

Sheena Duncan: Strike a woman, strike a rock

Gary Pienaar



1932–2010

I saw a need for women to work for justice in this country.

Duncan in MacLean, *Strike a Woman, Strike a Rock*

Sheena Duncan's immense contribution to the struggle against apartheid was recognised in Barbara Hutmacher MacLean's *Strike a Woman, Strike a Rock: Fighting for Freedom in South Africa*. The title of the book was taken from a famous Black Sash campaign slogan, and the book recognised the anti-apartheid resistance of many women, including those prominent in the Black Sash. The chapter on Duncan quotes her succinctly in the epigraph above.

Duncan was born on 17 December 1932 in Johannesburg to Robert and Jean Sinclair. Her father, an accountant, was born in Scotland and came to South Africa after the First World War. His attitude to developments in South Africa was influenced by his views on the oppression caused by the land clearances in the Scottish highlands, which in turn profoundly influenced Duncan, particularly her attitudes to land ownership and the need for post-apartheid reparations.¹ Her mother was involved in local politics, representing the United Party and Progressive Party, and was one of the six co-founders of the Black Sash on 19 May 1955. Named after the black sash worn during often silent street protests, the Black Sash was a group of white, middle-class South African women who assisted black South Africans and advocated the non-violent abolition of apartheid.²

In 1955, as the apartheid government prepared to remove coloured (mixed-race) voters from the common roll by enlarging the senate with their own supporters, Jean and five friends launched the Women's League for the Defence of the Constitution. They lost that battle, but the support they received encouraged them to establish the Black Sash. In the worst days of apartheid, white women draped in a sash would stand silently outside Parliament in Cape Town and elsewhere to protest human rights violations. The prime minister of that time, John Vorster,

loathed them, but dared not act. They got away with their activism because they skilfully used their protected 'white' status and some had influential husbands.³

Sheena Sinclair was the eldest of five children, and attended Roedean Girls' School in Johannesburg where principal Ella la Maitre's religious and liberal political views – developed through friendships with Father Trevor Huddleston (a prominent anti-apartheid activist Anglican priest in Sophiatown) and Alan Paton (a founding co-vice-president of the Liberal Party of South Africa) – would, in turn, influence Duncan's views and life.⁴ On completing her schooling, Duncan spent some time in what was then Southern Rhodesia before going to Scotland where she studied at the Edinburgh College of Domestic Science, qualifying in 1953. She then returned to South Africa and married architect Neil Duncan in 1955. After living and teaching domestic science in Southern Rhodesia, she and her husband returned to South Africa in 1963 and she joined the Black Sash.⁵

A committed Christian, Duncan sought to give practical effect to her religious beliefs as well as to confront the reality that injustice in South Africa was fundamentally political in origin. In the 1970s, she joined the Anglican Church's Challenge Group, which aimed to end racism within the church.⁶ She also represented the Anglican Church in the South African Council of Churches' (SACC) Justice and Reconciliation Division. Her work addressed justice and peace issues within the Anglican Church, and non-violent direct action. This work led to her being elected chair of Gun-Free South Africa and then appointed as its patron. Before women could be ordained as priests in South Africa, she became Canon of St Mary the Virgin Cathedral in Johannesburg, as one of only two female canons in the country. Soon thereafter she became the vice-president of the SACC from 1987 until 1990, its senior vice-president from 1990 until 1993, and later, its honorary life president. Ultimately, she was appointed patron of the Black Sash.⁷

Duncan became president of the Black Sash on her mother's retirement in 1975, and served until 1978, thereafter serving as vice-president before being elected president again from 1982 to 1986, during the height of the repressive state of emergency declared to shore up apartheid. She edited the Black Sash magazine and managed the Johannesburg branch of the Sash's advice office. She was also national coordinator of advice offices, a member of the Sash's national executive and a founding member of the Black Sash Trust.⁸ The Trust's network of advice offices was established to offer free paralegal advice and support, and acted as a free resource for those who sought paralegal services for issues like housing, unemployment, pensions, influx control, detention without trial, and so on.⁹

With no formal legal training, Duncan became an authority on the notorious apartheid pass laws that governed the movement and forced removals of black Africans. She publicised the death of detainees, campaigned against the death penalty, and challenged big business for its complicity with the apartheid system. As a result of her more than two decades of advice office work, Charles Villa-Vicencio wrote that Sheena Duncan knew 'more about racist South African laws than almost anyone else in the country'.¹⁰

Duncan sent people with a chance of successfully challenging these laws and government actions to the Legal Resources Centre, a human rights organisation that took on such cases with financial support from American foundations and South African corporations.¹¹

‘She had the terrible task of saying over and over again: “I’m sorry, we can’t help you. The law is against us”’, said Geoff Budlender, one of the founders of the Centre as a young lawyer, who credits Sheena Duncan with teaching him how the pass laws affected people’s lives. ‘She had huge empathy, but she wasn’t sentimental.’¹²

Duncan became a powerful public speaker and prolific writer in the media, in Black Sash and church publications. She wrote and co-authored many articles, booklets and pamphlets on issues such as the impact of forced removals and the pass laws, and the urgent need for fundamental social and political change. In her autobiography, *Memoirs: In No Uncertain Terms*, Helen Suzman describes an incident during the 1980s when she and Sheena Duncan sought to draw attention to the impending forced removal of a farming community from Mathopestad in what was then the western Transvaal (now North West Province) to Onderstepoort, just west of Pretoria. The planned removal was not implemented.¹³

In addition to her Black Sash work, her efforts as a human rights campaigner included her membership of the National Coordinating Committee for the Return of Exiles in the early 1990s, and of the Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression. She was Patron of the Society for the Abolition of the Death Penalty and worked with the End Conscription Campaign that aimed to stop compulsory military service for white youths in the South African Defence Forces in the fight to defend apartheid.¹⁴

Nelson Mandela wrote to Duncan from Pollsmoor Prison in 1985 on the 30th anniversary of the founding of Black Sash, nine years before apartheid and white minority rule finally ended. In his letter, he praised the ‘formidable impact’ of the Sash women. ‘Those who are prepared to face problems at eyeball range, and who embrace universal beliefs which have changed the course of history ... must, in due course, command support and admiration far beyond their own ranks.’¹⁵

Engaged with the ongoing struggle for social justice even in her later years, despite the death of her husband Neil in 2003, and in her capacity as Patron of the Black Sash, Duncan contributed a commentary in Guy Standing and Michael Samson’s *A Basic Income Grant for South Africa* (2003) quoting from Sampie Terblanche’s *A History of Inequality in South Africa 1652–2002* (2003). She wrote:

If the moral, humane and constitutional arguments for a BIG [Basic Income Grant] are failing to reach the hearts of the decision-makers in government and the movers-and-shakers in the private sector, then maybe they should consider the prospects of social instability, and even revolution in the near future. This is what could occur if we do nothing and continue to cling to the GEAR (Growth,

Employment and Redistribution) policy and the dictates of the international institutions and corporations which are rapidly destroying the idea of democracy within states and the ability of governments to respond to the needs and demands of the citizens of their country. We should be profoundly alarmed at the huge number of young adults who have no hope and no prospects within our society as it is currently organised.

In all the forty years during which I have worked with the Black Sash, I have never seen poverty as it exists now. All the hope we had for socio-economic justice with the new Constitution is dashed as inequality become[s] more and more evident.¹⁶

In recognition of her human rights activism, Duncan was awarded the Liberal International Prize for Freedom in 1986. In 2006, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa awarded her the Order of Simon of Cyrene, and she was later awarded the Order of the Baobab in Silver by South African President Thabo Mbeki.¹⁷ She received honorary doctorates from the universities of the Witwatersrand, Cape Town and KwaZulu-Natal.

Annemarie Hendrikz's biography of Duncan was published in 2015.¹⁸ In his Introduction to the book, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu described Duncan as having a formidable presence. Nevertheless, in his view, her 'finest quality as a human being was her regard for other people'. While he acknowledged her many admirable attributes, he promised readers that they would 'not be unmoved by her profound reverence for this other one, created in the image of God'.¹⁹

Duncan died of cancer at her home in Johannesburg on 4 May 2010 at the age of 77, and was survived by two daughters.²⁰ In his tribute at Duncan's memorial, Black Sash Advocacy Programme Manager Elroy Paulus quoted Idasa's Judith February:²¹

In this morning's *Cape Times*, Judith February of IDASA writes about the 'debt of gratitude to anti-apartheid risk-takers Duncan and Slabbert' – referring to the recent passing on of Frederick van Zyl Slabbert – co-founder of IDASA.

In accordance with 'the Arch's' characterisation, Black Sash patron Mary Burton's tribute to Duncan was entitled 'The Woman for Others',²² and she said of her that

her impact on the Black Sash is incalculable ... So many tributes have been paid to her. I quote only one: 'The detail I found most striking was that Sheena would never leave the Johannesburg advice office before everyone in the queue that day had been attended to. What a model of "batho pele". What a patron saint for civil servants!'²³

Notes

- 1 B.H. MacLean, *Strike a Woman, Strike a Rock: Fighting for Freedom in South Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004). C. Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan: Surprised by Joy' in *The Spirit of Freedom: South African Leaders on Religion and Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 76, 83. Accessed May 2020, <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft4p3006kc&chunk.id=d0e2389&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e2389&brand=ucpress>.
- 2 H. Suzman, *Memoirs: In No Uncertain Terms* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1994), p. 32; P. Romero, *Profiles in Diversity: Women in the New South Africa* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998).
- 3 D. Herbstein, 'Sheena Duncan Obituary', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2010. Accessed May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/17/sheena-duncan-obituary>.
- 4 Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 76.
- 5 Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 76.
- 6 The Presidency, 'Sheena Duncan (1932-): Order of the Baobab in Silver', 2006. Accessed August 2022, <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/national-orders/recipient/sheena-duncan-1932>.
- 7 The Presidency, 'Sheena Duncan'; Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 77; H.L. Gates, E.K. Akyeampong and S.J. Niven (eds), *Dictionary of African Biography*, Volumes 1-6 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 263.
- 8 Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 77; Gates, Akyeampong and Niven, *Dictionary of African Biography*, p. 262; Black Sash, 'Sheena Duncan (d. 2010)'. Accessed May 2020, <https://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/our-legacy/529-sheena-duncan>.
- 9 Black Sash, 'History of the Black Sash', 2017. Accessed October 2021, <https://www.blacksash.org.za/index.php/our-legacy/history-of-the-black-sash>.
- 10 Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 76.
- 11 C. Dugger, 'Sheena Duncan, White who Fought Apartheid, Dies at 77', *New York Times*, 8 June 2010. Accessed May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/08/world/africa/08duncan.html>.
- 12 G. Budlender cited in Dugger, 'Sheena Duncan', para. 5.
- 13 Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms*, pp. 206-207.
- 14 Villa-Vicencio, 'Sheena Duncan', p. 76.
- 15 N. Mandela cited in Herbstein, 'Sheena Duncan Obituary', para. 6; Dugger, 'Sheena Duncan'.
- 16 S. Duncan, 'Commentary by Sheena Duncan, Patron of the Black Sash' in G. Standing and M. Sampson, *A Basic Income Grant for South Africa* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2003), p. xi.
- 17 The Presidency, 'Sheena Duncan'
- 18 The Presidency, 'Sheena Duncan'; Herbstein, 'Sheena Duncan Obituary'; A. Hendrikz (ed.), *Sheena Duncan* (Cape Town: Tiber Tree Press, 2005).
- 19 D. Tutu, 'Introduction', in A. Hendrikz (ed.), *Sheena Duncan* (Cape Town: Tiber Tree Press, 2005), p. xii-xiii.
- 20 Herbstein, 'Sheena Duncan Obituary'; Dugger, 'Sheena Duncan'.

- 21 E. Paulus, 'Tribute at Memorial Event at Black Sash National Office on the Passing of Sheena Duncan', 19 May 2010. Accessed May 2020, <https://www.blacksash.org.za/images/legacy/elroytribute.pdf>.
- 22 M. Burton, 'Sheena Duncan: The Woman for Others', Black Sash, 19 May 2010. Accessed May 2020, <https://www.blacksash.org.za/images/legacy/maryburtontribute1910.pdf>.
- 23 Burton, 'Sheena Duncan', paras 2, 3.

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