

Verster Prison:

I also salute the Black Sash and the National Union of South African Students. We note with pride that you have acted as the conscience of white South Africa. Even during the darkest days in the history of our struggle you held the flag of liberty high.

A lifetime ago

The Black Sash was established in 1955 – Sheena Duncan's mother, Jean Sinclair, was one of the founders. It was originally called the Women's Defence of the Constitution League, and the black sash which these middle class white women wore was a symbol of mourning for the country's constitution.

In those days, the constitution, from the foundation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, guaranteed that so-called coloured people would always remain on the voters' roll. In 1955, the government used rather underhand methods to chuck them off, and seven years into Nat rule, that was a bridge too far for women like Jean Sinclair.

After leading a massive protest to Parliament (in its early days the Sash could boast around 10 000 members), the women took to standing silently, wearing their black sashes, wherever cabinet ministers were likely to pass. The press soon started calling them The Black Sash, and the name stuck.

In 1962, numbers had dwindled somewhat, but the protests continued, as Time magazine wrote on 25 May that year:

One by one, the angry Deputies of South Africa's dwindling opposition parties rose in Cape Town's Parliament to blast the government's new 'death for sabotage' bill, which would give the regime sweeping authoritarian powers... But the most eloquent attack on the bill was silent. It came from the rows of solemn women wearing black mourning sashes who last week kept a day and night vigil of protest outside Johannesburg's city hall and Cape Town's Parliament buildings.

As they had protested each major Nationalist infringement on freedom in the past seven years, the Black Sash members – largely women of English stock whose husbands oppose the government – once again vowed to stand stern symbolic watch until Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd's government forced the sabotage bill through to the inevitable successful vote. In the autumn chill, Black Sash Chairman Jean Sinclair, a 54-year-old Johannesburg

housewife, and her handful of matronly recruits were swathed in overcoats as they lit their symbolic torch of freedom and posted placards reading "Reject the Sabotage Bill." Promptly, young pro-Nationalist hooligans gathered to hurl eggs, water bombs, stones. Once a crowd of 400 rushed the Black Sash ranks.

Yes, they were heroes!

Targets of contempt

Sheena Duncan looked back in 2005:

In the 1950s, we were newsworthy, perhaps because we were riding the tide of white protest against the ruthless determination of the government at the time to impose what later became known as apartheid. We found ways of doing things that caught the imagination of the press.

In the 1960s, we were labelled as communists and were shouted at and told we ought to be at home in our kitchens looking after our children. Some of our attackers were very aggressive and threw nasty things at us.

In the turbulent 1970s, we became flavour of the month inside South Africa and for many of the people worldwide who were beginning to regard apartheid as a great evil. The Black Sash members knew a lot of things other white people did not know about the pass laws, migrant labour and forced removals, while the black majority who knew these things much more immediately than we did were in exile, in prison or silenced.

In the second half of the 1980s, people began to ask why we were still in existence because the pass laws had been repealed in June 1986 and few saw what use we would be after that. But the State of Emergency had been declared in the same month, the pass laws were repealed and the waiting rooms in our advice offices were overflowing with people whose children had been taken into detention or who had disappeared, so we went on.

In the 1990s, many people were sure we were dead because, they said, there was nothing left for us to do. One South African corporate donor stated that there was no further need for human-rights organisations because we now had a constitutional Bill of Rights.

Now, in the 21st century, we are still at it. Socio-economic rights are still far from being realised and there is a long way to go before the gross inequality and poverty in our society is overcome.



Sheena Duncan

An extraordinary woman

Sheena Duncan was just 23 when The Sash was founded, and soon found her niche in the advice offices the organisation started all over the country to help people caught in the evil net of apartheid laws. The pass law, now long forgotten, was an especially wicked instrument of control that caused much misery. In the year from July 1970 to June 1971, for example, 615 075 people were prosecuted under these laws; many were jailed, and many had to leave the places they'd lived in for decades and go to their 'homelands'. The year after the Sash was established, the famous Women's March showed the level of resistance to these laws.

Sheena became an expert on the pass laws and influx control; she and her colleagues worked incredibly hard to sort out the terrible tangles people found themselves in, and to lobby for an end to the laws (a goal which was finally achieved in 1986). Sheena was a devout Anglican Christian and her faith played an important role in motivating her – although you would never have known about it if it was up to her. Sheena was a shining example of a person who walked the walk and didn't talk about it.

Sheena became national president of the organisation in 1975, just in time to meet the challenge of the Soweto riots. She served two terms as president, and then became Chair of the Black Sash Trust, so she was very much in the thick of it in the 70s and 80s, which saw the Sash become an important source of information when it was increasingly hard to come by.

"The work of the Black Sash expanded to monitor and record the protests, the rallies and marches that were being met with ever-stronger police reaction. Lists were kept as people were banned and banished, died in detention, disappeared into lengthy