

On the Same Terms as Men? Race in the South African Women's Suffrage Movement,  
1902-1930

Senior Thesis

by

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## Introduction and Historiography

The 1930 Women's Enfranchisement Act granted South African women of European descent the right to vote. The passage of the act was the culmination of a struggle with its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which emerged as an organized movement in 1902. The women who campaigned for the right to vote were primarily white, English-speaking women of the middle and upper class. Heavily influenced by the suffrage movement occurring in England, of which South Africa was a dominion at the start of the movement, it ultimately grew into its own entity, influenced by the larger political and cultural landscape of South Africa. Occurring simultaneously with the Segregation Era policies in the country, the movement of white women ultimately chose to exclude their black counterparts in order to appeal to the white, male government. Though the passage of the act was a success for many of the women involved in suffrage organizations, it excluded a large number of South African women who were not white. Occurring at a time of racial segregation and oppression led by the current government, the complex movement both reflected and diverged from the racial divisions in the larger South African society, and the enfranchisement of white women was ultimately used by the government to further disenfranchise black Africans.

The historiography of the women's suffrage movement emerged in the late 1970s with Cheryl Walker's *The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*, written as an undergraduate honors thesis in 1976 and published by the University of Cape Town Press in 1979. Walker was the first to examine women's suffrage in South Africa as more than just a result of the segregation measures implemented by the government at the time. Instead, Walker argues that though women's suffrage was used to further disenfranchise native Africans, the movement that occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a complex and powerful political movement. Her

monograph examines the movement from its origins in the 1840s through the 1930 decision, providing an overview of the development of the movement, its participants, and the ultimate granting of women's suffrage.

Walker continued to study the women's suffrage movement and women in South Africa more broadly. Her 1991 monograph, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, presents a broader view of women in South Africa, dedicating a chapter to the women's suffrage movement, but also encompassing political organization of women through the 1960s ranging from trade unions to anti-pass protests. Walker's 1990 edited volume, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, also includes a chapter by her, titled "The Women's Suffrage Movement: Politics of Gender, Race, and Class" which takes the argument from her first monograph and expands on the subject of race in the women's suffrage movement.

More specialized studies began to emerge on the women's suffrage movement following Walker's original monograph, often examining a specific ethnic group involved with the suffrage movement. Studies of English-speaking women in the movement and the connections between South Africa and England illuminate the position of the majority of participants in the movement for suffrage. Deborah Gaitskell's article "The Imperial Tie: Obstacle or Asset for South African Women's Suffrage before 1930?" examines these connections that occurred in South Africa as a result of its imperial connections to Britain. Related to Gaitskell's article are works on Olive Schreiner, a South African author and early feminist who was well-connected to the women's suffrage movement in England. Helen Dampier's article, "'Going on with our little movement in the hum drum-way which alone is possible in a land like this': Olive Schreiner and suffrage networks in Britain and South Africa, 1905–1913," and Carolyn Burdett's monograph, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism*, reveal important information on Schreiner's role in the

movement and her radical opinions on race in South Africa. The most recent study published on women's suffrage in South Africa is S.E. Duff's article "Training for Citizenship" which explores how women in the suffrage movement, mainly English-speaking, were politically engaged during the campaign for the vote, and how they were involved with politics and modernizing the state in early 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa in a broader sense than their campaign for women's suffrage.

Studies focusing on Afrikaner women, their position in the movement, and how they were affected by their traditionalist society illuminate a minority of the women's suffrage movement, but nonetheless an important part of the complex story. Elsabe Brink's "Man-made Woman: Gender, Class, and the ideology of the *Volkmoeder*" gives context to the role of the *volksmoeder*, or Mother of the Nation, which was prevalent in Afrikaner society and politics. Louise Vincent's "A Cake of Soap: the *Volkmoeder* Ideology and Afrikaner Women's Campaign for the Vote" explains how Afrikaner women utilized their role as *volksmoeders* to expand their sphere of influence and argue for their suffrage. Drawing from both of the previous articles, Marijke du Toit's "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: *Volkmoeders* and the ACVV" looks specifically at the Afrikaner Women's Christian Organization and how the women involved both were and were not involved in campaigning for their right to vote as women.

Works that connect women's suffrage and race in South Africa during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are imperative to my argument. Pamela Scully's "White Maternity and Black Infancy: The rhetoric of race in the South African women's suffrage movement, 1895-1930" provides an informative study of how race was used by white suffragists to argue for their right to vote. Also important for my argument are works on the context of Native African women and their political involvement in this period, including Julia C. Well's monograph *We Now Demand: Women's*

*Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa*, which examines the protests against pass laws which occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, most notably for my project, the 1913 women's pass law protests in Bloemfontein which occurred at the same time as the women's suffrage movement. Also helpful for understanding the context of African women's political participation in the years following the women's suffrage movement is Shireen Hassim's *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*.

Though the historiography of the women's suffrage movement of South Africa is recent and still emerging, understanding the movement that occurred in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can shed light on the Segregation and Apartheid eras, as well as the racial politics that defined South Africa from the beginning of its colonial days. The women's suffrage movement was complex and the period contained many examples of women working in their ethnic contexts for greater freedom, some directly involved in the movement for suffrage, and some merely concerned with maintaining the rights they had. The women's suffrage movement debated campaigning for suffrage for all women, regardless of race, but ultimately the white members of the suffrage organizations decided to shift their campaign towards the vote for white women only, solidifying their appeal to the government and allowing themselves to be used as a measure for segregation and disenfranchisement of their African counterparts.

### **I. Women's Suffrage to 1912: A divided movement from the start**

From its emergence in 1902 with the establishment of the Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL) in Durban, the South African women's suffrage movement was marked by racial

divisions. The differing opinions held by the members on whether to be inclusive of all women in their campaign for suffrage characterized the beginning years of the movement. From its origin in the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the 1890s, the movement for women's suffrage was led by white women, generally of British background, and took place in segregated groups. The early years of the movement, however, saw some debate on whether the campaign for suffrage should be inclusive of all women. A small number of women involved with the start of the movement were in favor of campaigning for suffrage on behalf of all women, not choosing to exclude based on race, a position which was slightly ironic since the membership of the organizations was racially homogenous. What do these discussions of racial inclusion reveal about the early years of the movement for women's suffrage in South Africa? This section will examine the early years and prior history leading up to the establishment of the WEL to show how opinions of suffrage leaders were divided on how to present and campaign for their cause.

The Women's Enfranchisement League (WEL), established locally in 1902 in Durban by Henry and Oona Ancketill, was the first organization specific to women's suffrage in South Africa with local branches expanding across South Africa in the following years. Though the WEL was the first organization working specifically for women's suffrage in South Africa, earlier women's organizations had been engaging with the question of suffrage since the 1890s. In 1895, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), a global organization which had established branches in South Africa in 1889, began a franchise department that was focused on gaining women's suffrage. The organization's argument for campaigning for women's vote was that the enfranchisement of women would bring an opportunity for their members to vote on societal issues like temperance, and thus improve the society in which they lived. The WCTU was composed mainly of white, English-speaking, middle-class women, and their idea of

women's enfranchisement was along those lines. Though their suffrage branch was only the precursor to the organized suffrage movement, the origin of the movement being in this specific group reveals the trajectory that the women's suffrage movement would take by moving through circles of civically involved English-speaking women.<sup>1</sup>

The WEL's expansion in the years following its 1902 establishment saw the movement for women's suffrage begin in earnest. Founders Henry and Oona Ancketill were a married couple who were previously involved with the women's suffrage movement in England and wanted to bring the movement to South Africa.<sup>2</sup> As with the WCTU, the WEL was an organization led by white, English-speaking, middle-class women who were interested in being civically involved. Because of the connections of leaders such as the Ancketills and the political connections of South Africa at the time, the organization was heavily tied to the suffrage movement in England, which particularly encouraged support of English-speaking women in South Africa. English-speaking women also tended to live in more urban areas and make up the middle and upper classes, and many were involved in women's reform groups, which aided their ability to participate in the movement. The English majority alienated both native African and Afrikaner women, who operated in different spheres from English-speaking women. Afrikaner women tended to live in more rural areas and, in the aftermath of the South African War, were separated from English-speaking society. African women experienced racial segregation and tended to be more concerned with political movements within their own community. Because of these divisions, the early years of the women's suffrage movement were dominated by white, English-speaking women.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Walker, *The Women's Suffrage Movement of South Africa*, (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1979), 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 25.

The emerging question of women's suffrage was taking place in a broader context of discussions over racial suffrage in the country. The question of the "Native franchise," whether native South Africans should be granted the right to vote, was being discussed in the same years. South African politics were preoccupied with this question, and these individual issues in South Africa led to women's suffrage not being a large focus in the country, despite movements for women's suffrage working around the world, notably in England. In all provinces of South Africa other than the Cape, suffrage was granted along racial lines, with white men being the only voters. The Cape had a racially inclusive franchise, based instead on property qualifications. The property qualifications allowed a very small percentage of black South Africans to vote and a slightly larger percentage of Coloureds.<sup>3</sup> Not only were these differences discussed and debated in women's suffrage circles in the early years, but the question of women's suffrage overall was also viewed as insignificant and unimportant when compared to the controversial issue of the Native franchise. The years of the emerging women's suffrage movement unfolded in this context of growing segregation, as I discuss more deeply in section 3.

Though the women establishing organizations to work for their own enfranchisement were white, the questions of race that entrenched South African society permeated the groups. One early suffragist, Olive Schreiner, saw the two questions of women's and native enfranchisement as inseparable. Schreiner, an author, early feminist, and founding member of the Cape WEL, had been engaging with the question of women's place in South African society since the publication of her first book, *Story of an African Farm*, in 1883. Schreiner served as the first vice-president for the Cape branch of the WEL and was seen by its members as an important

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<sup>3</sup> The designation "Coloured" refers to the population of individuals who are not members of a specific ethnic group but are instead descended from a mixture of ethnicities that inhabit the Cape. They were designated as non-white while remaining outside a specific ethnicity or language group.

voice in the movement because of her earlier work, as well as her many connections with the suffrage movement in the United Kingdom, notably through her friendship with Frederick and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, who were British suffrage leaders. Schreiner was concerned with the racial implications of women's suffrage and believed that suffrage should only be campaigned for if it was inclusive of all women, regardless of race. She saw women's suffrage as a step toward universal suffrage. This radical view put her at odds with other suffragists, and, as Cheryl Walker points out, she was both a major member of the movement, and yet stood apart from the campaign for women's suffrage.<sup>4</sup>

Olive Schreiner's letters written to fellow suffrage leaders reveal her opinions on the matter of women's enfranchisement and the connection of race. They pose questions of the franchise on racial terms and exhibit Schreiner's radical opinions on racial inclusion and the importance of using women's suffrage to help, not hinder, voting rights for native Africans. Though Schreiner was on the radical side of the beliefs in enfranchisement of all South Africans, her letters reveal early discussions of race in the movement more broadly, as well as what could have been if the women's suffrage movement had chosen to campaign for the vote inclusive of native African women.

In a letter to Julia Solly, a fellow suffrage leader in the Cape Town WEL, in March 1907, Schreiner clearly states her desire for the women's suffrage movement to be open to all races. In the letter, Schreiner accepts the position as vice president of the suffrage society, the Women's Enfranchisement League. She praises the creation of the new women's organization, stating that a woman's suffrage society "knowing nothing of party or religious or race differences and

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<sup>4</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 19-21; and Helen Dampier, "'Going on with our little movement in the hum drum-way which alone is possible in a land like this:' Olive Schreiner and suffrage networks in Britain and South Africa, 1905-1913.," *Women's History Review* 25, Issue 4 (2016).

working solely for woman's enfranchisement is exactly what we should have at present."

Schreiner understands that other women's organizations were working for suffrage but sees them as being divided in their efforts, since they all had a goal broader than suffrage. She states her concern with women's suffrage becoming a topic divided along party lines and encourages Solly to make sure it is kept separate from any other political motivations. She concludes her letter by discussing a separate political topic, reform, but draws them together in stating that she sees the granting of women's suffrage as "only the first step" towards total emancipation of women.<sup>5</sup>

Schreiner pulls the question of women's enfranchisement into the broader realm of politics in South Africa and does not place limitations of racial division or political division found in South African society on the cause for suffrage. For Schreiner, women's suffrage is not an end result, but a steppingstone towards women's emancipation and racial equality.

Schreiner continues to defend her opinions to Solly in a letter following in May 1907. She reiterates the importance of keeping political party and religion out of the movement for suffrage by clarifying that the Women's Christian Temperance Movement should not be involved in the Women's Enfranchisement League. Schreiner believes that Christianity and Temperance are issues that "have nothing to do with woman as woman" and that mixing the issues would discriminate against members of other religions or non-religious members such as herself. She states her desire to have an organization "to fight simply & solely for the emancipation of woman from sex disabilities," and that their only question should be "Are you a woman who desires the doing away with sex disabilities?" Schreiner specifies that there should

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<sup>5</sup> Olive Schreiner to Julia Solly, 26 March 1907, University of Cape Town Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=99&letterid=5>

be no division based on political views or who members support politically, but instead there should be an organization and movement focused solely on women's enfranchisement.<sup>6</sup>

Schreiner's opinions on the openness of emerging women's suffrage groups not only applied to how the organization operated, but also to the position of the leaders. She saw leaders as important in keeping the movement focused on suffrage and suffrage alone. In a letter to a fellow suffragist Caroline Murray in 1907, Schreiner discusses her views on who should lead the organization, stating her support for Murray being the president. Schreiner believes that the "President ought not to be a woman, say like myself," who causes too much stir in politics. She also disagrees with Irene MacFayden, the WEL's first president, serving in that role because of her involvement with the Loyal Ladies League, a women's organization not specific to suffrage.<sup>7</sup> Schreiner wants the president to be entirely devoted to the cause of women's suffrage, able to balance political parties and appeal to all, and understanding of the need of suffrage for all women, not dependent on race, because "Even the question of woman's emancipation comes second" to the question of native African rights.<sup>8</sup>

Though Schreiner's views were radical when it came to racial inclusion, we can use them to understand the context of the emerging women's suffrage movement. How did racial inclusion and political unity, mentioned with such emphasis in these early letters from Schreiner, play out in the following years as the movement expanded? Did other suffragists feel as Schreiner did on the issue? Schreiner's letters reveal the larger conflicts between races in South African society,

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<sup>6</sup> Olive Schreiner to Julia Solly, 7 May 1907, University of Cape Town Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=99&letterid=12>

<sup>7</sup> Olive Schreiner to Caroline Murray, 4 July 1907, University of Cape Town Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=99&letterid=18>

<sup>8</sup> Olive Schreiner to Caroline Murray, 9 December 1907, University of Cape Town Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=99&letterid=33>

notably between white and black South Africans, but also touch on the divisions present between English-speaking and Afrikaner South Africans.

The emergence of the South African women's suffrage movement in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of a movement that would hold importance for many South African women. The suffrage movement, however, was overshadowed by and entrenched in the racial divisions permeating South African society. Though women's suffrage was an issue that many South Africans felt strongly about, women were not the only South Africans disenfranchised at the start of the century. The establishment of women's suffrage organizations occurred at a time of division over racial suffrage, and the movement itself reveals patterns of racial divisions that can be used to examine the broader society of South Africa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **II. "On the same evil & rotten basis"<sup>9</sup>: Shifts toward a racialized campaign, 1911-1930**

The years following the emergence of local women's suffrage leagues saw the suffrage movement expand in circles of middle-class, English-speaking women. The creation of a national suffrage organization in 1911 marked the beginning of a more formally organized movement. Though the emergence of a national organization might have resulted in a greater unity between the women of South Africa, the opposite occurred. The women's suffrage movement started to move further from campaigning for all South African women and more

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<sup>9</sup> Olive Schreiner to Mimmie Murray, 3 November 1912, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.  
<https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=45&letterid=71>

toward campaigning exclusively for white women, despite English-speaking women remaining the majority and numbers of Afrikaner women in suffrage societies remaining low. The 1910s also saw the passage of several acts that further disenfranchised native Africans and segregated South African society, as well as resistance movements occurring amongst women in native African communities. The tandem forces of campaigning for the enfranchisement of white women and the repression of their black counterparts marked the years leading up to the 1930 decision for women's suffrage.

Though local women's suffrage leagues had been operating in the country since 1902, the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 prompted a push toward a national organization to encompass women's suffrage across the country. Instigating this was the 1911 visit of Carrie Chapman-Catt and Aletta Jacobs to the country. Chapman-Catt, the well-known American suffrage leader, and Jacobs, a Dutch suffragist, were both leaders in the International Women's Suffrage Association, or the IWSA. Their tour of South Africa was aimed at both galvanizing the women of the country to organize into a national movement and appealing to the government on the issue of women's suffrage. Olive Schreiner was a large proponent of the visit, due to her close relationship with Aletta Jacobs and her personal connections with other suffrage leaders overseas. She saw the visit as an opportunity for South African suffrage leaders to broaden their sense of the movement occurring worldwide and gain valuable connections with women working toward similar goals.<sup>10</sup>

Chapman-Catt and Jacobs spent eleven weeks touring the country, meeting with political representatives, including Prime Minister Louis Botha, future prime minister Jan Smuts, as well

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<sup>10</sup> Dampier, "Going on with our little movement," 541.

as members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and local suffrage leaders. Chapman-Catt included details of their meeting with Jan Smuts in her diary, who she described as "the chief and dominating mind in the Cabinet," recording that he said he "had no objection to women's suffrage."<sup>11</sup> However, Chapman-Catt and Jacobs recognized the challenges racial divisions in South Africa brought to the movement for women's suffrage. Their two backgrounds were meant to appeal to both English-speaking women and Afrikaner women, who they recognized as being divided because of ethnic differences. Though they were deliberate with their appeal to both groups, including some majority-Afrikaner towns on their tour, the organization for women's suffrage that emerged from the tour was once again primarily centered in communities of educated, urban, English-speaking women.<sup>12</sup>

In 1911, the same year that Chapman-Catt and Jacobs toured the country, the Women's Enfranchisement Union was founded. This was the first national organization founded for women's suffrage. It emerged from the earlier established Women's Enfranchisement Leagues, organizing many of the local leagues under one national constitution. The WEAU encouraged the cause of suffrage in various ways, from organizing an annual conference, to mailing periodical magazines to its members. The establishment of a national suffrage society came with the challenge of stating on what terms its members were campaigning for suffrage. The WEAU included in their objectives that they would work to establish women's suffrage "on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men." Their campaign being "on the same terms as men" meant that the enfranchisement of women would have been based on race – enfranchising

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<sup>11</sup> Carrie Chapman-Catt Diaries 1911-1912, Wisconsin Historical Society, 119.  
<https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll9/id/929/>

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Gaitskell, "The Imperial Tie: Obstacle or Asset for South Africa's Women Suffragists before 1930?," *South African Historical Journal* 47, Issue 1 (2002): 7.

exclusively white women – in all of South Africa, with the exception of the Cape, where it was based on property qualifications. It was not until 1928 that the WEAU officially made the appeal to accept suffrage exclusively for white women. Despite the generalization of the terms on which they were campaigning, the organization remained majority white, with no participation from black African women. Though the terms officially stated that they would campaign for the expansion of the native vote in the Cape, many of its members were focused on gaining the vote for themselves only, not for black African women.<sup>13</sup>

Though the formation of the WEAU in 1911 unified many of the local suffrage leagues into a national whole, the Cape Town WEL, of which Olive Schreiner was a member, remained outside of the national organization.<sup>14</sup> The WEL did not remain untouched by the same racial shift that was present in the WEAU, however. The trends occurring in the national organization and the country at large were happening within the Cape WEL. The women involved in the Cape WEL were more concerned with gaining the vote for themselves than for their native neighbors. This can particularly be seen in the formal resignation of Olive Schreiner from the organization in March of 1912. In the months leading up to her resignation, Schreiner wrote letters to her colleagues in the movement, reminding them of her stance against racial suffrage and raging against the league for their opposition to the universal vote. In one such note written in the months prior to her resignation, she simply and forcefully states her opinion on the issue. She assures the reader that “It was not a personal matter” that made her leave the society, instead it was because “The women of the Cape Colony all women of the Cape Colony” was why she

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<sup>13</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 29.

joined the suffrage society in the first place. Schreiner's short statement solidifies her support of a non-racial franchise.<sup>15</sup>

The message from Schreiner was written on a pamphlet circulated by the WEL, stating the objectives of the society. Their stated objective was, "To promote an intelligent interest in the question of the political enfranchisement of Women in Cape Colony and advocate the granting of the vote to them on the same terms as men." Schreiner's note purposefully draws attention to the statement of granting the vote on the same terms as men, which would have meant women's suffrage would be granted based on property qualifications, enfranchising a small number of native women instead of excluding them based on race.<sup>16</sup> In another letter to a friend in late 1912, Schreiner discussed the state of suffrage in the Transvaal and Orange Free State that was mentioned in a speech. She called it "the terrible manhood suffrage" and explained that she could not support it because of the exclusion it created by only enfranchising some citizens, presumably white men. She complained that she could not add women's votes to suffrage there, because it would be "on the same evil & rotten basis." For Schreiner, gaining suffrage for women was only valuable if "women" included South African women of all races.<sup>17</sup>

While the English-speaking majority were grappling with the terms of their campaign, other South African women were not absent on the issue of suffrage or disengaged politically. Both Afrikaner women and native African women were involved in either organizations or political protests in the 1900s and 1910s. Unlike their English counterparts, these organizations and movements were not trying to appeal to the entire female population of South Africa.

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<sup>15</sup> Olive Schreiner handwritten note, January-March 1912, National Library of South Africa, Special Collections, Cape Town, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

<https://www.oliveschreiner.org/vre?view=collections&colid=65&letterid=28>

<sup>16</sup> Olive Schreiner handwritten note, January-March 1912.

<sup>17</sup> Olive Schreiner to Mimmie Murray, 3 November 1912.

Instead, they targeted specific ethnic groups and the problems they faced as women within these identities.

Afrikaner women faced many challenges participating in women's suffrage groups in the early years of the movement. They tended to live in rural areas, were under the influence of a more patriarchal culture, and were disinterested in a movement made up of largely English-speaking women – with whom they had recently been at war. Though they were not active in the formation of the suffrage movement in large numbers, Afrikaner women did establish social and political groups within their culture and communities at the same time as the suffrage movement was progressing, and often engaged with the question of women's suffrage through these organizations. Two such groups were the Afrikaans Christian Women's Society (ACVV), founded in 1904, and the Women's National Party (NVP), founded in 1915. Both societies provided a place for Afrikaner women to organize, and both societies were in some way involved with suffrage.

The ACVV, a social aid organization detailed in an article by Marijke du Toit, was founded out of a desire to provide aid for poorer Afrikaner people in the wake of the South African War. The organization was closely linked to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and focused on the emerging idea of a separate Afrikaner nation. The women involved initially organized to provide relief to their fellow Afrikaner people in the wake of the war and were firmly grounded in the ideology of motherhood. An emerging idea in Afrikaner society at this time was that of the *volksmoeder*, or “mother of the nation.” The concept defined women as mothers, confining them to their role in the home-sphere, while also reinventing them as “a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom,” as Elsabe Brink explains. The ACVV embraced the role of women as mothers, which was the prevalent expectation in Afrikaner society and the

beliefs of the DRC, while extending the sphere of women's work through this ideology to include political participation and the formulation of social policy.<sup>18</sup>

Working in villages, towns, and cities, the organization engaged with redefining women's place in the ideology of nationalism that was emerging in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to responding to the increase of poverty in Afrikaner communities after the war, the organization also had stated claims of promoting the use of Dutch – which became Afrikaans – in schools, homes, and public, and thus supporting “pure Afrikaans” and “language and people.” Ideas of the emergence of Afrikaners as their own ethnic group and the formation of an Afrikaner language in the wake of the South African War aided the cause of the ACVV. The early 1900s saw the deliberate attempt to create a unified language for Afrikaner people. It was believed that the Afrikaner language needed to be standardized, to not only create unity in its use, but to keep the language from devolving into a mixture of Dutch and English. The ACVV's objectives of maintaining the purity of Afrikaans supported this goal of creating a national unity for Afrikaners.<sup>19</sup>

Though the ACVV was heavily involved in nationalism and the Church, its members also pushed the boundaries for what women were allowed to do. Du Toit explains that Afrikaner women became involved with the ACVV simultaneously as the WEL was being established in the Cape. The ACVV formally positioned itself against the new claims to women's suffrage

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<sup>18</sup> Marijke du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism: *Volkmoeders* and the ACVV, 1904-1929” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, No. 1 (2003): 155, 160-162; and Elsabe Brink, “Man-Made Woman: Gender, class, and the ideology of the *Volkmoeder*,” in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1990): 273.

<sup>19</sup> du Toit, “The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism” 155, 160-162; and Isabel Hofmeyr, “Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902-1924,” in *The Politics of Race, Class, and Nationalism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa*, ed. Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, (London and New York: Longman, 1987): 105.

emerging in local leagues, despite the fact that they became involved in a dispute with the DRC for being a female led, independent organization. Though the society did not support suffrage, its members nevertheless pushed the boundaries of women's place. Some Afrikaner women involved in the ACVV did support women's suffrage, such as Maria Elizabeth Rothmann, an ACVV member who believed it was only a matter of time before women's suffrage was granted. Rothmann herself aligned with Olive Schreiner in many of her beliefs on women's suffrage, despite their differing ethnic backgrounds. Though the ACVV was officially against suffrage and worked only in the Afrikaner sphere of society, the examples of women mobilizing reveal that Afrikaner women were engaging with the question of suffrage, despite their lack of involvement with the suffrage leagues of English-speaking women.<sup>20</sup>

Though the ACVV was a leading women's organization in Afrikaner society at the time, it was not the only place Afrikaner women were organizing. The 1910s also saw the emergence of women's parties aligned with Afrikaner nationalist politics. The Women's National Party, founded in 1915 just a decade after the ACVV, was organized to work alongside the Nationalist political party led by J.B.M. Herzog. Similarly, local leagues of Afrikaner women organized to work in tandem with emerging Afrikaner nationalist politics in the Cape and elsewhere. While these organizations were begun to aid the cause of Afrikaner politics more broadly, unlike the ACVV, the women involved shifted to support women's suffrage. By the 1920s, the Women's Nationalist Party in the Cape was working on a pro-suffrage stance, which encouraged women's suffrage, but nevertheless maintained their separation with women's suffrage leagues led by English-speaking women.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> du Toit, "The Domesticity of Afrikaner Nationalism," 155, 169-171.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Vincent, "A Cake of Soap: The *Volksmoeder* Ideology and Afrikaner Women's Campaign for the Vote," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 32, Issue 1 (1999): 7-8.

The reason for the Women's National Party maintaining its separation with the larger women's suffrage movement was in part based on their concerns for the Afrikaner vote. The Nationalist Party was not supportive of the 1930 decision because, despite aligning with their stance of not enfranchising black African women, it enfranchised a large portion of educated, urban, English-speaking women who were prepared to use their right to vote. The Afrikaner women were concerned that since Afrikaners tended to live in more rural areas and be less involved with politics overall, the Afrikaner women enfranchised would not utilize the right to vote, which would lead to a much larger percentage of English-speakers voting that would hinder the Afrikaner Nationalist Party.<sup>22</sup>

While the ethnic divisions between Afrikaner and English-speaking women were evident in their separate organizations, native African women not only remained outside of these ethnic-specific suffrage organizations, but outside of women's suffrage as a whole. They were not organizing or campaigning for suffrage as women, but they were, however, organizing politically in the same era that the women's suffrage groups were working. One major example of the political participation of black African women were the anti-pass protests that occurred in Bloemfontein in the Orange Free State in 1913. Cherryl Walker mentions these pass protests in her argument, explaining that they were noteworthy at the time and were even mentioned by a white suffragist in a women's magazine as being important to the movement.<sup>23</sup> Though this mention by white suffragists is one way to look at the pass protests, examining the major protest movement that occurred can illuminate African women's opinions on women's suffrage and explain their lack of involvement in the movement.

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<sup>22</sup> Vincent, "A Cake of Soap," 8.

<sup>23</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 31.

The 1913 protests erupted because pass laws began to affect women's lives. The definition of pass laws in South Africa varied throughout location and time, but they functioned as a way for governments to control the black labor population in a given area. The laws were a coercive way for the government to hold power over black workers and maintain their labor force. As Julia Well explains, pass laws made it a crime for black Africans to be unemployed in urban or mining areas. Since the laws were engineered to affect the workforce, women were often not the targets of these laws. In a few instances, pass laws were extended to affect women's sphere of home and work. These were the situations that saw women's organization against the laws, including in the 1913 protests. Black women were, at the time, primarily homemakers and mothers, but they were engaged in work that was operated from their homes. This often included housekeeping or providing services from their homes, such as sewing. Though they were engaged with employment like their male counterparts, their employment was meshed with the domestic sphere they were a part of, and as a result was not impacted by pass laws imposed on industry.<sup>24</sup>

Though women in Bloemfontein were required to have a residential pass which affected their ability to reside in the urban area, before 1913 they were not required to have a pass for their employment. This changed in 1913 when the government began requiring employment passes for women, severely restricting their ability to work and operate businesses from their homes. The goal of these passes was to coerce women into roles of domestic service instead. Because the laws began to impinge on their lives, women resisted by staging the Bloemfontein protest. Large numbers of women refused to carry passes, resulting in their arrests and

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<sup>24</sup> Julia C. Wells, *We Now Demand!: The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Press, 1993): 4-5, 9.

subsequent overflow of the jails to the point that no more arrests could be made. The protests were successful in that women's spheres of work were removed from the pass laws, and they were able to return to their occupations unhindered.<sup>25</sup> The successful end of the Bloemfontein protests saw the end of black women's political resistance in this particular location and era, underscoring the trend that African women were less concerned with gaining the rights their white counterparts were organizing for. As Walker states in her monograph, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*, African women were more concerned with maintaining their rights as Africans than with extending their rights as women, a theme that is evident in these protests.<sup>26</sup> Though the organization of women in Bloemfontein created change for themselves, the women's suffrage movement led by their white counterparts remained outside their realm of activism.

While English-speaking women were organizing national suffrage organizations and debating the terms on which they were campaigning, Afrikaner women were becoming politically involved through women's organizations, and native African women were defending their rights as Africans. The divisions which occurred in the South African women's suffrage movement and in women's groups more broadly in the 1910s and 1920s were indicative of the societal divisions present in South Africa. The aspirations of Olive Schreiner of establishing a women's suffrage organization "knowing nothing of party or religious or race differences and working solely for woman's enfranchisement" was exactly what did not occur in South Africa in this era.<sup>27</sup> These years saw the expansion of the movement and its emergence on the global stage, but it came along with a shift toward suffrage exclusively for white women. The women leading the movement were English-speaking women, open to all in theory, but excluding their

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<sup>25</sup> Wells, *We Now Demand*, 29-31; and Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 31-32.

<sup>26</sup> Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991): 20.

<sup>27</sup> Olive Schreiner to Julia Solly, 26 March 1907.

Afrikaner and African counterparts. The divisions between the work and political engagement of English-speaking, Afrikaner, and native African women left divisions in the cause for women's suffrage. The polarized society of South Africa created subsets of women who worked for their own rights, within their ethnic context, but remained separate instead of creating a powerful unified movement.

### **III. Women's Suffrage in the Context of Segregation, to 1930**

While the cause for women's suffrage faced internal divisions brought by ethnic differences in the campaign for enfranchisement, the country of South Africa was experiencing a growing racial divide. Though the women's suffrage movement worked toward the enfranchisement of women and the campaigns launched by members of suffrage organizations furthered this goal, the 1930 Women's Enfranchisement Act was ultimately granted by the government to further their goals of racial segregation and encourage the suppression of the rights of native Africans. It came alongside other actions the government was taking to encourage racial segregation and suppression.

The 1930 Women's Enfranchisement Act provided for the "registration of women as voters" and for their capacity to be "nominated, elected, and to sit and vote as senators, Members of the House of Assembly or of Provincial Councils." Women who were "of or over the age of twenty-one years" and not convicted of crimes in the Union were eligible. Additionally, it defines "woman" as "a woman who is wholly of European parentage, extraction, or descent."

The women the act enfranchised reflected the membership of the movement by being of

European descent. Though the act was the culmination of the decades long struggle led by women for the vote, it ultimately became a tool for the government to increase the percentage of white voters.<sup>28</sup> The act was unique in that it enfranchised women and originated in the movement, but it was one of many measures the government took in the 1910s through 1930s that increased racial segregation and suppressed African voices. The white women involved allowed their rights to be used to further this goal.

The Segregation Era of South Africa originated in the early 1900s, around the time women's suffrage advocates were forming the movement, though segregation politics did not become prevalent until the 1920s. The 1910s were not devoid of segregation laws, however. Territorial segregation emerged as an idea in 1905 in a paper presented by J. Howard Pim, a South African intellectual who became involved in politics and pioneered segregationist ideas. The paper argued that native Africans should live in designated territorial reserves because they would be easier for the government to control if they were concentrated in one native community, rather than if they were spread through the population. Arguments that followed focused on segregation as a way to preserve the races. The South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC) published the 1903-5 Report, which outlined territorial segregation and the establishment of reserves.<sup>29</sup>

The report evolved into the 1913 Native Lands Act, which took the outline produced by the SANAC for territorial segregation and put it into law, providing segregation. This act established reserves for native African groups to ensure territorial segregation. Though positively

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<sup>28</sup> *Women's Enfranchisement Act, 1930* in Cheryl Walker's *The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*, 110-111.

<sup>29</sup> Saul Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36* (London: Macmillan, 1989): 24-26, 5.

presented as a way for the various people groups of South Africa to live in their own locations, it set the native population at a disadvantage by designating their reserves to be situated in areas that were unsuitable for living and farming.

The Native Lands Act sought to restrict native peoples to the designated reserves. This is evident in a resolution issued against the act a few years later by the South African Native National Congress, an organization which later became the African National Congress. The resolution states that the act failed to “carry out the alleged principle of territorial separation of the races on an equitable basis” and emphasizes the unsuitability of the land given to native reserves. The SANNC believes that the act is “one-sided and inconsistent” with fair government and declares their “unshakable opposition” to the act. The act reveals not only the full story of the affects brought by the it, but also the opinions of native South Africans on the subject.<sup>30</sup>

Though the Native Lands Act was one of the first segregation laws to go into effect, it did not affect South Africa nationally. This was because of a lack of support for the act, which ultimately resulted in it being applied inconsistently across the nation. Though not entirely successful in creating or maintaining segregation, the act did serve as the start of the Segregation Era, and it reveals that the government was beginning to search for ways to further divide the native and white populations.<sup>31</sup>

Though the 1913 Natives Land Act marked the beginning of segregation policy, the Segregation Era did not begin in earnest until after the first World War. The measures

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<sup>30</sup> “Resolution against the Natives Land Act 1913 and the Report of the Natives Land Commission,” by the South African Native National Congress, October 2, 1916 in *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964, Volume I: Protest and Hope, 1882-1934* ed. by Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (Hoover Institution Press: Stanford, 1972): 86-88.

<sup>31</sup> Dubow, *Racial Segregation*, 3-4.

implemented by the government were in response to the growing industrialization and work opportunities in South Africa. The 1920 Native Affairs Act took the beginning of segregation brought in by the Land Act and the earlier 1911 Mines and Works Act – which discriminated against African workers – and firmly established job discrimination and territorial separation. The legislation occurring both in the 1910s and 1920s began working toward segregation, even though a unified plan for segregation policies would not come until a few years later with the arrival of the Pact party into government. The measures implemented reveal the context in which the organization for women’s suffrage was established.<sup>32</sup>

The women’s suffrage movement was working within these segregationist policies, and their activities reveal that they participated in racializing their cause by utilizing the rhetoric of race to argue for their rights as white women. As Pamela Scully states, the “appeals for women’s suffrage, as well as the ultimate ‘success’ of the suffrage movement, were also deeply entangled with the colonial condition.”<sup>33</sup> The women’s suffrage movement was not only occurring at the same time as segregation, but it encouraged racial divisions through the arguments and language used to support their cause. Because the suffrage movement consisted of white, English-speaking women, many of whom were already engaged in reform groups, they viewed their role as potential voters as a place for reform and the upliftment of the black population. The suffrage movement was focused on white women, but the context of their debates were the racial views of South African society, which the suffragists’ view of the black population needing their help and reform were a part of. Suffragists began to use the idea of motherhood to argue their place. Much

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<sup>32</sup> Dubow, *Racial Segregation*, 39

<sup>33</sup> Pamela Scully, “White Maternity and Black Infancy: The rhetoric of race in the South African women’s suffrage movement, 1895-1930,” In *Women’s Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race*, ed. Ian Christopher Fletcher, Philippa Levine, and Laura E. Nym Mayhall. (London: Routledge, 2000): 68.

like the Afrikaner's term of *volksmoeder*, women's role as mothers qualified them to care about political issues. They utilized their metaphor of motherhood to further degrade their black counterparts, viewing them as infants who needed the voices and votes of white women to help them.<sup>34</sup>

While segregation in South African society was growing in these aspects, the voting rights that the white women's organizations were campaigning for were also being threatened for native Africans in the Cape. Voting rights in the Cape were based on property qualifications instead of race. This resulted in a percentage of property owning, non-white men being able to vote. The non-racial franchise qualifications of the Cape frustrated the segregationist government in the 1920s, because black and Coloured voters made up about a fifth of the total votes in the Cape. The campaign for women's suffrage was in the center of this debate, because if suffrage was granted to women on the same terms as men, a small percentage of property-owning Coloured and black African women would gain the vote.<sup>35</sup>

J.B.M. Herzog, the prime minister, opposed women's suffrage in the 1920s on the basis of the Cape franchise. If women were given the vote on the same terms as men, some non-white women would be enfranchised, and the percentage of non-white voters that he was trying to lower would be raised. Herzog's goal of lowering the percentage of native votes and disenfranchising non-white residents in the Cape was in line with the policies held in the rest of South Africa, where a racial bar was used for voting rights. Women's suffrage was largely ignored by the government in the 1920s because it would have raised this percentage, and it was seen as being less important than the major debates being had over whether the Cape franchise

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<sup>34</sup> Scully, "White Maternity and Black Infancy," 72-73, 75-77.

<sup>35</sup> Vincent, "A Cake of Soap," 3.

would be changed. The Pact party's rise to power in 1924 solidified these racial policies and further pushed women's suffrage away from the focus.<sup>36</sup>

It was ultimately the shift of the terms of women's suffrage that enabled them to win. By shifting to suffrage on the same terms as men outside of the Cape, that is, racially exclusive terms, the women's suffrage movement found new support in the government. The suffrage of white women provided a way for Herzog's and the Pact party's plans of abolishing the Cape franchise to begin in earnest. By allowing only women of European descent to vote nationally, the percentage of non-white voters in the Cape was lowered. The problem that Herzog saw in providing the vote to women on the same terms as men nationally was solved because of the clause that the vote would only go to white women and thus provide for the further exclusion of non-white women. Because of the terms of the Women's Enfranchisement Act, it became a law much like those being passed as a part of the segregationist policies. Though extending voting rights to white women was seen as a success, in reality the act contributed to disenfranchising many more South Africans on the basis on race.

The tandem forces discussing both women's suffrage and native suffrage can be seen in issues of the *Cape Times* newspaper in the 1920s and 1930s. Though focused on the Cape locality, the newspaper reveals the debates surrounding both women's suffrage nationally and the native franchise in the Cape, often placing them in the context of one another. An issue from February 1930, just a few months before the Women's Enfranchisement Bill was passed, discussed that it directly affected the debate on the native franchise. The act was "closely related to the general question of Native franchise ... To give the vote to women would immediately

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<sup>36</sup> Walker, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, 44.

reduce the proportion of Native to European voters.” The goals of the Pact party in supporting women’s suffrage as a way to further disenfranchise Africans were evident and publicized in these papers.<sup>37</sup>

An April 1930 issue of the *Cape Times* covers a protest held by Coloured South Africans in the Cape who were protesting the Coloured Persons Bill, the Women’s Enfranchisement Bill, and the Native Representation Bill. This protest, occurring in the months while the Women’s Enfranchisement Bill was being successfully passed, reveals the reception of white women’s enfranchisement outside of suffrage circles. The Coloured protesters recognized that the bill represented the first racial designation for voting in the Cape and believed “that the Bills would only lead the non-European section to discontent, distrust, and strife” if they took effect. The protests reported are important to understanding that the women’s suffrage movement was working within racial segregation and was not widely supported by non-white South Africans.<sup>38</sup>

Though the 1930 decision ended the women’s suffrage campaign, the politics of suffrage and segregation surrounding it continued with the 1936 Representation of Natives Act, which solidified the suppression of black and Coloured individuals in the Cape. The 1936 act removed black and Coloured voters from the common role they had been part of in the Cape, and placed them on a communal role, meaning that they were limited in their votes to a set ballot of candidates. This act came on the heels of the Women’s Enfranchisement Act and stood in direct contrast to it by limiting the franchise, while also being in support of the earlier act by strengthening the white vote. The Natives Act was a part of Herzog’s plan of segregation that he

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<sup>37</sup> *The Cape Times*, February 14, 1930. National Library of South Africa Digital Collections. <https://cdm21048.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p21048coll53/id/3570/rec/1>

<sup>38</sup> *The Cape Times*, April 18, 1930. National Library of South Africa Digital Collections. <https://cdm21048.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p21048coll53/id/1966/rec/20>

had been working toward for a decade. These two acts issued by the government in the 1930s define what the segregationists wanted to accomplish regarding suffrage. The vote was extended to white women, but at the cost of limiting the franchise of non-white South Africans.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusion

The 1930 passage of the Women's Enfranchisement Act marked an end to the women's suffrage movement. After the passage of the act, the Women's Enfranchisement Association disbanded, releasing the last issue of their publication, *The Flashlight*, in August of 1930.<sup>40</sup> Their goal of gaining the franchise for white women had been met. Though successful for the women involved in the movement, the early goals of women like Olive Schreiner, who wanted a non-racial franchise for the women of South Africa, were thwarted. When the 1930 bill was passed and celebrations were organized by the WEAU and others, Olive Schreiner's widow, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, requested that her name be removed from the celebrations. He stated that Schreiner would not have celebrated a bill that enfranchised women at the expense of racial segregation, a fact that is obvious given her resignation from the movement in 1912.<sup>41</sup>

White women who met the other qualifications of the bill were able to vote following its passage, but it would be over 60 years before native African women were granted the same right. The women's suffrage movement of South Africa cannot be celebrated as a granting and

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<sup>39</sup> Dubow, *Racial Segregation*, 133-134.

<sup>40</sup> *The Cape Times*, August 1, 1930. National Library of South Africa Digital Collections. <https://cdm21048.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p21048coll53/id/2181/rec/152>

<sup>41</sup> Olive Schreiner handwritten note, January-March 1912.

extending of rights as suffrage bills should be. The enfranchisement of women was directly tied to the disenfranchisement of black Africans which would define South African society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The South African women's suffrage campaign was a powerful political and social movement consisting of women heavily involved in reformist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These women ultimately allowed themselves and their cause to be used by the government for the segregation and suppression of African people. The complex movement presents the specific challenges of South Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the ongoing racial divisions resulting from South Africa's colonial condition. The object of the Cape WEL in the 1910s was to "promote an intelligent interest in the question of the political enfranchisement of Women in Cape Colony and advocate the granting of the vote to them on the same terms as men."<sup>42</sup> As Olive Schreiner pointed out, this object included all of the women in the Cape Colony. The suffrage movement fell short of this original motive, choosing instead to participate in the racial politics of the era. The movement which contained potential to expand the franchise in South Africa came to a predictable but disappointing end by shifting to align with segregationist policies and become a tool for white supremacy.

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<sup>42</sup> Olive Schreiner handwritten note, January-March 1912.

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