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HERstory: Writing women into South African history

Mthunzi Zungu, Nozipho Manqele, Calda de Vries, Thato Molefe and Muziwandile Hadebe of the Oral History Unit of the Department of Arts and Culture

abstract

It is said that "history is told not as it was but as men saw it". Women have largely been absent from the telling of our history, despite their vital contribution made in the struggle for freedom. The Department of Arts and Culture currently has an opportunity to record the largely untold micro-histories of South Africans through the recording and archiving of oral histories. The practice of recording oral histories will have two major advantages: 1) acting as a transformational mechanism through which past imbalances are addressed, and functioning as a therapeutic mechanism to deal with South Africa's turbulent past; and 2) enriching our educational curriculum at all levels, creating deep and thorough archives to be accessed by domestic and international scholars. It is of utmost importance that research needs to be undertaken on women prior to and in the struggle; women's everyday struggles; and women in leadership positions, among other contemporary issues. 2013 marked the centenary of the 1913 Women's Anti-Pass Campaign in Bloemfontein – a campaign which served as a turning point in our history, and left a lasting legacy for South African women in the 20th century. De Lauretis' (1989) statement that "it is the specific properties, qualities or necessary attributes that women have developed or have been bound to historically in their different patriarchal sociocultural contexts which make them women not men" is useful in guiding how we write women's lives and give women a voice. We, the KwaZulu-Natal Archives, will focus on writing the lives of forgotten heroines/activists like Nokuthela Dube, Portia Ndwandwe, Phyllis Naidoo, Bessie Head, Victoria Mxenge and Charlotte Manye Maxeke.

keywords

gender, women, South African history, oral history, patriarchy, politics

Introduction

Writing women into history does not only include narrowing the gaps and giving them a voice, it also involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of their historical significance. Scholars have over the past centuries focused on men as players and writers of history. This state of affairs has to a large extent neglected and silenced the voice of women and their role, yet women have played a profound role in shaping the country's history. Evidence has shown that

women have come together and fought for freedom and dignity, for equal rights and social justice. They played an enormous role in the relaxation of the pass laws in 1913 and later the exclusion of women from carrying passes in 1923. They have marched in protest on the stone towers of power. They have faced police batons, teargas and guns. They have been detained and tried to make a better land for their children to give them what they never had: the right to be free in their own country.

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Figure 1. Bessie Head (from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).

“Wathintaabafazi, wathintaimbokodo, uzakufa” (“You have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock, you will die”) are the stirring words of a protest song composed in one of the largest mass demonstrations on 9 August 1956, where 22 000 women marched on the seat of government in Pretoria against white minority rule. It is through documenting these struggles that as South Africa marks the centenary of the 1913 women’s march against pass laws in Bloemfontein, women’s role in history will be given equal status and attention. The centenary has allowed less celebrated heroines of the struggle to be remembered and celebrated for shaping the direction of the country – politically, socially and economically.

The overarching aim of this focus is to draw attention to some of the less celebrated heroines in South Africa. These women have played an active role in the struggle for liberation – they were at the forefront of key points in our history – women such as Nokuthela Dube, Princess Magogo, Charlotte Manye Maxeke, Victoria Mxenge, Bessie Head, Phyllis Naidoo and Phila Ndwandwe. The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Arts and Culture honours all those women who have contributed in extraordinary ways to South African society. Those who fought for justice and peace at the turn of the 20th century; those who did pioneering work in arts, music,

dance and poetry; the early writers of South African history; the suffragettes who fought for equality and fairness; the trade union women who fought for a living wage; and the early women political activists and women in other fields. The exemplary achievements of all these women are certainly an inspiration for men and women today – and will indeed be an inspiration for future generations.

C.T. Msimang in his book *Buzaniku Mkabayi* published in 1982 presented the fascinating role of Mkabayi in Zulu history and its political affairs. Not only did Mkabayi shape the political affairs through her power and influence, she also became a powerful political figure feared by men of great influence. She eventually became a regent when her father, Jama kaNdaba, died with Senzangakhona still too young to take the throne. However, such historical tales are few: hence the need to document women’s history.

Jeff Guy wrote *The View Across the River* in 2001, but the book is not entirely about Harriet Colenso, but more about her plight in trying to help the uSuthu in times of the British invasion. The marginalisation of women in history has been camouflaged by such undertakings, which ensure focus on a few notable women in South African history. While this is vital, there are countless women who are not given the necessary focus, and remain invisible. Zulu history is filled with examples of noteworthy women, such as:

- The chieftom of Machibise, located where Pietermaritzburg currently stands. Uncharacteristically headed by a woman, Machibise, this was before the arrival of the Voortrekkers in the region. While part of Edendale, a predominately black township in Pietermaritzburg, is named after her, she is barely remembered (J. Wright, ‘PMB before the Voortrekker’, *The Witness*, 24 November, 2010).
- Mavundlase, iNkosi-chief of iziNkumbi on the South Coast (Henry Francis Fynn’s black supporters, known as iziNkumbi). Charlie was the nephew of Henry F. Fynn (junior), and succeeded his mother as chief of the iziNkumbi. Mavundlase is regarded as the first Nguni matriarchal *iNkosi*.
- King Dinizulu’s mother, OkaMsweli, who carried out the duties of



Figure 2. Seen in the foreground is Victoria Nonyamezelo Mxenge (photo from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).

chieftainship for almost a decade while Dinuzulu was exiled in St Helena. Written sources place emphasis on Mankulumane (Dinuzulu's *undunankulu*, or prime minister) as the figure at the helm of the chieftainship. Dinuzulu was imprisoned in 1907 on the basis of allegations that he instigated the 1906 Bhambatha Uprising. His imprisonment depressed her so tremendously that she died in 1908.

The underlying presupposition of this focus is that structural and societal constraints have led to the silence around many stories of remarkable women in our past. Karl Marx is aptly quoted as saying "anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment." The word 'ferment' denotes a catalyst of sorts – and this in itself is an ideal fit to the stock of women in this country who were at times at the forefront of the struggle for liberation.

The bold women in our history did not mobilise simply because they were women. They mobilised against the injustices of the apartheid state, recognising that such injustice touched on all aspects of their lives. According to Hassim (2006), in the early part of the 20th century women in the country mobilised around a wide range of issues, for example working women's struggles against low wages and poor conditions in the

workplace, local states' attempts to regulate women's economic activities, control of women's mobility by the promulgation of pass laws, and poverty among many others.

In establishing the patriarchal character of South African society, Bozzoli (1983) informs us that the legal system, wages, access to positions of power and authority are all structural mechanisms whereby a hierarchical, unequal relationship between men and women is perpetuated. Abbott, Wallace and Tyler (2005) argue that women's and men's experience of the social world are not only shaped by difference but by a hierarchical ordering of difference, what feminists have called the 'gender order'. The terms sex and gender have particular definitions in sociological work: sex refers to the biological identity of the person and is meant to signify the fact that one is either male or female, whereas gender refers to the socially learned behaviour and expectations that are associated with the two sexes (Andersen, 1997). The fact that someone is born a female or a male does not mean that she or he will become stereotypically feminine or masculine. Likewise, gender is not natural, but is created by society through socialisation using institutions such as the family, the church, schools and the state. Unequal power relationships are also created by society, enabling H1St0ry to take precedence over HERSt0ry. It is said that "history is told not as it was but as men saw it."

Documenting women in history requires revisiting their 'lived lives'. This is sorely needed as women's role has been missing from the discourse. Such deliberate silence means that documenting women's history can only be done through life histories, hence the need to employ oral history as a methodology. This approach has often been described as a method that enables a void within the archives to be filled, by recognising the previously marginalised.

Scholars of the 21st century cannot afford to downplay the role of women in shaping society. Evidence has shown that women have contributed much to our history and thus deserve to be included in the academic and public discourse. Anderson, Armitage, Jack and Wittner (1987) affirm that oral history supplements archival material by incorporating the previously overlooked lives, activities and feelings of women into our understanding of the past and of the present. This focus piece wishes to advance this claim by stating that the purpose of oral history is not merely to 'fill the gaps' in archival documents that are about the biographies of men and are Eurocentric in nature: it is a methodology of its own, not requiring supplementation. It creates an opportunity to create new sources for HERstory and thus adding to HStory.

Men and women experience the world differently. Simone de Beauvoir (1952: 172) is quoted as saying "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth." The act of supplanting HERstory in place of HStory is that HERstories are written from a feminist perspective and emphasise the role played by women in society. Feminist research attempts to document and describe the main social differences and inequalities between men and women. MacKinnon (1982) informs us that consciousness raising – the act of collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience as they live through it – is key to feminist method.

It is noted that history is a violent space; it offers fictitious accounts, vilifying some and 'heroising' others. It is known that the leadership of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa identifies and remembers 'heroes' and forgets the rest, which includes men and women. For example, if you died in the struggle, you are remembered; if you survived



Figure 3. Princess Magogo (photo from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).

like many millions, you are forgotten in history. History is thus negotiated by power.

Princess Magogo and Nokuthela Dube

In observing various oral history narratives of women in South Africa there is evidence that women's accounts of events is given significance by making reference to the eminent men around these women. In the various interviews analysed for this focus, the women retell their stories in relation to these men. Women are not often interviewed as key figures but rather as subordinates in the events. Women are not given equal status during the interview process; at times they are used as a means to an end. For example, the subject for the Princess Magogo interview was King Solomon, her brother, and not the Princess herself. The content of oral history is gendered towards the King, and derides the role she played in shaping history. Whilst this is so, a glimpse into the Princess' life is revealed, thus presenting us with a text in need of analysis.



Figure 4. Nokuthela Dube (photo from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).

There are countless women who have shaped history through music as a form of dissent against the injustices inflicted on them based on gender, race and class. Princess Magogoka Dinuzulu is one such woman, who can be seen as a 'deviant' or 'interfering' woman who shaped history. Born at Osuthu Royal Homestead in 1900, during a significant period in Zulu history, Princess Magogo was raised by her grandmothers and mothers (Dinuzulu's widowed wives). Her mother, Queen Silomo, died when she was still very young. As a result she endured mistreatment from her 'foster' mothers. After Queen Silomo's death the responsibility to look after her two brothers, King Solomon Maphumuzana Nkayishana and Prince Mshiyeni, fell on her.

Her experiences as a royal, a female and a black woman shaped her identity; she later projected herself as fearless and independent, and exhibited a certain agency which was uncommon for a woman of her social position. This was portrayed in how she claimed her space in her music and in her political activism. Princess Magogo was a poet, singer, composer and historian who revealed much about her time through her

oral history recordings. She transcended boundaries by becoming a female composer and *imbogi* (bard).

Through her musical compositions and interviews she tackles taboo issues in Zulu culture and society. She observes and interrogates the absence of her husband in raising her children. This is heard in the nursing song *Uyephina?* (Where has he gone to?). Her recordings do not only reflect various issues troubling the nation at a point in history, but position her as a woman actively questioning the status quo and responding to social change by bringing it into the spotlight. She also played the role of safeguarding music by being the last known player of *ugubhu* (a stringed bow and calabash instrument). She became known as an authority on Zulu traditions and music; experts in these fields often consulted her and she taught many. Without her a great deal of traditional music would have been lost.

Nokuthela Dube is another such heroine who shaped history through music and education. Nokuthela (née Mdimma) was born at Inanda Mission School in the early 1870s. At the age of 11 she attended Inanda Seminary, the prestigious girls' high school that was established by the American Zulu Mission in 1869. According to Healy-Clancy (2013: 67) Inanda missionaries contributed 32 cases of young women who had come to evade 'forced marriages', which forced many young girls in the area to run away from home and others to commit suicide.

Nokuthela grew up in this era; observing such cases contributed immensely in shaping her character as an independent woman. After completing her schooling she took to teaching young girls. In 1894 she married John Langalibalele Dube and thus became a member of the most prominent Christian family in Inanda. John and Nokuthela Dube were sent to study in America from 1896 to 1899 at the Union Missionary Training Institute in Brooklyn, New York. Nokuthela studied music education and home economics. It is known that her musical performances abroad assisted in funding the building of the first African independent school in Inanda. Ohlange Industrial Institute is 'known' to have been started by John Langalibalele Dube, the first President of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC – became the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923). The vital role she played in the formation of the school is

often overlooked. Nokuthela and John Dube collected funds through talks they gave, and Nokuthela's musical performances abroad. She is not given the same recognition as her husband John Langalibalele Dube, who is often given the solitary role of funding this school. Nokuthela was fearless in taking bold decisions; this was clear later in her life, when she abandoned Dube after his extramarital affair. This also showed how strong her religious conviction were.

Nokuthela's story has only come to light recently. A US-based academic of African origin, Professor Cherif Keita, discovered her unmarked grave that had remained forgotten for 93 years. On 24 August 2013 the Department of Arts and Culture, in collaboration with the KwaZulu-Natal Office of the Premier and other stakeholders, held a memorial lecture to contribute to the work of reinstating the legacy of this remarkable woman into South African public life. The unveiling of her tombstone was held on 31 August 2013.

The unearthing of such a remarkable woman almost a century after her death leads the authors to question whether there may be other forgotten heroines of this land still to be discovered. Nokuthela cofounded the *Ilanga Lase Natal* newspaper in 1903 (which is still in circulation), Ohlange Institute and Natal Native Congress (the forerunner of the SANNC) with Dube – but she is not mentioned at all.

Women's emancipation through education

The 'makeup' of the heroines in our history reveals that many were educated, either at mission schools or through life experience; they were fearless; they were selfless; and they had the audacity to challenge the system. Women intellectuals like Nokuthela Dube and Charlotte Manye Maxeke were educated abroad; they knew no boundaries and were internationalists. As previously mentioned, Nokuthela started the first African school independent of state control, and it was feared by the colonialists that this would assist in the emancipation of the black majority. Nokuthela has also recently (2013) been credited for the instrumental role she played in the success of John Dube. Charlotte is widely known to be the first South African woman to get a degree, which she received in

the United States of America; she led the 1913 Women's Anti-Pass Campaign in Bloemfontein, and was one of the selected few allotted membership into the SANNC.

Missionary education in South Africa during the 19th and 20th centuries was the first of its kind to prepare women for a better life in society. Women like Talitha Hawes and Dalida Isaac were among the first to be educated at Inanda Seminary. The influence of missionary education on women was more positive than negative, and women like Bessie Head stand out as typical examples of its positive influences. Her access to missionary education freed her of South African oppression and discrimination, exposed her to a wide range of literature and allowed her to become one of the most well-known African women writers in South African history. Her works deal with issues of discrimination, refugees, racialism, African history, poverty, and interpersonal relationships in apartheid South Africa. Bessie Head had a strong belief in the importance of education; she was formally educated, and her life's work was aimed at educating others. Her life demonstrates an interesting departure from what was generally perceived to be the



Figure 5. Charlotte Manye Maxeke (photo from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).



Figure 6. Phyllis Naidoo (photo from South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za).

status and role of women in her society, especially at the beginning of the 19th and 20th century.

Through the work of women like Bessie Head, who were agents of change, women's roles in society and opportunities in the educational sphere improved dramatically over the years. Today a large number of women are teachers, health workers, activists and intellectuals, artists and entrepreneurs. Women also participate in key positions of power; in parliament and government, as voters, legislators, members of the judiciary, members and leaders of political parties, civil society activists, political analysts, media agents, public servants, public intellectuals and more generally as citizens exercising their agency in the broad spectrum of their daily lives and that of South African society.

Political participation and political activism

South African women have been politically active throughout history. Political participation is referred to as activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, either directly through public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995: 38). Political activism, on the other hand, refers to the use of direct, confrontational action toward a cause. Women have been active within the ANC since its existence. Frene Ginwala (1990), in

a paper titled 'Women and the African National Congress 1912-1943', published in this very journal, mentions that for the first 30 years of the existence of the SANNC/ANC the exclusion of women from full membership in the constitution contrasted with the participation of women in the deliberations, decision-making and campaigns of the organisations, although not in the leadership. Ginwala (1990) asserts that this apparent contradiction stems from the actuality of African women's involvement in resistance and the irregular structure of the ANC, which allowed for ways in which women could participate. Ginwala (1990) goes on to mention that this exclusion of women was neither surprising nor exceptional for the time, in that South African society was patriarchal in form and male-dominated.

Ginwala (1990) says that in 1912 government and politics in the country were generally considered to be within the exclusive province of men, and at the time women were denied the franchise. According to Ginwala (1990) the absence of women from political institutions does not necessarily lead to their absence in the political arena. Because women chose to engage in issues of immediate and direct relevance to their daily lives, they found it easy to mobilise support and mount campaigns. An example of this is the 1913 anti-pass campaign in the Free State, where women mobilised support against the extension of passes to women instituted by the government. The solidarity that women displayed during the 1913 march

in Bloemfontein ultimately forced the SANNC to recognise women within its structures. This led to the formation of the Bantu Women's League, forerunner of the ANC Women's League in 1918, the first political body of black women at national level.

2013 marked the centenary of the 1913 anti-pass campaign and the 1913 Satyagraha movement. These events are not as highly publicised as the 1956 protest. This highlights women's resistance at the turn of the century, and also racial cooperation and resistance against unjust laws and oppression. Another example, close to home, is the similar anti-pass campaign which took place in Natal in October 1959, in Ixopo, where Dr Margaret Mncadi mobilised 500 women from surrounding districts and they marched to town demanding to see the Native Commissioner. This was after they had submitted their grievances 2 months earlier and received no positive feedback. The Native Commissioner responded by telling the women to return home and give their demands to their husbands, who would then take the matter to the local headman. The women refused to disperse until they could speak to the Native Women's Commissioner.

Just like the women of 1913 and 1956, these women marched to the town centre opposing pass laws. They were also willing to go to jail for the cause, but the strategy they adopted differed. When confronted by the authorities and told to disperse, their approach was to go down on their knees in prayer. That resulted in arrests with fines or imprisonment. As seen in other areas, police would always respond to women's demonstrations in a similar fashion. Issues of gender inequality were evident during this period, as authorities refused to succumb to women's demands. The implications of acceptance would have meant that women and men were equals, which threatened the fundamental social and political assumptions. Margaret Mncadi eventually became the first President of the ANC Women's League in Natal.

Another woman in our province with a powerful story is the late Victoria Nonyamezelo Mxenge, who was brutally assassinated during the turbulent 1980s. Mxenge was active within the structures of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and was also one of the founding members of the Natal Organisation of Women. As a lawyer Mxenge was

unafraid to challenge the system. She became politically active after her husband, Griffiths Mxenge, was murdered by the Nationalist Party government. Mxenge was part of the defence team for the UDF and Natal Indian Congress during the Pietermaritzburg Treason Trial. She was assassinated shortly before the trial, on 1 August 1985 in the driveway of her home in Umlazi, Durban, in front of her children.

Women like Victoria Mxenge, Margaret Mncadi and Nokuthela Dube should not only be names we see on buildings or as renamed streets – they should be as synonymous with the struggle as are their male counterparts.

Audacity, sacrifice, death and near-death experience

Phyllis Naidoo, a remarkable woman who recently died, is remembered for the pivotal role she played in the liberation of this country. When Phyllis Naidoo's underground network was arrested in Durban, she received an instruction from ANC leader Harry Gwala to leave the country since she faced the danger of being detained. She sneaked out of the country to Swaziland and joined the ANC in exile. She crossed via Lesotho, alone since a large group of escapees would attract attention from the authorities.

In 1982 Phyllis Naidoo had a close shave with death when the South African Defence Force (SADF) raided Lesotho at night, leaving 42 people dead (30 South Africans, mostly ANC members, and 12 Lesotho nationals). This is known as the Maseru Massacre. Her second near-death experience was when she was bombed in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). A tragedy befell her when she lost her sons – the first, Sahdham (Sanna) was killed by South African agents in Tanzania in 1989. According to Phyllis, Sanna knew the penalty of being politically active. Sha, her second son, died in 1995. Later she lived in Zimbabwe, where she taught at the University of Harare. Life in Zimbabwe was still unsafe, as comrades would be killed and sometimes had to run into the bush to hide from the Zimbabwe Defence Force, which often raided their place. It was a life of anxiety, panic and endurance, which was the sacrifice of being involved in a political struggle. Leaving home, family, friends and relatives was hard; equally



Figure 7. A telling headline: story about Phyllis Naidoo from the *Sunday Tribune* in 1971.

so was the danger posed by raiding South African forces and their allies.

It is fascinating if one looks at how Phyllis' attention was drawn to the race problem in South Africa. According to Phyllis, she received her first lesson in politics at the age of ten when accompanying her father to a liberals' meeting. A woman at the meeting asked her to go and call the 'boy' outside. She discovered that the 'boy' referred to was a grown-up man who deserved respect and dignity. The reply she received from the wife of the man rattled her: "That 'boy' you are looking for is my husband!" It was a turning point in her life. It

was a time of developing a political acumen that shaped her political life throughout.

Racial oppression affected black South Africans of different ages, which triggered their desire to be involved in politics. Such an undertaking was sometimes costly. One such example was that of Phila Portia Ndwandwe, who was a student at the University of Durban-Westville when she abandoned her studies and skipped the country to Swaziland. People close to her at campus remembered her as smart, gentle, friendly, and a good communicator who was comfortable in any company (Naidoo, 2009: 36). She had been

arrested with a group of activists by Brighton Beach Police in 1985, and released after making a statement, since they hoped to turn her into a state witness. The man in charge of the investigation was furious with his colleagues for releasing her, and it was after this that she escaped to Swaziland.

In Swaziland she joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and built a reputation of being brave and trustworthy. She was a brave, dedicated cadre, which explains why she was tasked to be a commander of the Durban underground network under 'Operation Butterfly', a resolution taken at the ANC Kabwe conference in 1985. Military intervention had been fruitless for MK, hence the need to revive the strategy. Under Phila's command the network succeeded in several missions, with bombs going off in several locations in Durban. The attention of the Durban Security Branch then refocused on Swaziland and Durban; they intercepted calls of the unit, and Phila was identified as a commanding figure of the network.

One bomb in Wentworth in Durban had killed Colonel Robert Wellman in 1984; he was notorious for his interrogation of witnesses and covering up of evidence, and heading the Brighton Beach Police Station unit investigating MK and other political activities in Durban. The bomb that killed Colonel Wellman was planted by Robert McBride, who said that they planted two bombs ten minutes apart, knowing that the police would come to inspect.

Colonel Andy Taylor took over from Wellman and was tasked with neutralising the Durban network as its activities had reached critical point. Taylor devised a plan and tasked an *askari* to contact Phila Nwandwe, posing as a member of the ANC tasked to pass her an important message. She was then kidnapped in Swaziland, and taken to a farm outside Pietermaritzburg. The aim was to turn her into a police spy. When her abductors saw that she could not be 'turned', she was killed, execution style.

The demeaning circumstance under which she died is indicative of the brutality of the Security Branch members. When her body was exhumed to be given a proper burial, she had only a piece of plastic to cover her private parts. While she had tried to protect her bodily dignity, throughout her life Phila maintained her political dignity.

Women soldiers were exposed to the same dangers as men, and suffered the same fate.

Women were therefore decision-makers, knowing individuals, fully aware of the dangers and yet still opted to continue to work in dangerous spaces. This shattered the myth of women always needing protection, and shows the agency apparent in women in our history.

During the Truth and Reconciliation (1998) hearings the defendants in Phila's assassination were granted amnesty. Phila has since received recognition from the government for her courage and sacrifice. Oral narratives and testimonies assisted in resurrecting her story. Phila grew up during the time of conflict just five years after the Sharpeville Massacre. She was 11 during the Soweto Uprising, and would have listened to the ANC's Radio Freedom. As somebody who stayed with her stepmother, her daily life was a struggle since she did not have a good relationship with her. In her days at the University of Durban-Westville, Phila did not take up leadership roles in student politics as she wanted to avoid drawing attention to her political activities. It is this deep nature of understanding her role in the ANC that deserves praise.

Conclusion

It can be said that women in South Africa are regarded as storytellers, yet they suffer institutionalised silencing in history (Hofmeyer, 1993). This focus is an attempt to deal with the silences of some of the less celebrated women in our history. Silences such as that around Nokuthela – absent from the history books despite the pivotal role she played in co-founding Ohlange Institute, *llanga* newspaper and the Natal Natives Congress (forerunner of the SANNC).

This focus does not provide a comprehensive account of the aforementioned women and their achievements, but does attempt to add to the narrative of women's role in South African history. Much work needs to be done in the field to document the life histories of Mavundlase, Machibise, OkaMsweli, Phila Nwandwe and many more. It is hoped that the national initiative to record oral histories spearheaded by the National Department of Arts and Culture is going to address some of these challenges.

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THE ORAL HISTORY UNIT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARTS AND CULTURE is newly established, and responsible for safeguarding intangible heritage by collecting, recording and archiving memories of community members from different parts of the province. This research was conducted by Muziwandile Hadebe (Deputy Manager: Repository and Oral History Management) with Calda De Vries, Nozipho Manqele, Thato Molefe and Mthunzi Zungu (Researchers for the Oral History Unit). Email: DevriesC@kzndac.gov.za

From left to right: back – Mthunzi Zungu, Calda de Vries, Muziwandile Hadebe; front – Nozipho Manqele, Thato Molefe.