

Nothing is stopping us except us

Jihan El Tahri and Kodwo Eshun

in conversation with Sue Rabkin



We learned about **Sue Rabkin** from the documentary, *Behind the Rainbow* (2008): a film researched and directed by **Jihan El-Tahri** about the ANC's transitions from a liberation movement to the political party in power.¹ Sue Rabkin appeared so much ahead of things, fearless, outspoken and humorous. When we asked Jihan, during the preparation for the *Public Hearings Festival* in June 2020, who she would like to talk to about the presence and absence of women in South Africa, about the legal potential of the

Constitution in terms of equal rights etc., she didn't have to think twice. So, we had the great pleasure to meet with Sue Rabkin virtually for a few Saturday afternoons. We kept going in zigzags but returned to speaking about Ruth First. It was at that moment that **Kodwo Eshun** joined in saying, "she is a hero of mine." The following conversation is a slightly edited transcript, recorded on 21 June 2020 and audible on <http://woa.kein.org/node/163>.

Sue Rabkin: I grew up in a part of London in which many of the white South Africans came to stay when they left South Africa after the first State of Emergency in the early 1960s.

There was thus an influx of South Africans into my local school, and I started to have many South African friends. My political involvement began around the age of fifteen when I went on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) marches in the early 1960s. From thereon, I became more and more politically involved.

Among the South African friends in my circle was David Rabkin, aged fourteen years and newly arrived from Cape Town. We became involved, on and off, for many years until he recruited me, via the Algerian Communist Party and a Syrian Communist Party Central Committee member, into the South African Communist Party (SACP). We married in 1972, and went to live in Cape Town, as members of the SACP and part of the SACP underground machinery. We operated clandestinely in Cape Town for four years producing SACP and ANC propaganda until we were arrested in 1976. David was sentenced to eight and a half years, and I was sentenced to three years which was suspended, and I only had to serve a one-month incarceration. During that one month I gave birth to my second child. I was then deported back to Britain.

One year later, I was asked by the Chairman of the SACP if I would work with Mac Maharaj who had recently been released from Robben Island after serving a fifteen-year sentence. He had smuggled out of prison Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*. I typed out the first draft of the manuscript. During the two and a half years we worked on the Mandela book, Mac was deployed by the Revolutionary Council of the ANC to head up what was then called "Internal Political Reconstruction" which was, as the name suggests, the apparatus charged with creating the underground machinery of the ANC inside South Africa. Because of my experience working in the underground, I was then deployed in Maputo to carry out this task.

Jihan El-Tahri: Before we come back to these moments in Maputo, let me fast forward and enter the stage from a different angle: the legal foundation for new SA [South Africa], so to speak. I always wondered—how did you get to such a Constitution so quickly? And getting to

it, how a liberation movement in the midst of battle, in the midst of all this, why would they be even thinking of a Constitution? Could you tell us from your side, because you were there, how did all this start happening?

SR: A number of comrades who had come into exile had legal qualifications. They were put together in a collective. The comrades that I knew well were **Brigitte Mabandla**², **Zola Skweyiya** and a bit later **Penuell Maduna**. They were put together in what I think was called the Legal Department in Lusaka, and my understanding is that **Oliver Tambo** asked them to start working on constitutional principles. Later I learned that **Albie [Sachs]** worked with them too. Comrades who attended the Kabwe Conference in 1985 reported back that Albie spoke at the conference, some-

1 "Plotting an uninterrupted timeline"—A conversation between Kodwo Eshun and Jihan El-Tahri, *Women on Aeroplanes Inflight Magazine* #5, 2020.

2 "In 1996 Brigitte Mabandla, then a deputy minister, explained that members of rural women's organisations were '... more vocal about the essence of women's liberation, they talk about emancipation from patriarchal control, the traditional system, they talk about equal access to resources, and that is profound. They also have a stand on abortion, that women have a choice. The assumption that this is imposed by the elite does not hold water in South Africa. It is, you see, the struggle atmosphere in the country [which] enabled women to at least claim the space to talk. It is not like in other countries really, even though they were suppressed in the internal days of the 1980s when we said struggle first, gender last.'" Gisela Geisler, *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa—Negotiating Autonomy, Incorporation and Representation* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrika-institutet, 2004), 80.

3 Albie Sachs: "Oliver Tambo mentioned to me the difficulties that the movement faced dealing with captured enemy agents, whose objectives were to destroy the organisation, to carry out assassinations, to sabotage equipment. These activities were not the result of dissidence inside the organisation, but part of the enemy's attacks on us. Host countries in Africa didn't want to be saddled with the problems of the different freedom movements—each exiled organisation had to make its own arrangements. And it was clear to me that he, Oliver Tambo, supported the international principles as a lawyer, but not only as a lawyer, but also as a person, as a leader, and as a Christian. His Christianity was very deep, and he often considered leaving the political struggle to become a full-time Anglican minister of religion.

So I had to find the language, the legal language, to crystallise an ideal of justice inside our own ranks, one that would be manageable and that would inspire the rank and file inside the ANC. At one stage in Maputo—remember I was not part of the MK [uMkhonto we-Sizwe]—I had bumped into this man, we never asked for names, who asked

me out of the blue: 'Tell me comrade Albie, when you join the ANC, do you have any rights?' Now, I had never heard that question asked before. Lawyers like myself raised this kind of jurisprudential issue in class, but here was a MK soldier posing the question. When you joined the ANC voluntarily, dedicating your life to the collective freedom struggle, did you cede your right to have personal rights?

Oliver Tambo was never one to issue a decree from the top. He insisted that the issue of treatment of captives be dealt with in a democratic manner at a delegates' conference, and be discussed in advance by the whole movement. In the result, the question of whether it was legitimate to use torture, or whatever euphemism was used, against captured enemy agents whose objective was to destroy the organisation, and who might have important information about im-pending enemy action, was a deep matter of struggle of morality. We discussed it in our different branches throughout the world.

I was then asked at an ANC conference in a small Zambian town, called Kabwe, to introduce the Code of Conduct. It operated at three levels. At the lowest level, it dealt with the legal processes to be followed in the case of people who came drunk to branch meetings and who were just dis-ruptive, and so on. You dealt with that politically. The next level related to people who stabbed, stole, assaulted, crashed motorcars, and drove while drunk. We developed regional tribunals with a limited range of penalties to handle these alleged offenders. At the highest level, the Code of Conduct dealt with grave offences that were aimed at destroying the organisation. These included killing members, assassinating leaders, using bombs and poison to cause mayhem. In dealing with these issues, very special procedures were laid down. Offences were defined with some precision. Evidence had to be led and could be challenged. Defenders were provided. A range of permissible punishments was provided. There was a system of appeal. I think it is the most important legal work I've ever done."

Drucilla Cornell, Karin Van Marle, Albie Sachs: *Albie Sachs and Transformation in South Africa From Revolutionary Activist to Constitutional Court Judge* (New York: Birkbeck Law Press, 2014), 80.

thing along the lines of Humanitarian Law³. I know that to be one of Albie's areas of expertise. He was working in Mozambique, working with FRELIMO, setting up a progressive legal framework that was harmonious with customary law or African law. That's how we first heard about constitutional principles.

JET: That whole moment of the Kabwe Conference, was there a form of forward-looking thinking other than just the Freedom Charter?

SR: I wasn't at the Kabwe conference. I think there was *forward-looking* but not in the way you are understanding it. I think the *forward-looking* was that our struggle has to be rooted amongst the people for it to be supported, and the Freedom Charter is like the baseline. It's a common programme, what everybody in SA wants. So, in order for us to convey those principles of equality, which is what the Freedom Charter is all about after all, equality—that has to be captured in the political demands to be put forward. The Freedom Charter is a very human document, it places humanity at the centre of the kind of a SA we want to see. There was a very strong militant spirit at the Kabwe conference in 1985. MK [uMkhonto weSizwe] combatants and young militants were very well represented. They were

impatient with what they saw was the slow pace of progress and wanted to accelerate our efforts, especially in relation to the armed struggle. The "culture of the gun" was very apparent amongst many delegates. Looking back, I can see that it was really strategic for Tambo, at that point in time and in that forum, to introduce ideas that would become the basic principles of a new Constitution for the country. To be frank, and knowing the militancy of the time, it should be noted that the ideas put forward were listened to. I remember getting a report back in Maputo from the Kabwe Conference and how many comrades thought Albie was a liberal because of the ideas he was putting forward.



JET: Can you elaborate on what that means, "the culture of the gun"?

SR: That we love the gun, and the gun is going to liberate us. I used to be in briefing sessions when comrades used to come to train comrades on how to use an AK. And they used to stroke the AK and say, "This is our liberator." I objected to that, because it's our politics that liberates us, not the gun. But that was the way of thinking of many in MK, and it is still the way of thinking of a sizeable number of MK comrades whilst simultaneously emphasising that MK is a 'political' army.

So, to get back to the humanity. O.R. [Oliver Tambo] was a Christian in the broadest sense of the word. **Joe Slovo** used to tell me that O.R. was a better communist than half the communists in the Communist Party because he embodied humanity and tolerance. He believed in equality, in human rights, and he shared those values with **Walter Sisulu** and many of the other members of the leadership. Those values permeated the politics of those outstanding leaders. They were continually brought to the front of discussions and the development of political positions. Most of the comrades on the left were very enlightened. Slovo was very enlightened. For example, when the issue of the victimisation of homosexuals arose in an NEC [National Executive Committee] discussion, there were only a few comrades who supported the position of non-victimisation against homosexuals. There were comrades who thought and who were quite open in their opinion that "There's no such thing as homosexuality amongst Africans." I'd respond to this and tentatively say *umm*, what about homosexual practices in prisons? And those comrades would say, "No, that's different circumstances, it's the whites that have brought homosexuality to Africa." There was a lack of enlightenment on some issues.

JET: You mentioned the two elements that are always brought up as really advanced in the Constitution, that and women's rights.

JET: Tell me that story again.



SR: We go to this meeting of the **Women's Section**⁹ and it was all the ANC women in Maputo, except those who were underground. We met in somebody's flat. I'd only arrived in Maputo a couple of weeks earlier, so we're talking early **1979**. We walked there on a rainy hot February Saturday afternoon. It was the first Women's Section meeting I had attended in Maputo. There were about four older women and six or seven younger women who were part of the ANC support network. Some of these women had married Mozambicans and had come to Mozambique to join their husbands. But they had maintained their SA identity and actually went on to play a very key role in support of our underground work. The older women were very intimidating and in some ways quite authoritarian. They had been in the ANC for a long time and, I'm sure, they had to deal over time with a lot of backward men. I felt sorry for any man who crossed them.

They were assigned by the ANC to take care of the influx of young women who came out of the country in **1976** to join MK in the wake of the **Soweto uprising**. These young women went to the military training camps, but they were in such a minority that they became very vulnerable. It was becoming a problem for the ANC. Hundreds of eighteen-year-olds in one camp, and a handful of young women, some kind of authority was needed there that would protect the young women. So these older women were brought in. They had grown up in the 1930s, and in their way of thinking that young people shouldn't/couldn't mix sexually, so, all the young women had to be in their dorm by eight o'clock at night. They were very very strict with the women, very strict. Of course, that didn't stop any nocturnal activity, you know what I'm saying.

When I went to **Caxito** [ANC military training camp in Angola] in **1981**, women could only train in a camp if there were enough of them to form a group. The ANC had found that if they sent only one or two women at a time, which is how many women there were at any given time, it didn't work. There were too many men and on top of that, the men had been in the camps for a while. Women, therefore, had to be militarily trained in groups. When I got to Caxito, I was with a group of women, all of whom I knew. They were and still are serious and impressive cadres. They have all gone on to make a tremendous contribution to the transformation of the country. There were eight of us and the camp command had made us a special toilet because there were no toilets for women. There were special separate washing facilities and we were housed separately. This had its downside though. The women's toilet was set up a little way away from the centre of the camp. We had to walk past a huge black pig that was being fattened up for one of the celebrations—Freedom Day or whatever. The pig was enormous. I've never seen such a big pig in my life! And it snorted to say hello as

4 "In August 1987, on hearing that ANC executive member Ruth Mompoti was visiting London to promote South Africa Women's Day, I devised a plan and requested an interview. A courageous fighter against the apartheid regime, Mompoti was one of the leaders of the biggest women's demonstration in South African history. In 1956, 20,000 women marched on the Union Buildings—the seat of government in Pretoria—to protest at the extension of the notorious pass laws to women. Most of my interview with Mompoti was about the struggle for women's emancipation, and was duly published in Labour Weekly. But towards the end, I raised the issue of women's sexual emancipation—in particular the human rights of lesbians and their role in the struggle against apartheid. This provoked an astonishing outburst that reconfirmed all the previous horror stories that I had heard about ANC homophobia." Peter Tatchell: "South Africa: How the ANC was won for LGBT rights" www.petertatchellfoundation.org

5 See also "History of Women's Struggle in South Africa" on www.sahistory.org.za

6 On the 9th of August 1956, together with Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa and Sophia Theresa Williams de Bruyn, Lillian Ngoyi led the women's anti-pass march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, one of the largest demonstrations staged in South African history. Holding thousands of petitions in one hand, Ngoyi was the one who knocked on Prime Minister Strijdom's door to hand over the petitions. "Lillian Masediba Ngoyi" on www.sahistory.org.za

7 "In South Africa, for example, many well-rehearsed revolting songs are often recycled and remixed, posing an added irony: whereas chants like, "Si-yaya Epitoli" (meaning: we are going, or rather, marching to Pretoria) were sung fervently in October 2015 by some of the youth marching on the government buildings to call for a no-fee-increase. That particular revolting song was pelted like a rock at the glass house now run by those erstwhile radicals of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, who sang the very same ditty to threaten apartheid, then ensconced in those selfsame hallowed halls of the union buildings. A kind of poignant switch had therefore been flipped, transposing a new band of revolutionaries at the door—in this case, the kids—out where the parents once revolted." Neo Muyanga, "Songs in the key of revolution" on <http://woa.kein.org/node/157>

8 Ruth arrived in Maputo in 1977 to direct a study on black miners, and she returned the following year, taking an appointment as Assistant Director and Director of Research at the Center of African Studies. Although it took her another five years to formally resign from Durham, she was firmly placed in Mozambique from 1977 onward. Alan Wieder, *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013, 206.

9 ancarchive.org/womens-section.

we walked passed, so we used to shriek "Aaah!!!" The point I'm making is that we didn't go at night because we were too scared. These were the great revolutionary military combatants who were too scared of this pig! So in desperation, we used to squat outside the room where we were staying. And the second time I did that, I was summoned to the command. "Comrade, you cannot do this. We can see your bum from miles away. Your white bum is showing".

But the women were trained like everybody else. By the time I went for military training, the battle for equality in the camps had been won by the women who came before us. There was no problem when I was there. The women were trained equally in the camps. But after your training, what happened to you? Where were you deployed? Most of the women were deployed as secretaries to the leadership, to individual leaders. Most of the women weren't given the same kind of opportunity to participate in military activity like the men.

By the time we were trained in 1981, things had progressed. In my group of eight women, all of whom I knew well and with whom I worked at the "front"—they were deployed in the political military structures. We told the camp command we wanted to put on a show for the **August 9th ANC Women's Day**. And since the camp command didn't quite know what to say, they said "Ok". We decided to illustrate the triple oppression of women—which was the accepted political policy position of the ANC. Triple oppression of women of class, colour and gender. We decided that each one of the eight of us would represent a woman in SA.

There was a domestic worker, there was a student, there was a farm labourer, a factory worker, a trade unionist and so on. When it came to me, everyone said, "Oh well, what can Sue do?" And one of the women, who I am now very friendly with, but who wasn't too partial to me in the beginning said, "She can't do anything, I mean, what's she going to do? Don't be ridiculous."

Then I said, "**I could be me.**" And they said, "Oh, ok!" The male comrades gathered round the stage anticipating our performance. Looking back, I think there was a great deal of pride that there were women in MK ranks. We all came onto the stage, one after the other, announcing who we were and explaining the kind of oppression we experienced. We were explaining in practical terms the triple oppression of women. It was hugely successful. All the comrades loved it, wildly applauding each woman. The comrades were shooting their guns in appreciation. The position of women in MK and in the ANC progressed.

10 "In 1957, she was a member of the Alexandra Bus Boycott Committee. The repercussions of the boycott were felt far beyond the boundaries of the Transvaal province. This was before the 1960 State of Emergency, and before the ANC was banned. During the State of Emergency in 1960, Florence Mophosho went underground and continued to work as an organiser for the ANC. [...] In 1964, she was banned. She was instructed by the ANC to leave South Africa, and she went to Lusaka and later to Dar es Salaam. It was at this time that the ANC and its Women's Section decided to send her to Berlin, German Democratic Republic, to represent the Women's Section at the Women's International Democratic Federation, and she remained at that post for four and a half years. She met many women from all over the world. She compared their lives with

those of her Black sisters right back home. She developed to be an internationalist—and of course she travelled to many countries on behalf of the Women's International Democratic Federation. She spoke at numerous public meetings in the German Democratic Republic, held radio and TV interviews, and helped to strengthen the relation between the GDR—especially the women's organisation—and the ANC. [...] She combined in an excellent way the struggle for women's rights with the national liberation struggle [...] Not the women's liberation has to wait for that; the struggle for women's liberation, to-day and now, is part of the overall struggle. There is no contradiction in this." From the obituary in *Sechaba*, November 1985 <http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/SeNov85>.

You pushed forward, got to a certain point and then you pushed forward again for another step. That's how it was. It was very hard work. We used to have political discussions in the political machinery every Tuesday night, and we invited the military machinery to join us where I did one session on "women's emancipation." Everybody came including one of our leaders, **John Nkadimeng**. I asked him, "Comrade Nkadimeng, why don't you bring your wife?" And he said "Oh, ok." I don't think it had ever really dawned on him to invite her. And she came. It was the first political meeting she'd been to, in Maputo. She was wonderful, but he hadn't realised that she needed and wanted to be brought in. I ended the talk by saying that the rights of women should be enshrined in the new Constitution. And a comrade asked, "What for?" So, I said, "Just to make sure. It's clear that everybody here is in full agreement that women must have full and equal rights, but let's have it in the new Constitution." And the comrade didn't speak to me for a year. He wasn't hostile. He just thought I was over the top and that it wasn't central. He said, "I think you're overreacting, and it is not necessary. We all know that women are equal, there's no need to put it in the Constitution."

So it happened. And it is still happening. It is a journey.

JET: Absolutely! But tell me more about that conversation Ruth First had at the Women's Section in Maputo ...

SR: Back to the Women's Section meeting that Saturday afternoon in Maputo: the comrade that was chairing the meeting was a wonderful woman called **Florence Mophosho**¹⁰. She was fabulous. She was strong and brave. A force to be reckoned with. She was, like everybody else, very in awe of Ruth. You couldn't not be in awe of Ruth, because she was so clever, and her politics were inspirational. But she was a bit rough, and she was stern. The first item on the agenda was school uniforms or maybe it was ANC pioneers' uniforms. Ruth said, "Comrade Florence, let's move forward, let's discuss. Let's bring up women's emancipation. Let's discuss where we come from. Let us bury this idea that everything for women and for all of South Africans **before 1652** was wonderful. That when women went down to the river to wash their clothes, they were happy and singing and that they acted like they were free." What she was actually saying was that it wasn't the arrival of the colonialists in 1652 that led to the oppression and subjugation of women. In pre-colonial traditional societies too women were not treated as equals to men. I'll never forget it because everybody sat there knowing that nobody enjoys going to the river to wash clothes, that it's hard, hard work to carry water to your house for cooking and washing. Ruth put forward a feminist agenda and everyone accepted it, the women accepted it.

JET: Ruth obviously had a very critical role within the ANC in exile during these days. Also, inside the country, **Winnie Mandela** had a huge role. Was there any connection between these women, inside and outside? And the other question is, did Winnie in any way affect the role of women?



SR: Oh, I think so. Look at the role she played. I mean, if anybody was a symbol of bravery and courage it was her. That famous incident when she appeared at a rally—it was at the time of necklacing—Winnie stood up and she shook a box of matches and said, "This is our weapon." I think it was wonderful.

JET: Oh!

SR: The ANC was angry because Oliver Tambo had condemned necklacing, quite rightly. It's barbaric! But Winnie was showing that she wasn't taking any shit from anybody, that she wasn't frightened of anybody like the Special Branch or the Security Police. She was prepared to take on anyone who collaborated and betrayed the movement. She was in contact with the exiled leadership throughout. I'm pretty sure she was in contact with Tambo and Mbeki. Comrades like me were much too junior to be in contact with the leadership inside the country. But we, in the political machinery, did have contact with the women's organisations in the different provinces. There wasn't a national women's movement at the point. There was a women's organisation in the Cape, there was the Natal Organisation of Women [NOW] and there was FED-TRAW [Federation of Transvaal Women]. We paid attention to all the women's organisations just as we did to all other community-based organisations. We recruited from them all. I can tell you a number of women we recruited from the women's organisations, **Susan Shabangu** was one of

them, I think **Bathabile [Dlamini]** was one of them, if I'm not mistaken. So a lot of women were recruited and they were, of course, wonderful, I mean, women are wonderful. They are much better at any of this work than the men are, quite frankly, especially on the organisational level. Contact between outside and inside happened at different levels and at different levels of seniority. The ANC was in touch with Winnie throughout. A delegation from the Mass Democratic Movement [MDM] came out to see the ANC in Lusaka. I think it was **Murphy Morobe** and **Valli Moosa**, maybe also **Sydney Mufamadi**, I can't remember. But a delegation from the MDM came out to report and discuss what was happening with the football club at Winnie's house in Soweto. There was tension between Winnie and the MDM, for many years on the issue of the football club.

JET: After 1983 you mean?

SR: Ya, before the formation of the UDF [United Democratic Front]. Political activity on the mass level ['legal/open' activity was referred to as being part of the Mass Democratic Movement]. It was given organisational expression with the formation of the UDF.

JET: It was a tense moment, that brings us back to the legal aspect—what then happened to Winnie? Coming from the outside, I felt that Winnie was the only "sacrificial lamb" or "scapegoat", if you want, of the legal process that came with the transition.

SR: Look, the white regime hated her. They hated her with every drop of their blood. Because she resisted everything, she told them where to get off. She showed no fear. She was a symbol of resistance, she was a symbol of black liberation, however you want to put it, she was a symbol of the armed struggle. She publicly identified 100% with the ANC, with the armed struggle, with the Black Consciousness Movement. She was very active in the women's movement. The regime was out to get her whichever way they could. There's no question about it. And I think that the ANC floundered on this because, although, some of the things she did were out of order, i.e., she often worked outside of structures and, like many leaders, she made mistakes. Leaders like Winnie don't come in a box, a readymade package of the right

measurements, if you know what I mean. What eventually transpired about the football club was a disgrace. The movement had not realised that she was 100% surrounded by enemy agents. She was used, she was tortured, she went on to very heavy medication because she wasn't well, and I think she got the bad end of the stick. That's my personal view. I know she did things that were wrong, I know she did, but she did a lot that was right.

JET: Without getting into the content of what she did or didn't do, what I think is quite interesting is that the legal process, especially the Truth [and Reconciliation] Commission, that got practically everyone from the apartheid regime off the hook, what did that legal system pin on Winnie?

SR: I think she was a sitting duck. The regime could get away with it. They could put the problem on her and they got away with it and the movement did not come to her help. One of the reasons being that she was very stubborn, and she stuck to what she believed in. I can't remember what were the charges. She was sometimes out of order, as I said, but for very understandable reasons and she was very vulnerable. I remember Madiba going to court, to attend her trial at some stage. But the apartheid regime also knew that if they sentenced her there would be another revolution and I think that's why she never got sentenced. She was very popular with the masses because she lived with them, amongst them and supported them. She identified with them and fought for them. She was held up by them as a leader.

JET: Which is quite interesting, speaking of the legal framework. You started with the idea of humanism and enshrining things into a Constitution that would somehow guarantee a better life for all in the future. Then, you go into the transition where these ideas are to be transformed into actual implementable realities, but the result is a legal system that doesn't actually do that.

SR: Well, I don't quite agree with your description of the process. My understanding of the process is that the

Constitution is an enabling document. It sets down the framework and what then has to happen is that the legislation is drawn up which bring those principles into being. It's been a long, ongoing process. There have been many instances where the introduction of enabling legislation hasn't taken place or maybe it's still going to happen. One of the tragedies that we've been through, and this one is a very personal one for me and one that I feel very strongly about, is the fact that the parliament has not fulfilled its role. It hasn't been understood in the way I think it should've been understood that it is an oversight body. It has been seen more as a terrain for contestation rather than getting legislation in place wherein you implement the principles of the Constitution. That's still, very much, work in progress.

JET: Have there been any legislations that you can think of in the domain of equality, in women's rights, that have moved ahead or even gone backwards?

SR: This last piece of legislation, which is referred to as the "Bantustan Bill" ...

JET: What is it?

SR: That's not it's title, but it's referred to by ANC people as the "Bantustan Bill" [Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act] because it is so backward, it is so shocking. In essence, the legislation reduces the status of African women almost to where it was before 1990 when there weren't equal rights. I can't remember the details now. I went into it at some stage, and we were signing petitions.¹¹

The Bill was a result of consultations with traditional authorities. My understanding is that we have allowed them to remain and function because we don't want to rock the apple cart. The 'theory' is that these traditional authorities will fall away as democracy deepens. However, this hasn't happened because, in many instances, these authorities play a very significant role in the rural areas. For example, they issue birth certificates, they perform the function of a local authority—they play an important role because they fill a "governance gap." So of course, because they haven't been dissolved or dismantled, they want to have a voice, right? And as their voices are listened to, they then want rights. And in addition, they want funding. All of this is perfectly understandable.

My point is, that their role doesn't have to be reactionary. For example, when I was living in Pretoria, the woman who was the domestic worker in the house where I had a room came from Venda. She had a plot where she was building her house and the plot was given, or leased to her, by the chief and I used to ask, "Can he take that house away from you?" And she said, "Yes, but he won't." So I'd say, "How do you know he won't?" I was trying to understand. I was worried that she was pouring all this money into building this house (and I'm not talking about a mansion, I'm talking about a tiny little house on a plot in a village, in Venda) but she had no security of tenure. So, the traditional authorities have some legal authority which is recognised. This bill seems to be the result of extensive consultations with those authorities.

However, in the process, the status of women has been reversed. And there's been a lot of arguments and protest. **Nomboniso Gasa** has been very vocal in criticising this Bill. She has unpacked the details and the subsequent negative impact this Bill will have on women. She has experience in this field because she grew up in a village in the Transkei.¹²

So, you asked me for examples of how or where the struggle for equality for women has gone backwards—this Bill is a good example. This issue can be seen in the context of the legacy we inherited of a distorted 'tribal' structure. Distorted because those 'chiefs' and 'kings' who opposed the apartheid regime were removed and replaced by those who complied and did not resist the regime. Distorted also in the sense that only parts of that culture are upheld in the urban areas. This can be seen very clearly in relation to the status of women. Women who work for a wage in an urban environment are much less likely to accept an unequal status. They are less likely to accept polygamy, which is still legal in SA, than their rural counterparts. The transition in SA has also left intact royal households. Kings have status and are supported financially by the government.

JET: Without going too much into detail, has there been sort of a way of amalgamating this traditional power—because everything we're talking about *really* is about power structures?

SR: Yeah!

JET: When do power structures, then, translate what is in the Constitution and how it is implemented, to give a better life for all? The issue you brought up about traditional leaders, obviously, it has its manifestation, as you were say-

ing, in the possibility of setting back something like women's rights. But, the process itself of that power structure, amalgamating both, for something that isn't just political but rather for a better life is being translated by the structures and the legal process.

SR: You know, it's not a subject that I'm well versed in and I'm not confident of the depth of my understanding of this issue. However, I always anticipated that with the advent of democracy, the role of traditional leaders would be gradually adjusted to the new dispensation. My understanding is that that whole system of traditional leaders was corrupted by the apartheid machine. The traditional leaders who didn't agree with the apartheid government were sidelined and were replaced. My experience in the ANC has been that due to this corruption of the traditional structures, they lack legitimacy and are not fully respected by the ANC or even seen as legitimate. But at the same time they exist, and they play a role in governance. They play a role in the community, in the absence of government structures. The status of women in traditional society is not one of equality with men.

11 Sindiso Mnisi Weeks from UCT's Law, Race and Gender Unit states that, "This Bill creates separate categories of citizenship reminiscent of apartheid. It strips rural people of basic citizenship rights. Those living in the former Bantustan areas will be second-class citizens, with no right to the legal representation and recourse the law allows for."

The alliance believes that customary law continues to play an important role in the lives of many rural South Africans. However, the Bill does not appreciate the real-life experiences of people on the ground. The Bill was developed in close consultation with traditional leaders, rather than in consultation with the people who will be most affected by it, namely rural citizens, particularly women. "Civil Society Groups oppose traditional courts bill" on constitutionallyspeaking.co.za and "Stop the Bantustans" on stopthebantustanbills.org

12 "Our village was 55 minutes from Queenstown, where we saw the GP, dentist and bought fresh milk to sell and supplies for my parents' shop. We went to town almost every day and sometimes twice a day. We crossed two borders, first the Transkei border on exit to South Africa. And then a few minutes later, we crossed the South African border and repeated this, with stamped passports on our way back. The bakkie was always full of village kids, singing at the top of our voices, urging my father to overtake cars and generally fooling around. [...]

All these factors contributed to my fascination with land. In addition to this, we worked the land and lived off it in my village. There were problems that were introduced by the Transkei government

which took arbitrary decisions about land, irrigation and development. They built an irrigation scheme in Qamata. My parents were actually excited by this development and for many years, we got produce to sell and to live off, peas, milies, sorghum, potatoes, cabbage—just about every crop we planted. The land was generous. One year, without any discussion with the communities, the Transkei government entered into an agreement with Taiwanese companies. Swathes of land were taken and converted into rice paddies. Rice paddies in Qamata. People had no say over this. They were allocated smaller plots for their use and we competed with rice paddies for water. This was the time of drought so naturally the rice paddies did very well. The people, not so well. From these complicated roots of my family's complex identities, the hardship and isolation brought by border posts and the powerlessness over the plough fields and the irrigation scheme, within me, a commitment to understand the land questions of South Africa and to contribute to a better system and to free the land, grew.

When I worked for the ANC in the early 1990s, this grew strongly. I was fascinated and frustrated by the manner in which the land question was handled during the constitutional negotiations. I did not have a position as such, but I believed very strongly that land is not property and should not be treated as such. I cornered President Mandela about this and he asked me to develop my position. I did and we engaged on this. Frankly, I am not sure how coherent I was but I believed that land, like the sea and the air should be treated as a national resource." "A conversation with Nomboniso Gasa" on https://leadershipconversations.co.za

JET: To go back to the Women's League, there were these flipping moments when particular events became dividing lines. For example, when the Women's League supported Zuma during his rape trial, did that transform the role of the Women's League into political alliances rather than concentrating on issues that actually concerned women?

JET: Is the fact that having such a progressive Constitution and saying, well, women's rights are enshrined in it anyway become, actually, something that holds it back rather than moves it forward?

SR: No, I don't think so. The issues facing women in SA are today a priority. Gender-based violence including rape are major problems in SA society. Equal pay for equal work is lower on the agenda. Why isn't the Women's League demanding this? I am distressed with the way we are approaching the ghastly problem of gender-based violence. We don't seem to be trying to understand where this problem emanates from. It's not enough to be shouting in protest. It's not enough to be drawing attention to this problem. Concrete and practical measures can only be introduced when there is understanding of why it is taking place. In my view, that should be one of the tasks of the Women's League. They should say, "We want legislation on equal pay, and we want it now." We've got a woman who is a minister in-charge of women. Why isn't she producing that legislation? Now. This minute. What is stopping her?

The Women's League should be saying that there are resolutions of conferences that say that the ANC Constitution must be aligned with the SA Constitution. So why is the Women's League not doing that as part of their Programme of Action? Why are they not going to go through this Constitution to align issues? Why are they not looking at every little thing that affects women and see to it that legislation is introduced to give meaning to what the Constitution says?

Why aren't they doing that? What are they doing?

Frankly, I'm not clear what they're doing. When you go to rallies, half the stadium is in Women's League uniforms. It's such a captive audience, you could do so many brilliant things with that support. And as I said, it's being used to support Zuma and then it's being used to support Nkosazana, or it's being used to support someone else, and then the cry is to have a woman president. I'd love to see a woman president, but what is her programme? What's she going to do that's different?

JET: But does the existing political system allow for the Women's League to change the system?

SR: Absolutely, there's nothing stopping it. Nothing on this earth. There's nothing stopping the ANC changing, except for the ANC. And if one more person this week tells me, "No, Comrade Sue, you can't do that, that's not the way it's done ...!" We used to have the same argument in Maputo. And I'd say, "Who says it's not the way it's done? Did Moses come down from the mountain and say you will do it this way? It isn't working this way, let's do it another way, and try and find a way where it's working." There's nothing stopping us, except us. Nothing.

JET: If you had one thing you could do, just one, what would you do?

SR: I have to think about that, because there are too many things that need to be done. [laughs] That's so ironic, because I'm the one that always says, "No no, we can't have that many things we have to do. We can't have a shopping list. We must focus on one or two things." One of the things I would do is to explore how an organisation should and can function if it has proper accountability. What does that depend on? Is it structure? Is it politics? Is it both? What is it that you need to ensure proper accountability? I think, if we had accountability of leadership, many many people would fall on the wayside and many other people would rise into the leadership. That's what's holding us up, our leadership is not accountable as individuals. We're only accountable as a collective when it comes to elections.

JET: Why are they not accountable? Doesn't loyalty play a factor in that?

SR: No, nepotism and patronage play a factor in that. I can't ask Jihan because she made this film and I was in that film, but if I put her on the spot, she won't ask me to be in the next film. Already, she's married to my brother-in-law, or maybe it's because she laid out the money for a new car for me—it's *all* that. That's why I said, accountability is the bottom line. And to have accountability, you've got to have some kind of objective measure. You can't have a subjective measure. The issue of measuring competence and integ-

ity and honesty and quality is what one is striving for. It's the measurement that is so difficult to determine. Do you agree?

JET: I definitely think that accountability is the backbone, but I do wonder to what extent loyalty is a factor. Let me put it in a different way: to say that I agree completely would mean that I think that ideology and what the ANC stood for is completely out of the window, which I'm not sure is the case.

SR: No, it's not out of the window, Jihan. It's a different ideology because the composition of the ANC is different. The ANC became left-wing in the 1940s because of the growth of the African working class which was then organised by the SACP and by the ICU [Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union]. The trade union movement and the Communist Party were (and are) in alliance with the ANC. The interests of the African working class became dominant and there was therefore a dominance of left-wing thinking that continued through the 1980s until 1990. And then, a whole set of things changed, one of which was that we came to power. The composition of the ANC is no longer dominated by the industrialised African working class. We now have a very vocal, very greedy, very rapacious new middle class who are inside the ANC and pushing and influencing ANC policy to benefit themselves. Just as the working class were pushing policies that would benefit themselves. That's what has changed. So, the ideology, what you think is watered down, it's not watered down, it's different. It represents different interests. And all efforts by the ANC to analyse that balance of forces inside the country must be guided by this, because that group of people are now very influential. They are climbing up the structures of the organisation and they pay for those leadership campaigns we've just been talking about. And they pay for Jihan to be president. Because when they support her and give her money for the campaign and pay for her children to go to private school etc. etc. etc., she has to repay them. She has to repay them, somehow or the other. That's how it works all over the world and our poor little ANC is no different.

JET: It still blows my mind because the amount of money that was coming into the ANC, into the underground, as you must know, and with no accountability at that time. Money was there and it reached its destination. Why and how did money become a problem?

SR: Well, money was there for certain things. I mean, SIDA [The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency] gave us money for rents (in exile) and we had to show that the money was paid for rents. But, money didn't come into the armed struggle, it didn't come into the underground. The money for the armed struggle and the underground only came from socialist countries and the international communist movement. Where the big money came from, whether it was Britain or wherever, had to be allocated where it could be accounted for, that's the first thing. You can't really account for money in the underground. It's dangerous to keep records for underground work because you are revealing what you are doing. So it's your word that counts. If I give you 2,000 Rand to carry out a task, it's my word that I've given you that money and your word that you've received it, right? Now, the difference is that people are coming into the ANC supporting individuals and giving them money in order for them to follow certain programmes and to do certain things. It's become a patronage system.

JET: What I'm trying to wrap my head around is that you have this country that had gender issues at the top of their agenda, that isn't treating it in the same way. It's that discrepancy that I'm questioning.

SR: I wouldn't say that gender issues are top of the agenda in SA. I think poverty is at the top of the agenda in SA. There are other issues. There's equality, there's discrimination, there's poverty, there's joblessness. Those are the issues that are on everybody's lips, right? The Women's League could play a huge role in this situation because what's being revealed, even now with Covid-19, is that, as usual, the section of the population that has really been the most badly affected is women.

JET: Ok, I'm gonna ask a very weird thing, but I want you to flow with my imagination: What if **Ruth First** was here today, what would she be saying?

SR: I barely even want to think because I knew what she was saying in the 1980s in Maputo ...

JET: Ok, what was she saying in the 1980s in Maputo and what would she say now?

SR: In the 1980s, her main criticism was that the ANC refused to be challenged on controversial issues like, for example, the extent of our organisational support inside the country, or the tendency towards militarism, or the extent of the mobilisation of women, because we hid behind the word 'security.' We said we couldn't discuss those kind of issues because it would be a breach of security. She, therefore, felt that we didn't deal with real problems. And this was what she raised morning, noon and night. Although she was hampered and constrained in raising these issues, she did raise them. This became problematic for the organisation, and subsequently there were attempts to sideline and to marginalise her, and to some extent this was successful. She was removed from the central committee of the Communist Party because she was seen as being too outspoken, she was too critical. She wouldn't blindly follow the Soviet Party line. Inside the SACP there wasn't a tolerance for academics to seek out different opinions. She sought to get a bigger picture, derived from different views. She was criticised for that. At that stage, the SACP was narrow. You weren't allowed to criticise the Soviet Union in public and you weren't allowed to refer to China, that was our reality. That changed with time. It had to change. But at the time, she was in Mozambique, she was highly critical of that way of thinking. For her, the fact that we got important financial and political support from the Soviet Union did not automatically mean that one could not be critical of what was happening there.

She gave a public address in London during this period, and I was at that talk. She said that she had always thought that the youth was the big change factor in the liberation movement, but with time she changed her mind. She now saw women as being that change factor,¹³ and that one could gauge the level of development of an organisation and of a society on the position women held. She said, "When I look at the Soviet Union, I don't see women in the leadership. I don't see women in the Central Committee or the Politburo. I see lots of women doctors, lots of women academics and lots of women nurses, but I don't see women where power is located." She got into a lot of trouble after that meeting, it created a storm. But it was the truth. She wasn't making it up, it wasn't an opinion, it was a fact. She raised it as a fact. She was very very seriously pushed aside after that. She addressed the cadres in Maputo on the occasion of Walter Sisulu's 60th birthday. She told us how she had worked very closely with him. She talked about him in such glowing

13 "She was a passionate intellectual; in love with ideas, because she desired, she needed always to learn more; to find and consider further insights and explanations. But inevitably those ideas that mattered to her most and that became her own were those that were instruments in liberating people and personality. These came to her in the main from the rich store of revolutionary socialist thought. But she was always testing them by new experiences and perceptions; always ready to augment them. It was for her not a diversion from such thought but an essential extension of it that drew her to the cause of women's liberation and relatedly to writing, with Ann Scott, a milestone biography of Olive Schreiner. Some of her colleagues in the revolutionary movement were impatient with what they saw as her irrelevant or incompatible interests. Some of them took unkindly to her criticism of rigid attitudes. There were issues, such as the struggle of the Eritreans for their own freedom, that separated her from accepted alignments. She was firm in maintaining her own view. And she enriched the movement, to which she never wavered in her allegiance, by her independence of mind." (Ronald Segal, new preface to Ruth First's book *117 Days*, republished by Penguin Books in 1982. Preface reprinted in *Index on Censorship* 6/82, vol. 11, 6 1982, 29-30 on <https://journals.sagepub.com>

14 "I first met her in London in the 1970s, so my memories date only from the time when she was teaching at Durham University and researching the life of Olive Schreiner. We met in 1974, over an interview for *Spare Rib*. The magazine asked her for a feature on Schreiner: she was reluctant, because the scale of her work at that stage was massive — she was corresponding with libraries, following up leads, and couldn't envisage putting together a short profile summing up Schreiner's life and thought—but was willing to try an interview. She made a very vivid impression on me. For a start she was so vibrant (rather like her description of Schreiner, I felt), so enthusiastic about the project as well as openly anxious about her competence to the task. I was struck by her conscientiousness: we'd agreed I'd give her some topics to think about in advance and on the day of the interview itself she was ready with a sheaf of papers, typed quotes neatly attached with dressmaker's pins. She spoke fast from these notes, in long, complete sentences. She sought my reactions to some of the material, especially where she was having difficulty in assessing where Schreiner's thought was going. She was very interested in women's liberation and was concerned to bring a feminist perspective to bear on the work. 'I'm scared to start writing anything down. I'm just reading all the time. She does excite me much more as a women's liberationist than anything else.' It may have been this which first gave her the idea of doing the book as a collaboration with a younger writer, and one who had been active in the women's movement. ('My formation isn't in a women's group,' she once said to me.) She had collaborated on other work, including a book, and in the months after the *Spare Rib* interview I did some research for her on the treatment of women's illnesses in the 19th century, as Schreiner had been asthmatic. Ruth wanted us to 'combine our talents' as equals rather than for me to go on being a research assistant; she also knew she would be going to Mozambique. She said she enjoyed collaboration as a learning experience. But it was still a leap in the dark for her, since I was half

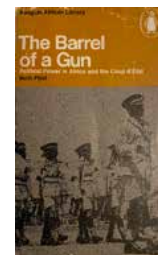
her age and had never done anything of book length. [...] What do I remember in particular about her way of working? Her briskness and resolve above all. 'Getting stuck in' was a phrase she used about the struggle to get going on a day's work, or a new bit of the research, or a stretch of writing. She knew how difficult it was and loathed interruptions (but unlike so many people she never seemed to seek them out). She was efficient about correspondence and prompt to return a call. She seemed frequently to work halfway through the night if the situation called for it. She was very serious about preparing talks, for 'you have to assume some intelligence in your audience', and she was very critical of speakers who seemed not to. I went to hear her speak in December 1974 on the changing balance of power in Southern Africa. Her talk, which was on the legacy of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, was meticulously researched and delivered with great zest. She spoke for nearly an hour and yet in the lunch break came and talked with equal energy to me and the women I was with about a conversation she'd had with a Durham psychiatrist about anorexia among women students. I can't now recall the link, but she also brought up the problem of women's timidity in seminars. Ann Scott: "Ruth First (1925-1982)", in: *History Workshop*, Spring 1983, no 15, Oxford University Press.

terms, I never forgot it because she didn't have that high an opinion of many people. This was a rarity. Years later, I had the honour of working with him. One day I asked him, "What was it like working with comrade Ruth?" I was interested to hear what he had to say because so many comrades were uncomfortable working with her because of her criticism. He replied, "It was absolutely wonderful." I asked, why? And he said, "Because she challenged every single thing I said. You had to think before you said anything. That's what she was like."

Kodwo Eshun: Good afternoon. I was really pleased to hear you talking about Ruth First, she's a hero of mine, for many people. But, you don't hear so much about her these days. I am a big fan of *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'Etat*, her analysis of military coups on the continent, her case studies of Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan, I think it's a phenomenal book. I think it's the other essential book on the dilemmas of decolonisation, after *The Wretched of the Earth*. Going back to the critiques Ruth First faced within the party—how much do you think that has to do with the roles she played as an academic, an activist, a comrade, a public figure, a public intellectual? She was good at building communities around her, but I've also read that she was quite isolated. Who were her main interlocutors? Who was she in dialogue with when she was working out her ideas?

SR: When she was released from prison and came into exile, when she went to Britain, she went to Durham University¹⁴, and she started opening up communication lines with left wing academics inside SA. One of whom was quite a problematic character, according to the movement, called Martin Legassick, and this intellectual relationship made her very vulnerable to criticism. I don't know why, because he wasn't powerful or anything, but as a Marxist he was very critical of the movement. She really came under fire for that. He was critical of the ANC and the SACP, of course, and she started to get really pissed off with the narrowness she was encountering. It was a very very bad time in exile because the SACP was very narrow.

I think she was on the the first SACP Central Committee delegation from the SACP to China in the early 1950s after the Chinese revolution. She went with John Nkdimeng and she came back absolutely glowing about the revolution in China. This didn't go down at all well because if you remember, the Soviets weren't on such good terms with the Chinese etc. So there was all that background of her being outspokenly different. Anyway, in Durham, she opened up lines of communication with left wing intellectuals. The one I knew about was Martin Legassick. She took quite an openly critical view of the movement and what we were doing and why we were doing it, especially the tendency (not often talked about now, but very prevalent then) towards



militarism. Then she got offered a job at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo¹⁵, and she was working with **Aquino de Bragança**, who was very progressive. She once said to me (I saw her a lot in Maputo), "I love this job because I can do what I want," and she started to do educational work amongst FRELIMO cadres. She took her students and researchers and went into the field. There are lots of people that can tell you about this who are still alive, one of them is **Bridget O'Laughlin**¹⁶ who's based in the Netherlands, who was in the room when the bomb blew up that killed Ruth. There's also **Rob Davis** who has just stopped being a minister, he worked with Ruth and Helena Dolny. They all worked with her at the University Eduardo Mondlane, and she loved that work. She felt she was making a lot of progress, that she was making a difference and she was not being constrained. I don't know much about the nature of her work because I was not involved in the affairs or programmes of the university.

One of the reasons she was so critical of the ANC was that, at that stage, it was divided into what we called "internal" and "external". If you were involved in "internal", it meant that you were involved in secret work inside SA building underground structures inside the country, creating conditions for armed operations to be carried out etc. It was secret work. You couldn't talk about it, obviously for obvious reasons. But the "external" operated differently, more openly. She always asked, not out of curiosity but out of political interest, "What are you telling everybody *inside* the country?" And she was rebuffed all the time with, "It's not your business, this is secret, you can't know". That's why, as I said earlier, her big thing was, "You're hiding behind this security screen, and it's not acceptable". When I arrived in Maputo, I was deployed in the political machinery with the aim of building the underground organisation. Mac Maharaj, who was directing this work, told us to go and see her about creating a syllabus, a political syllabus, that we could use for the comrades that were coming out of the country, secretly for a day or two, for political training. We had to create a political syllabus to cover a whole range of political issues that would expand the consciousness of the comrades whom we had recruited and were training. I'd only been in Maputo about three months when we trotted off to see her. She was so scathing. "Excuse me, what are you coming to me for?"

You're the ones who are supposed to be doing this work. What do you think should be in the political syllabus? What tasks are you giving comrades?" I was so embarrassed. She challenged us until we were forced to think things through.

She took everybody on. She challenged everybody and everything. She had political arguments publicly. There was one fight in my flat in front of a whole lot of comrades where she took on Ronnie Kasrils ...

KE: Oh!

SR: ... about the Soviet intervention in Hungary. They were arguing about something in relation to the Soviet Union and she turned to Kasrils and said, "I suppose you supported the Soviet intervention in Hungary."

KE: Was that 1956?

SR: Yes, '56.

SR: And he said, "I did." And she said, "You would, you would."

[laughter]

SR: After she left, Ronnie was frothing at the mouth he was so angry. After he left, I remember one of the comrades saying, "Jesus Christ, I hope I never have to be in a class with her." Let me tell you the story of what happened after the Sasol operation. After the Sasol operation, the Commander of Special Ops, the late comrade Obadi, and the commander of the Transvaal Military Machinery, General Nyanda and I went to have a celebratory drink with Slovo at his flat. When we arrived, it was just him and Ruth and us three. Ruth, Obadi and I were in the same SACP unit which was secret. Party membership was secret. Joe opens a bottle of whiskey, and we were sitting chatting about the forthcoming first elections in Zimbabwe. After we had a couple

of shots, we were all quite relaxed and happy. Obadi, who is now nicely relaxed says in this very flippant way, "Well, it's quite obvious that ZAPU are going to win the elections."

Ruth asks, "Why do you say that?" And I thought, here it comes, poor Obadi caught offside. He didn't know what to say. He's casting his eyes around the room and finally he says, "Well, we're in alliance with ZAPU." There is silence and then Ruth leans forward and says very quietly, "Comrade, alliances change because organisations change." And I'm telling you, not one of the three of us had ever thought of that before. We had never thought that the ANC or the SACP could change. We were too young. Too politically naïve. The organisational discipline was too tight, it was too constraining. You didn't ask questions, you weren't supposed to ask questions. When I was recruited, I was told, in relation to the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, that "There is no room, comrade Sue, for someone in the SA communist party who disagrees with the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia." I went home and said to my husband, "Then they'll have to do without me." But he talked me into it, "Who do you think you are? For god's sake, you can have your opinions, but you don't have to tell everybody. And our participation in this struggle is bigger than your little opinion on Czechoslovakia ..."

15 "Ruth traveled from London to Maputo with an initial mandate to study Mozambican mine workers in South Africa. When she arrived, Maputo was a city that had suffered a great deal of damage from the Portuguese colonialists before they exited the country. Ruth stayed with her good friends Moira and Zé Forjaz. Moira had helped Tilly care for Shawn, Gillian, and Robyn in 1963 when Ruth was in prison. Ruth had other friends in Maputo, Pam dos Santos and Albie Sachs, and through Pam's connections she subsequently rented a two-bed-room flat on Julius Nyerere Street, overlooking the Indian Ocean. The project that de Bragança had brought her to work on that year was in many ways a demonstration of the collective research that Ruth would facilitate in the years that followed at CEA. Aquino had assembled a staff of history graduates, and although the composition of the Center would change greatly in 1978, Ruth's 1977 research group included Aquino's staff as well as a number of expatriates who were on the faculty of the university—specifically Marc Wuyts, who taught in the Economics Department; the historian Alpheus Manghezi; and David Wied, who was in Engineering. In total there were fourteen researchers supervised by Ruth and Wuyts. The study consisted of surveys and fieldwork. Fernando Ganhão, the Rector of Eduardo Mondlane University, gave Ruth only seven months to complete the project.

The 1977 CEA study was published after Ruth's death as *Black Gold*. In 1978 it became the theoretical, methodological, and substantive model for Center studies. The CEA librarian Colin Darch's participation in the project illustrates the collective nature of work at the Center of African Studies. Research from the study had been presented at a 1978 conference in Zambia, and the report was printed in Portuguese. Ruth wanted the study published in English. However, she believed the report required further work, and she assigned

Darch to write a chronology and a section on health and safety in the mines. When he explained that he knew nothing about mines, Ruth replied, "Well now is your chance to learn." (Alan Wieder, 212)

16 "Our focus on production was, however, not just a practical expediency; it was theoretically informed by the assumptions of Marxist theory. We presumed that socialist revolution meant a fundamental shift in relations of class and the ways in which production was organised. We thought that socialisation of the countryside would be a lengthy process, not to be achieved simply in an instant by the construction of new forms of living—the communal villages—and working—the state-farms and cooperatives, even if these were not formulaic imitations of Soviet or Chinese models. This process was the real focus of our rural research and the area where we tried to contribute to critical reflection within Frelimo itself. Perhaps our greatest contribution was to maintain debate.

Contemporary anti-globalisation movements are more concerned with the politics of difference than with the politics of production. The language of class analysis has been displaced by the language of human rights and rights are usually conceived as individual rather than collective. Yet the questions posed for the researchers of the CEA in Mozambique still holds: you know what you are fighting against but what are you fighting for and how do you propose to get there? The answer Ruth First gave to this question: 'Focus on the transformation of production', came from Marxist theory and practice, but it embraced no general recipes for socialising production or suspending the logic of markets. Yet this focus gave some starting points and troubling issues of continuing relevance for social movements today." Bridget O'Laughlin, "Why was Ruth First in Mozambique?," in: *DEP*, Special Issue 26, Dec 2014, 39. On www.unive.it.

[laughter]

So, some of us came into the organisation on a compromised position where we just kept quiet. She didn't keep quiet, that was the difference, and the result was that she was pushed to one side. She told me, one day in Maputo, when we were taking a walk and we were looking out to sea at the Soviet trawlers on the horizon. She said to me, "You know, they're stealing all the fish" and I said, "Who's stealing the fish?" And she said, "The Soviet ships are stealing the Mozambican fish. Those are factory ships." You know, I was so shocked, I could hardly believe it. The Soviets stealing little Mozambique's fish when there was such poverty and hunger in Mozambique. But I knew she wouldn't make it up because she was an academic. She dealt in facts. It was such an incredibly important thing to say because that was the first time there was a seed of serious questioning in my mind about the Soviet Union. What is going on there? How do they steal the fish from Mozambique, the poorest country in the world, with those factory ships? That's what she was like, and she paid the price for it. Sorry, that was a very long answer.

JET: That was wonderful!

KE: She never thought of leaving, right? Her point was to critique from inside not from outside.

SR: Absolutely, absolutely. She was very brave. She didn't shift her position, although I am certain that if new facts were presented that changed her outlook, she would have had no compunction about adjusting or changing her position. In one of her courses at the university, she critiqued the GDR. They were giving aid to Mozambique by sending tractors but they hadn't taken into account that the soil in Mozambique is different from the soil in Germany. The result was that the tractors couldn't perform, they kept

breaking down. It was true, I saw it for myself. Wherever you travelled in Mozambique there were tractors all over the place that had broken down, and the GDR hadn't sent replacement parts. She criticised this openly. And do you know what happened after that? The GDR party sent a delegation to the SACP and said she should be removed from the SACP.



KE: Oh!

JET: Rather than fixing the tractors.

SR: That was specifically about the tractors that they said she should be removed. After that, a delegation from the central committee met with our SACP unit in Maputo. They said, they were visiting all the Party units, but I'm not sure that was true. They asked us about Ruth. She wasn't there at that particular meeting, obviously. We looked at them, "What are you asking?" We were shocked. "No, no, we're just inquiring as to what kind of a position comrade Ruth is taking." I mean, it was unbelievable. We were furious and did we give them hell—it was one of the proudest moments of my life. All of us, to a comrade, said, "She's the most fantastic thing that has ever happened to the SACP, she's wonderful, blah blah blah". And she didn't get removed.

KE: Yeah!

SR: That was what was going on then, that's what it was like.

JET: Would you say at the time of her killing—I mean, was her killing convenient, somehow? Not that I'm accusing anyone, but had she come to a point that if she continued to be vocal she could have either been kicked out or ...

SR: No, she would have never been, we all supported her. She was very highly regarded, she was extremely highly regarded. After a trip to Vietnam by the leadership—do you know about that trip?

KE: No, I don't. What year was that?

SR: It was in 1978. There was a lot of dissatisfaction in our ranks in exile at that time, lots of moaning and criticism about the leadership for the lack of progress in the struggle. There was a feeling of betrayal by the leadership, disillusionment and anger. It was a very worrying situation inside the ANC. The leadership took the situation seriously and took off for a meeting in Vietnam with the Vietnamese party leadership. Our delegation was composed of our top alliance leadership, lead by Tambo. Although it was a secret meeting, it's all been documented now. I'm giving you an account in my own words: When they got to Vietnam and explained the situation, the Vietnamese said, "Well comrades, you're doing everything wrong." Our leadership asked, "Why?" And the Vietnamese said, "Because yours is not a military struggle, it is a political struggle. It is a mass political struggle. You're not dealing with the American military, for example, like we are. Your armed activity is armed propaganda, it's there to support political action." As a result, when the leadership returned, the unsuccessful strategy that had been employed until then, until that point, was turned on its head. The new strategy was expressed in what was called the "Green Book," wherein it was directed that the political struggle would dominate and determine military work. Mass struggle stimulated by armed propaganda was what we were striving for.¹⁷ Ruth would have been very, very pleased with this change in posture, although she didn't see any evidence of it in practice, none of us did. I would imagine that Ruth was aware of the existence of this new strategy and was challenging whether it was being implemented. It was a huge struggle by the way to implement this volte face. Amongst the other things the leadership learned on this trip to Vietnam was that, there must be no mixing between the political structures and the military structures. The political structures must not know anything about the military structures, and vice versa. This is to protect the underground, so that if a

person is captured, he or she can't give too much away. We call it now, information on a 'need to know' basis.

Well, this started to be implemented in the most mechanical way and the political machinery challenged this because we were supposed to be creating the conditions for the military to base themselves amongst the people. That meant, there had to be some exchange—some interaction, especially at the higher levels, so that there could be an integrated approach to the struggle. Over time it got very heated, and I, for one, got into a lot of trouble. Slovo went on some trip, and when he came back, he was told that I'd been visited by the top leadership, that I was undisciplined and that I was not allowed to mix with the military. And furthermore, that since I was not taking any notice, disciplinary measures would have to be taken. So Slovo said to me, "Jesus, I go away for five minutes and you're already in shit." He must have told Ruth, because she contacted me and said, "Listen, what are you up to? You are to come and have lunch with us every Tuesday and I want to know what it is you're doing. There's no getting you into trouble here." When I reported this at the political headquarters—that I've got to have lunch with Ruth every Tuesday, and that she's going to put me on the spot—the comrades all said to me, "Oh my god, you're so lucky. You've got to keep notes. You've got to tell us what she said. You've got to report back."

That was the level of respect the cadreship had for her. They would not have allowed anything to happen to Ruth. So, that's an answer to your question. Yes, she was marginalised by the leadership, because she used to put them on the spot. But I can tell you that if she had been alive when Madiba and Uncle Walter were released from prison, the first person Uncle Walter would have asked to stand by his side would have been Ruth. And she would have stayed there until the day she died or he died. That was what he conveyed to me, face to face. Because when you've got real leadership, they want to know what people are thinking—not to enhance their own power but so that they can understand and deal with the situation. That's what Uncle Walter was like. When I travelled around the country with him in 1994, before the first elections, whenever he convened a meeting with a local organisation, he would ask everybody to speak first. He wanted to hear what the comrades on the ground had to say. And he always said, at every single meeting, "I'd like to hear from the lady comrades first, please, because otherwise their voices get drowned out." Every single meeting, he would ask for the women to speak first and he never said anything until he'd heard everybody. Oliver Tambo was the same—there were no long speeches. Ruth was the same. She listened to everybody. She was interested and took note of what was being said and that's why comrades respected and valued her. That's why, in a way, she was untouchable. But she was very unpopular in many quarters. Stalinist quarters especially.

JET: Are there any women of that kind of a profile still around? Not necessarily in the leadership, someone you think like, "Damn, Ruth would have liked her."

SR: Ruth would have loved **Thandi Modise**. She was an MK operative and cadre, trained in Angola. Now she's Speaker in the National Assembly [since August 2021 she is Minister of Defence]. She's very outspoken. Ruth would have loved **Thenjiwe Mtintso**, too. Those were the kind of women that she liked, women like her.

JET: And can you hear their voices in South Africa today?

SR: Ya! We hear them, we listen to them. They have our support. They know who we are, we know who they are.

17 "The core of [Govan Mbeki's] book concerns the re-emergence of the ANC inside the country following the decade of post-Rivonia 'paralysis'. [...] He places his main emphasis on the 1980s—and sees this decade's politics as the product of a change in ANC thinking manifested in a 'Green Book' which was produced in 1979 after a visit by a delegation to Vietnam late the previous year. For Mbeki, its main importance was in its effect on ANC work with relation to mass organisations. "From 1979 the ANC leadership was firmly united around the strategy of integrating the military struggle with mass political organisations". He quotes from the Green Book: 'the armed struggle is secondary at this time'. Mbeki suggests that not merely the United Democratic Front, but the host of community organisations established from 1980 onwards, were consciously organised by the ANC as products of this change of line. [...] This seems to me to give too much credit to link-ups from outside to inside the country, and too little to the 'spontaneous' activity of activists inside. In the 1970s the tendency in ANC thinking was to regard organisation inside the country purely as a recruiting channel for MK. The post-1979 ANC change

to seeing a role for mass organisation in its own right was welcome. But the community organisations developed as mass organisations out of a response to local grievances, encouraged by the militancy of the youth and the resilience of trade union organisation. My reading of the situation is that the switch from black consciousness to ANC politics took place through a recognition (the result of experience) among trade union and youth activists of the significance of the black working class and of class struggle—as a solution to national as well as social grievances—rather than through direct intervention from outside. [...] The ANC was conceived of as standing for revolutionary social transformation, and the Freedom Charter was understood as a programme for socialism. The masses, in other words, chose the ANC rather than the other way around—with the expectation that, in power, it would produce a radical transformation of society." Martin Legassick, "Myth and reality in the struggle against apartheid" [Review of Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Allister Sparks books]. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol 24, no 2, 1998, 443–458.