society, various
26 organisations in Edendale and various people in Edendale that I worked with in
27 Sobantu who became life long friends, people like Lucy Mthembu, who was Principal
28 at Nichols, and was very concerned about the state of African education, and the
29 wages that were being paid and the way people lived, and Lucy remained a very close
30 friend until her death. After her there was Daphne Shabalala who took over as
31 Principal of Nichols, and also became a life long friend, she's a wonderful, wonderful
32 woman.

1 M: She was also a member of the NCW.

2 S: She was a member of NCW, so was Lucy Mthembu, you see. They were both
3 members, but they were members of NCW and also members of NCAW- the National
4 Council of African Women and the relationship between those two organisations is a
5 very, very complicated one that I don't think anybody has ever sorted out. So let's
6 look at the non-racialism of NCW and the apartheid system as practised. People live
7 in different geographical areas, it's very difficult to get people to come to a central
8 area to work together. But it is easy to build up, or was easy to build up a working
9 relationship with people and people like Isabel Beardmore, helped to form, and I don't
10 know the date, but it's quite a long time ago, the Coloured Women's Council which
11 was affiliated to the National Council of Women, it was an autonomous body but it
12 was guided by the principles and policies of the National Council of Women. The
13 Indian Women's Council was also formed by the National Council of Women, it was
14 affiliated to the National Council of Women, but it was an independent organisation,
15 it was represented on the Board, it was represented, it had representatives who came
16 to meetings, but it also had - of course they all did the - the Indian Women's Council
17 or the Coloured Women's Council had members who paid their dues to the Coloured
18 Women's Council, but paid their dues to the National Council of Women and were
19 members of the National Council of Women, in their private capacities, but were
20 represented by Violet van Wyk, from the Coloured Women's Council on the National
21 Council of Women.

22 M: But who was the driving force behind the setting up of these other little racial groups?

23 S: The National Council of Women.

24 M: And was it largely White women who encouraged the other women to set up these
25 organisations.

26 S: I don't think so because I think at the stage at which - this is hearsay, but I think at the
27 stage at which there was - those two councils in particular were set up, there were
28 already women, Indian and Coloured women, who were members of the National
29 Council of Women but who realised that there was insufficient work being done
30 inside their own communities because people didn't come to the meetings. Now the
31 same thing happened as far as Black Women were concerned, but it happened
32 nationally, not here. It wasn't instigated here. It was the Indian Women's Council

1 that was instigated here in 'Maritzburg, and the Coloured Women's Council. In fact
2 Isabel Beardmore was the first President of the Coloured Women's Council, at the
3 invitation of the Coloured women so that's how complicated the set-up was. that was
4 before the Nationalist Government. The National Council of African Women, was
5 formed on a national level as an affiliate of the National Council of Women.
6 Throughout the country, very large numbers of independent women's organisations
7 and service organisations were affiliated to NCW. Here in 'Maritzburg, at one stage
8 there were somewhere round about 50 or 60, I think, all affiliated to NCW, all having
9 representatives that attended every meeting of NCW. Again, as I say, the National
10 Council of African Women was affiliated to the National Council of Women at
11 national level. Then in 'Maritzburg area, we had the Sobantu branch of the National
12 Council of African Women, which was a member of the National Council of Women,
13 Pietermaritzburg. We had the Edendale branch of the National Council of African
14 Women, which was a member of the Pietermaritzburg National Council of Women.
15 So we all went to each other's meetings as much as we could, but, ja. geographically,
16 we were being separated, biogeographically we were being more actively separated as
17 the Nationalist Party's policy really took root and pushed.

18 M: So the setting up of these other racial groups is really a function of the geographical
19 apartheid system.

20 S: Ja, later, and perhaps we're getting chronologically out, but let's put it in at this stage
21 before we forget to come back to it. Later on, and it was in the 70s, the National
22 Council of African Women separated from the National Council of Women on the
23 grounds that they needed to become conscious of themselves as people, a Black
24 Consciousness thing, they wouldn't succeed in becoming truly independent as Black
25 women and running their - capable of running an organisation until they freed
26 themselves from the White-based organisation. It was a very sad time for the Black
27 women here in Edendale and for us. But it was eventually accepted that the National
28 Council of African Women would formally part from the National Council of
29 Women. I went to the meeting in Edendale at which it happened, it as very sad, there
30 were Black women weeping, there were White women weeping and we all toy toy'd,
31 we didn't call it toy, toying in those days, but we danced around and I was wearing - I
32 was an honorary member of the National Council of African Women in Edendale and

1 there was a formal separation, but we continued to work together.

2 M: Did you have any African women, when you were in 'Maritzburg NCW Committee,
3 who were not members of the African ...

4 S: No, I don't think so, I don't - I think there may have been in the beginning, but when I
5 became actively involved in NCW, all the Black women who came to the meetings,
6 Pearl Nthuli, Purity Gumbe, they all belonged, Sheila Kunene and so on, all belonged
7 to their own branches to NCAW.

8 M: So when the split came, does that mean after that you had no Africans?

9 S: No, they still came to the meetings, they still came to the meetings.

10 M: But they weren't on the Committee?

11 S: They weren't on the Committee, they still came to the meetings, they still invited us to
12 their meetings, so we still had the interchange and the contacts but they were no
13 longer affiliated to the National Council of Women. The Coloured Women's
14 Council; Indian Women's Council never did that. It was the National Council of
15 African Women that did it. It's understandable, it's understandable, when you've had
16 generations, and generations and generations of being the people at the bottom, you've
17 got to fight to get your head through to the top, so it was understandable.

18 M: Do these other organisations still exist?

19 S: The Coloured Women's Council does, the Indian Women's Council does, the
20 National Council of African Women does, I don't know if it does here in Natal. But it
21 certainly exists elsewhere, I had word of its conference in Bloemfontein a few months
22 ago - so it still exists and the liaison now between the National Council of African
23 Women and the National Council of Women is stronger than it has been for many
24 years.

25 S: The women in the Coloured Women's Association who would be able to give
26 information about the early days would be Ball Ghela and Mrs Bundoo, she's the
27 wife of the Mr Bundoo who was head of the Leather Workers Union for a long time.
28 She's a very tough little lady who once put the Special Branch to flight when they
29 tried to search her bedroom and they wanted to search a trunk that was under her bed,
30 and she said 'That contains National Council of Women papers and nothing else and
31 if you touch it I shall 'phone the press immediately, get out of my house.' And they
32 got out. Quite an amazing person.

- 1 M: This was the Pietermaritzburg Indian Women's Association?
- 2 S: The Pietermaritzburg Indian Women's Association, the Coloured Women's Council
3 was very strongly under the influence of Violet van Wyk, who was a very powerful
4 woman.
- 5 M: Who died recently?
- 6 S: Ja. She was, she died very recently and she was still active into her late eighties. she
7 died aged 94, 95; her family say she was 94, and she insisted that she was 95. I spoke
8 at her birthday shortly before she died. Then there was Mrs Ferreira? And Mrs
9 Hoskin, of the Coloured Women's Council.
- 10 M: Getting back to your involvement in the labour and wage issues, can I ask was this
11 part of the national campaign by NCW and to what extent did some of your research
12 get fed into that national campaign?
- 13 S: It wasn't part of the national focus at the stage at which we started here in
14 'Maritzburg, because each branch throughout the country, and I think at that stage
15 there were about 36 branches, or 46 branches, or something, was independent in the
16 work that it undertook. But what reports came through in the various portfolios, and I
17 mentioned the portfolio system earlier, the work that came through in each portfolio,
18 at the branch level, was written up and sent to the national portfolio person in each
19 portfolio. So the work that I did in the Native Affairs portfolio here on wages and so
20 on would have been sent through to the national convener on Native Affairs, and
21 possibly through, as well, to the person in economic affairs. Certainly NCW,
22 nationally, was deeply concerned about the situation about domestic workers because
23 our focus was largely on conditions pertaining to women and children and domestic
24 workers were almost entirely female, so certainly there was a national campaign to try,
25 at various levels, throughout the country, to make people aware of the appalling
26 conditions under which domestic workers work.
- 27 M: Well, could I ask you about these NCW national campaigns? Exactly how did they
28 function?
- 29 S: They - the function of the National Convener was to keep in touch with the branches
30 and find out what was going on in her particular field at branch level, in other words,
31 what did we in 'Maritzburg find interesting or frightening, or disturbing, for instance
32 in the educational field in Pietermaritzburg, what we saw and were worried about, we

1 fed through to the national convener on education and if she thought it was something
2 that had to be taken up at a national level, she then wrote to all the branches
3 throughout the country "Maritzburg has found the following bad habits, whatever
4 they might have been, in the education system, in Pietermaritzburg, please have a look
5 at it in your area, and let me have the information. That information will all be
6 collated, written up and sent through to the education departments, provincially,
7 nationally, with our comments and our request, or demand for that to be looked at and
8 taken up. Right?

9 M: Right.

10 S: There might also be a press campaign, but NCW was very wary of press campaigns
11 until the advent of my board, which rather tried to change the approach of NCW, it
12 tried to make it more of a public campaign, which wasn't terribly popular with some
13 of the older members of NCW.

14 M: This is when you were National President, in the 1980s?

15 S: Ja, we'll come to that.

16 M: The reason I asked the question was, that Mary Child's little book on the NCW from
17 1909 to about 1948, lists an amazing number of social/economic, political issues that
18 the early NCW was involved in, and she also claims that many NCW women served
19 on government commissions in that early period and that many NCW memoranda to
20 government actually led to change in particular laws. Can you remember any
21 particular requests, or memoranda that NCW made when you were involved, which
22 actually had an effect on government legislation?

23 S: Yes, I can and a strong one was the Matrimonial Property Act, the earlier Act before
24 the Ward? Act, which is known as the Bertha Solomon Act, was actually produced by
25 Bertha Solomon, in parliament, on the research work done by NCW. All her
26 information, all the work that went into that was done by NCW. We were involved in
27 collecting information, opinions, making demands, about the matrimonial women's
28 property problems, right through. The 1987 one was it? It incorporated quite a
29 number of the things which NCW had been demanding for a long time. I remember
30 very strong and active involvement in women and tax. Now NCW first made an
31 approach about fair taxation for women in, I think, 1922, or 1923, something like that
32 and it went on. And NCW made its - this was during my national presidency, did a

1 research project here and asked other areas to do the same, on the effect of the tax
2 legislation on working women and sent representations to the - I've forgotten the
3 name of the commission that was looking at taxation at that stage, I've forgotten who
4 the commissioner was - some of which were incorporated into the amendments made
5 then, but as with the Married Women's Property Act of '87, not enough. We sent
6 representations to the Law Commission on the Status of Matrimonial Status of
7 Women, some of which were accepted and incorporated. Certainly when we wrote to
8 the Government about the Immorality Act and the demand of the repeal of the
9 Immorality Act, which again was during my presidency and it's easier for me
10 obviously to remember the things that I was actively involved in, oddly enough, when
11 the new thing came out repealing some of the actual phrases that we used were
12 incorporated into the Act, so it had obviously been, well, pretty carefully read. So,
13 yes, we continued, but none of these campaigns, or very few of these campaigns,
14 were conducted through the press, because NCW's belief, up until my Board got a bit
15 stropky, was that the government would not listen to what you said if you splashed it
16 annually in the newspapers. So you wrote to the government and reasoned a thing
17 after doing your research work and said 'this is what the research shows, this is what
18 we believe has to be done, we request it or we demand it, or whatever.'

19 M: So, in a sense, if you want to define the difference between say Black Sash and NCW,
20 it's almost analogous to that difference between the Suffragettes and the Suffragists.

21 S: Ja.

22 M: The latter worked quietly behind scenes by talking to government officials, whereas
23 Suffragettes was very much more public in the eyes ...

24 S: That's right..

25 M: ...not that I'm suggesting that Sash's out of it?? It's just a broad analogy.

26 S: Your definition of violence is a physical assault or a visual assault, but certainly
27 NCW right through has sent deputations to parliament, to meet with ministers and
28 has conducted an amazing amount of fascinating research, all of which now sits in the
29 Pretoria Archives.

30 M: Is that where it is?

31 S: All the NCW papers were collated by Margaret, by Mrs Munro, Peggy Munro and
32 they're all in the Archives in Pretoria.

1 M: So that includes local 'Maritzburg'?

2 S: It includes local 'Maritzburg stuff, ja. We tried very hard to get national NCW to
3 allow the branches to put their material into local archives, but they were worried
4 about branches in places like TweeSpruit who were going to put them into the
5 TweeSpruit lending library and they would simply disappear so it didn't - the national
6 policy was everything had to go to one place.

7 M: So how would you describe your relationship with government officials in the height
8 of apartheid?

9 S: Tense. Tense. I remember the asbestos business, for instance. Now one of our
10 members in the - up in the what's this north eastern - up near, towards the Phalaborwa
11 area, but I think it also happened across on the other side. There was a dump. As a
12 result of asbestos mining, and we discovered the school children were walking over
13 the foot of this dump and riding over the dust from this dump to get to school. That
14 mothers were carrying their infants on their backs and walking round the dump to get
15 to the shops and so on and I remember contact, that we contacted through our national
16 advisor on health and our national advisor on economics and so on, the Minister of
17 Education, who was then Gerrit Viljoen, and raised a fairly mild stink about this
18 problem with this. Our National President then was Joan Laubscher, in Pretoria, my
19 predecessor, she was invited by the - the asbestos mining people to come and see how
20 careful they were in their processing of asbestos. She was taken to various factories,
21 mines and what have you, everything except the dump of the surplus from the mining
22 process. We did succeed in getting a promise that these dump areas would be covered
23 with an adequate layer of soil. And certainly the process was started, whether it was
24 finished or not I don't know, because family matters intervened, when Jenny got into
25 problems with the Security Police and I couldn't care less at that stage about asbestos
26 in the North Eastern Transvaal.

27 M: But now you're talking about the relationship, the relationship with government...

28 S: The relations with government, so again in each of these cases I'm saying to you that
29 government did listen and I think it was because NCW had a reputation for quietly
30 and solidly accept - investigating and making absolutely sure that the facts were
31 correct before they moved, and because NCW went to see the relevant minister either
32 physically went to see, or wrote to the relevant minister before making a fuss in the

1 paper.

2 M: NCW always seems to have had a very low profile, possibly because of the way its
3 worked. Anybody writing a history of it?

4

5 There is nothing more on this side.