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Broadening the Black Sash's Reach: A Biographical Study of Women Activists in The Natal Midlands.

This research project seeks to document the contribution made by Black Sash women to the anti-apartheid movement in the Natal Midlands region. This study will give special attention to the biographical narrative of three women who were members of the Black Sash organisation in the Natal Midlands region. These women are Joan Kerchhoff, Mary Kleinenberg, and Anne Harley.

In, 1955 Else Schreiner travelled to Natal to look at the possibility of setting up branches of the Black Sash. After holding meetings in Durban, she went to Pietermaritzburg, and there she met and spoke to a small group of women who belonged to the Liberal Party. Soon after Schreiner's visit, the Natal Midlands branch was formed and the women voters in the Pietermaritzburg region began to meet to discuss their opposition to the Senate Bill.

By the late 1950s, many people began to lose heart as they viewed their campaign as unsuccessful and wondered how useful it was to protest. This led to the decline in membership of the Black Sash movement. But those who remained committed to the anti-apartheid movement embarked on a wider protest against white supremacy in all its social, economic and political forms. For thirty years, the organisation would carry on sustained campaigns and held weekly placard demonstrations to protest against capital punishment and the torture of political activists. The organisation continued to examine the legality and morality of the administrative and judicial system.

The Black Sash white anti-apartheid activists took a stand against injustice, that other white people refused to take. They served jail sentences and suffered hardship as they lost friends and were often socially ostracised. These individuals discarded the white privileges afforded to them by the apartheid government. They dedicated their lives to combating injustice while fighting for their vision for the future, free and democratic South Africa. Their participation in the anti-apartheid movement is unique as they were willing to take risks and go to jail. It was due to their involvement in the anti-apartheid movement that the fight against the apartheid regime was not simply a black versus white issue but rather against an oppressive system. Their participation in the anti-apartheid movement transformed the liberation movement into multi-racial, even though their numbers were small.

This study will also examine the contributions of the Black Sash organisation in the Natal Midlands via the life histories of these three women activists. It will highlight their trials and tribulations as wives, mothers and political activists and how they negotiated their activism in the context of race, class, and gender. By incorporating biographical narratives of these three women, this research project will be able to provide a more in-depth insight into the contributions of women's organisations other than Black organisations in the apartheid struggle in the Natal Midlands. Hence this study will contribute to the regional histories of KwaZulu-Natal in the context of race, gender and resistance. This study also seeks to examine the socio-economic and political factors that shaped and defined the political activism of Joan Kerchhoff, Mary Kleinenberg, and Anne Harley in the Natal Midlands. The need to include gender perspectives and voices in the nationalist narratives in South Africa was one of the primary reasons for this topic. Women played a crucial role in the anti-apartheid struggle and during the transition to the formation of a democratic government in 1994. These regional narratives are wanting in current South African liberation histories.

The general absence of Joan Kerchhoff, Mary Kleinenberg, and Anne Harley in scholarly literature could be attributed to South African historians' tendency to overlook the women's resistance in the anti-apartheid movement in Pietermaritzburg. This is due to the gender-blind approach used by most academics interested in the anti-apartheid movement in the Natal Midlands. In addition, the South African anti-apartheid historiography also focuses on black South Africans and overlooks the contributions of non-Black communities to the anti-apartheid struggle. Thus, this study on the three Black Sash women will integrate white women into the story, setting the stage for an invaluable academic inquiry into South African history. It will demonstrate that the anti-apartheid struggle was collective, non-racial and included a small group of whites. The life history approach in this study and its findings will reveal how the contribution of Pietermaritzburg activists shaped and defined both regional and nationalist history in South Africa's road to democracy.