# BLACK SASH

Black Sash, a South African human rights organisation known for its long history of advocating for social justice, particularly focusing on social protection and socio-economic rights. It all began back in 1955. A small group of white middle-class women who were predominantly English-speaking formed an organisation called **The Women's Defence of the Constitution League**. The founding members were **Jean Sinclair**, **Ruth Foley**, **Elizabeth McLaren**, **Tertia Pybus**, **Jean Bosazza** and **Helen Newton-Thompson**. The organisation grew into an avenue for liberal women to oppose government policies through marches, convoys, demonstrations and vigils. It came to be called the Black Sash because the women wore black sashes over one shoulder as they stood to demonstrate against discriminatory legislation. It was initially formed to protest the Separate Representation of Voters Bill, a ploy by the government to remove Coloureds from the common voters' roll. The women saw this as a flagrant attack on the spirit of the Constitution. To show their disapproval and bring this injustice to the public's attention, they stood silently on pavements outside public buildings in major cities, wearing their black sashes.

The Sash, as it is sometimes known, worked with several organisations, including the **United Democratic Front**, the **Federation of South African Women** and the **End Conscription Campaign**. After the 1994 elections, the Black Sash shifted focus from being a protest organisation to becoming a professional one, still upholding the same principles of making submissions to government in shaping legislation and advising on welfare.

The organisation has brought about significant social change in an era where a lot of people faced oppression, discrimination and inequality by actively opposing apartheid and advocating for a more just and equitable society. Their efforts focused on challenging discriminatory legislation, providing legal aid to those affected by apartheid and contributing to the drafting of the new South African Constitution. It was apartheid laws such as the Pass Laws that it opposed through peaceful yet impactful methods. They monitored the Pass Law courts and by documenting the proceedings, they exposed the injustices and abuses inherent in the system.

The organisation even provided legal and advice and assistance to those affected by apartheid laws, helping individuals navigate the complex and discriminatory legal system. They organised marches, petitions and convoys to raise awareness about the injustices of apartheid and their efforts were aimed at mobilising public opinion against discriminatory legislation. The group campaigned against the damaging effects of migrant labor, which disrupted families and communities and even when legislation restricted their right to protest in groups, members stood in solitary vigils to continue

their resistance. The Black Sash's commitment to non-violent resistance and its focus on exposing the legal and social injustices of apartheid made them a powerful force for change. Their efforts were not only a challenge to apartheid but also a call for justice and equality in South Africa.

The Black Sash showed how peaceful protest and advocacy can have a lasting impact. Even a relatively small group like the Black Sash demonstrated how dedicated individuals can challenge systems of oppression. By monitoring injustices in the Pass Law courts, the organisation exposed the reality of apartheid to the wider world. All this work holds significant and impactful lessons for young people of today, young people can learn that change doesn't always require confrontation; sometimes a dignified and steady approach speaks louder than aggression. It inspires young people to recognise shared humanity and work together for justice, regardless of background and young people can be inspired to believe that their contributions, no matter how modest, can ripple through society.

The organisation's work also teaches young people the importance of documenting abuses and speaking out against injustices to be able to gain the public's attention while still finding methods to solve and help the people who are the most vulnerable to these social injustices. We might no longer to in an era of apartheid, but oppression, discrimination and inequality continues to be the problems that South Africa faces and the most vulnerable being young people and that is why they need to continue the work that Back Sash has done over the last 70 years, even outside the boundaries of the organisation.

Young people have immense potential to drive positive change and carry forward the work of advocating for human rights and preventing social injustices. First of all, knowledge is the tool. Black Sash already offers educational and training programs for young people to learn about human rights issues and share this knowledge with their communities, fostering awareness and understanding and to give them the motivation to continue the work of advocating human rights.

Unlike the Black Sash, young people have the advantage of digital platforms to raise awareness and share documented injustices to a wider audience than the Back Sash has done over the last decades to amplify causes, share stories and mobilise support for campaigns. Social media can be a catalyst for connecting with like-minded individuals globally.

While young people are required to continue the work of advocating human rights and bringing about social change, the Black Sash's sustained efforts over the decades teach young people the importance of persistence, meaning that it will require time, endurance and continuous action for young people to tackle systemic injustices.

To conclude, by learning the history and adopting the approaches of the Black Sash to today's challenges, young people can carry forward the legacy of the Black Sash and be powerful advocates for human rights.