

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Sophie Rose

Interviewee: Sophie Rose

Interviewer: Caroline Pascoe

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[00:00:01]

PASCOE: This is an interview with Sophie Rose by Caroline Pascoe with Kati Murphy recording for the Women's Information Service History Project at the State Library for South Australia on Wednesday 6th December 2017. Welcome Sophie. Can you give us a brief overview of when and where you were born and grew up?

ROSE: I was born in 1956 in Adelaide to parents of Greek background. My parents had migrated here in 1954, so were post-war migrants and myself and my younger sister were actually born here, but they did actually come with three sisters who were born in Greece.

PASCOE: How did you come to be working or volunteering, working you were at WIS? You started off as a paid staff member.

ROSE: At the time I'd left teaching and had actually been working in the Department of Local Government at the time that the vacancy for the position of Greek Information Officer had been advertised. I applied for the position and was successful in winning it and I commenced work as the Greek Information Officer in about October 1985. Well I was there --- I did at the time take a secondment to the Equal Opportunity Unit of the Central Agency for a period of time and then when I returned I actually worked in the policy side of the Women's Advisers Office. At that time the Women's

Advisers office had the Policy Unit and also had WIS as the service delivery to women in the community.

PASCOE: So you obtained the position as Greek Information Officer with the Women's Information Switchboard?

ROSE: Yes I did.

PASCOE: Switchboard or Service?

ROSE: It was actually called Switchboard then.

PASCOE: And where was it?

ROSE: We were located in the Institute Building in Kintore Avenue and, certainly at that time, we were open seven days a week and we worked shifts so we had, if you worked the afternoon shift, because we were open from 9 am to 9 pm at that time.

PASCOE: Seven days a week, 9 am to 9 pm?

ROSE: Yes.

PASCOE: And what would your weekly shift look like in those days? Do you remember?

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ROSE: Generally you'd have a combination of --- you might work --- generally your afternoon shifts might have been like three shifts so you might work two or three days 9 until 5. I can't actually remember exactly what the shift was and then the afternoon person usually started, I think around 4 or 5 and then worked through until 9. You'd normally have, usually like your three days of your afternoon or night shift and that included weekends, so if you worked the night shift on the weekend then you'd have, obviously you'd have your days off and your days on day shift and whatever. I can't exactly work out, remember.

PASCOE: No, but you would be working Saturdays and Sundays every so often?

ROSE: Yes, absolutely. There was a roster.

PASCOE: And you often left at 9 o'clock at night.

ROSE: Yes. We closed at 9.

PASCOE: Was there any concern about safety for women leaving at that time? Do you remember?

ROSE: That is an interesting question actually, because really at the time you were actually on your own in the building. Certainly in the room which comprised the offices of the Service and obviously when you were on your own you'd lock the door. I presume at the time there was probably security. Not to the extent that we have it now, sort of day and night, I suppose, in buildings, but yes, it wasn't, I don't think an issue that seemed to be, or have the degree of seriousness I guess in a way that it has today, which is really interesting. Might be a different sort of situation. We did have a duress button so that, and that was for any time. If someone did walk in through the doors and there was any cause to have to press the button, obviously for assistance, so we knew we had that. I've obviously got to say I think, for myself, I mean I did feel safe. It wasn't that I felt unsafe.

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PASCOE: From time to time at Women's Information Service as it is today, there are some disgruntled men who come in because they want to have their own service. You can't remember anything like that that happened then?

ROSE: Not specifically that I can remember and I'm not suggesting that it didn't happen. I am sure that it did happen. But fortunately I didn't actually experience that myself. When I started there we had, certainly particularly

during the day, obviously there were the paid workers, there were the volunteers, there was lots of activity, lots of people coming and going. People would come in and meet with you. It wasn't just the telephone service. That was the bulk of it, of course, but I often had women of Greek background who spoke very little or no English who would actually physically come in to talk to me and seek advice and assistance. Often I went to appointments to, now it's called Centrelink, but Social Security as it was back then, to virtually, I suppose act a bit as an interpreter and to some degree I suppose a bit of an advocate, depending on what the issue was. Or attend other appointments where women didn't feel confident obviously to go on their own. At that time when I was working there, we could always also use the Telephone Interpreter Service to organize, and we did, to organize interpreters so that we could assist women in the language that they needed to speak. So we'd often set up those sorts of times as well.

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When I worked there, as well, and I don't know if you know this, but the Italian Information Officer, who at the time that I was there was Luisa Sheehan. Luisa and I also had a weekly radio program on ethnic radio. So I'd go down to Byron Place I believe it was, EBI, the community radio station and really I suppose it was called "Today's Woman" and we would do programs on various, a diversity of issues affecting women's lives, whether it was to do with health, legal stuff in relation to family law, changes in the law that affected women and so on. So Luisa did hers in Italian and of course I did the program in Greek. It was a half hour program. Sometimes it might be that we were interviewing somebody in relation to some new service for women or some new, it might have been a health worker in the sort of service. At that time we had the first Women's Health Centre, Adelaide Women's Health Centre and we also worked closely with the Health Centre because the Health Centre as well had a Greek worker,

an Italian worker, who also provided a service to women of non-English speaking background, that was the term we used at that time, in relation to health services. So we had a really good relationship with the Health Centre as well. And various other centres that, I mean at that time, obviously there are many more services now, but at that time they were fairly fledgling services obviously, just as the Women's Information Switchboard was.

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PASCOE: Did you set that program up or did you continue it?

ROSE: That actually had already, and I'm assuming that that had been set up, I'm not sure from the absolute beginning of the start of the service or whether, but certainly the Greek Information Officer who'd left the service and I took that position.

PASCOE: That was someone called Nicky?

ROSE: Nicky Dimitropoulos.

PASCOE: Nicky Dimitropoulos, yes.

ROSE: She did also do the radio program as well.

PASCOE: When you started there, you started in 1985, did you start as Sophie Rose?

ROSE: No. [Laugh] I actually at the time did start as Sophie Alexiou, Alex.... in Greek. That was my married surname. And I did, a few years later decide to change my surname, translating my surname from the Greek into the English, so that's where we got Rose from.

PASCOE: And were you Sophie Rose at the Women's Information Switchboard at all or had you left before you changed it?

ROSE: By that stage, I was actually in the Women's Policy Office. So still part of the Women's Advisers Office but not actually at WIS.

PASCOE: Getting back to that, just to clarify that. You started in '85 at Women's Information Switchboard, then you were seconded and then you came back to Women's Information Switchboard.

ROSE: I didn't come back to Women's Information Switchboard, but I came back to the Women's Advisers Office. So the Women's Advisers Office had the Switchboard under its umbrella and it had the Policy Office. So when I was due to come back, I was basically offered by the Women's Adviser to come back to the Policy Office and obviously someone else had been appointed to back-fill me.

PASCOE: I'm thinking about Women's Information Service today and not too many Greek women come in, or Italian women for that matter. Did you have a lot of Greek community? Did you do anything about getting them to come in? Were you going out into the community?

ROSE: Well, yes. It's interesting I suppose. It's now where we have people migrating to Australia from different ethnicities, and when you think about it, really at that time, services to those European migrants who had come, were really limited, in particular services to women. So places like the Women's Switchboard and the Women's Health Centre were, well put it this way, word got out in the community and that's really, the major promotion just really happened by word of mouth, but things like the radio program, things like going to forums and actually speaking to women. So at the Health Centre, for example, they may have set up a particular group, so women would come along to the group and whether it was a specific area of health I'm not sure, but I do recall that there were women's groups and probably the Greek worker did have Greek women attending. So we'd often go along as well and we'd talk about various things, so a lot of that community education happened that way. It happened through the radio program and ---.

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PASCOE: Maybe just with your community too. Your family and they would know because of that I expect, and that spreads out doesn't it?

ROSE: Oh yes. Absolutely it does. Yes. That's right. I think that's really how in the main people did get to know about us.

PASCOE: So I'm thinking when you left, when you went on secondment elsewhere and you didn't actually come back, that would have left a gap for Greek women. What happened with that?

ROSE: Well it didn't actually, because fortunately that really created, I suppose, a position for someone else to come into. It wasn't ever left vacant. So another person did come in behind me to ---.

PASCOE: Who was the Greek Information Officer.

ROSE: Yes.

PASCOE: OK. We had a Greek Information Officer, an Italian Information Officer. Who was that? Do you remember?

ROSE: At the time that I was there it was Luisa Sheehan.

PASCOE: Oh it was Luisa. She was the whole time. And then the Aboriginal ---.

ROSE: Well Jo Willmot as the Aboriginal Information Officer was there when I, certainly when I started, but we also created, there was a new position created which was the Vietnamese Information Officer. So Lien Nguyen ---.

PASCOE: Nguyen

ROSE: Nguyen started in that position. And I suppose, I've honestly got to say, I eventually for myself, I did leave the service. I went on and did further study and a different career path and didn't come back to government until about ten years ago. So I haven't really kept up with what positions are there now.

PASCOE: Well things change so much, don't they?

ROSE: Yes of course.

PASCOE: Did you enjoy it? Working there?

ROSE: I did. I did very much, and also all of the women who worked there and also I include the volunteer women, so committed and really passionate and it was a fantastic working environment. It was just wonderful to go to work. You were working with a bunch of fantastic women and everyone obviously assisted everyone else, so what I didn't know I just went and asked someone else and so on. It was, it was truly a great environment and I guess also I think that, certainly at that time, women working in that environment were also empowered. So I sort of come from the feminism where information is power. And it was, really. Women being able to help other women without, I think also just felt really empowered by that and were wanting to empower women as well.

[00:18:04]

PASCOE: So would you say that was the main consideration behind all of your dealings with the women? To empower them.

ROSE: Oh, it was. I had Greek women that came to the service who were experiencing domestic violence and for a lot of women, and I'll say it, I'm sure there are a lot of women today who don't see a way out of that. I recall very well one particular woman, who at the time she didn't drive a car, didn't have a driver's licence and came to the service looking for information and assistance about how she could actually change and obviously remove herself from that situation. Well, you know, sometime later when I saw that Greek woman she was driving, she just felt her life, and she was so thankful for all of the support and assistance she'd received. Her life was so different and she was completely empowered and it was just great to see. So sometime later she'd come into the service and "I'm driving now".

PASCOE: She was a real domestic violence survivor, or domestic abuse survivor, to be more accurate, perhaps.

ROSE: She was. She was indeed. I remember at the time that I worked there as well, with the Domestic Violence Service, I know I sat on the committee as the WIS rep. for some time so, obviously the really difficult issues that people were dealing with, but despite that it was, you were doing something that had an incredible value and meaning. To be part of that was really, really great.

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PASCOE: Did you often get situations that you couldn't help? That were too disastrous and how did feel after that?

ROSE: Well look, I think there are some situations I, it's funny actually, because I am thinking about another Greek woman, who again was the victim of domestic violence and what was interesting was that she could never see herself leaving that situation because she was also very religious and believed that really, that it was going to be up to any divine intervention to help her. Despite providing information and options for her, what she wanted was almost in a way, someone to speak to her husband to say that God doesn't think that what you are doing is a good thing. You need to be looking after your wife and family. Her view was that she couldn't leave that situation because that wouldn't be right in God's eyes.

PASCOE: Because she'd committed to God in the ceremony or that sort of thing?

ROSE: Well, because she committed, it was her view that that was what was the right thing to do, culturally. I understand that because culturally a woman would get beaten, but it was not the right thing culturally to leave that situation because she would be, well, if you look at it practically a lot of women who were dependent on their husbands because they were home with the children and raising the children, they didn't have economic

independence. So certainly that was an impediment to leaving that situation. Their religion was very strong and so they believed that being a good wife, they tried to be a good wife and they believed their husband had to be a good husband because that's what the Bible said etc. so you wouldn't be seen to be a good wife if you left a situation like that. I mean in that sort of situation, I think I realized that I could provide information, but I really didn't think that this particular woman was really in a place to take that on and to make that sort of value herself and think this isn't right. But to actually change that, so it's terrible, obviously, but there wasn't a lot really I could do about that. I just had to, you know, it's accepting I suppose where she was at and saying at least she came to the service, she actually attended in person and we sat down and we had that conversation and quite different obviously to the previous woman that I referred to who really did change her life. She said, "I'm not taking this anymore."

[00:23:54]

PASCOE: Can you get a sense of overall what sort of women were coming in - young, old, ethnicities?

ROSE: I think it was, really I suppose a diversity. I won't say, probably as I recall it anyway, and especially I suppose in terms of Greek women, they were usually married women with families. I don't recall having young women come to see me to talk about things to be honest. But in terms of, and I think a range of ethnicities, like a lot of women walked through those doors, but I would say probably like I say, either women married with children and families too, that sort of child rearing or having had the family and that sort of age group.

PASCOE: Was it a bustling sort of a place or a quiet place?

ROSE: It was a bustling place. It was quiet at night time when I may have been the only one there, or the worker was the only one there, but sometimes the phones would go and that was pretty busy, so you might be

there for a time with a volunteer or another person for a while but it was a bustling place. It was.

PASCOE: Noisy?

ROSE: Yes, it definitely could be noisy. You know, you've got the sort of set up with tables and phones. I can't even remember how many we had, but quite a number and phones are going, people are on the phone. So yes, it actually was noisy. It was all open space, so I mean the coordinator had an office and I think the admin. person was in an office, so I think there might have been a couple of offices. And we had another room which we used to have meetings, or if we had groups happening in there, but in the actual area where we did the telephone and sometimes you'd have to meet with someone out in that room because there wasn't an office to go in and talk in quiet.

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PASCOE: Would there be anything there for them - coffee, tea, couch, toys for the children and that sort of thing?

ROSE: Yes, yes. There were those sorts of things.

PASCOE: All those things to make them feel comfortable. That was the idea of that.

ROSE: Yes, yes. There was. I mean that's a pretty amazing building, the Institute Building. I mean it was a lovely space and you could open the window and look out onto Kintore Avenue and the War Memorial across the street and so on. So, very high ceilings and, but it was a welcoming place, which was great. So women, Aboriginal women came in of course and that's the thing. I mean you just had a diversity of women and people would come in with kids and I suppose, I don't recall seeing a lot of young, young women though. I'm not saying they didn't come in but it was generally I think women who were, I suppose twenty to twenty plus.

PASCOE: You were talking about families, so you were saying they mostly came in with their children.

ROSE: I think that also must have depended a bit on ethnicity, because I think Luisa certainly saw women similarly who had children and families and so on.

PASCOE: I know that you worked mostly without any Internet. You had some sort of card system.

ROSE: I don't think we had the Internet then.

PASCOE: So did you, when did you actually go on your first secondment?

ROSE: That was, I think that was about sometime '90 to sometime in '91. I can't remember the exact date.

PASCOE: So you were '85 to, so you were there six years.

ROSE: I was going to say, we did have, every call had to be recorded and attendance and we had, I remember we had these big, sort of sheets and they were kind of drawn up so that, the time of the call, ask for their name, you'd write in what it was about, what sort of action or advice or information you gave, so that was how we recorded attendance.

PASCOE: Did you record where they were from? Their postcode or anything? Was that important to you?

ROSE: Actually, I don't recall taking addresses unless there was a reason to do so.

PASCOE: So confidentiality would have been high on the list anyway.

ROSE: I think on the phone in particular it was and I mean, some people didn't want to give their name.

PASCOE: Would you give yours?

ROSE: Oh, yes.

PASCOE: You'd always say it's Sophie.

ROSE: Oh yes. I mean, why wouldn't we?

PASCOE: I just meant as a matter of course, did you say, "It's Sophie here"?

ROSE: Yes. Or you'd say, I can't even remember exactly what I said, but you'd probably say something like, "Women's Information Switchboard. Can I help you? It's Sophie speaking." Or they'd ask what their name is, or I'd say, "What's your name?" If they'd tell me. Usually they did. Because while you are obviously talking, as I do now and I'm taking notes of a phone call, you try to get those sort of details. So we did keep those sorts of records. Obviously to see how many people have used the service and who's using the service if you knew that.

[00:30:40]

PASCOE: So while you were there, talking about the Internet coming in, you can't remember that the Internet came in to be used at least by the clients, or even you. You still used the phone book and the little cards system.

ROSE: Yes. And I remember when, I remember there used to be the Community Information, the overall body, they produced a Directory. And so we used it for, if someone lived in some suburb and they were looking for some particular service in or near their suburb, we often, that was one of your reference documents. Any other directories that we had. I remember that well, because it had a yellow cover, sort of small thing with a ring folder and so it was all hard copy stuff. No, we didn't Google anything. I've got to say when I did go to, I'm not sure, or was it when I was, I think it was before WIS was located in Grenfell Street, it was somewhere else and it was all glass. Was it in the Station Arcade or something?

PASCOE: Yes. It was at the top of the escalators in the Station Arcade.

ROSE: Yes, and I could see that there were computers there and people could actually go and I thought, "Oh, wow! Fantastic. Things have really changed." People could go in and use the computer there and do all that. Whereas no, we didn't have that facility.

PASCOE: I wanted to talk to you now about your work in the community, which we touched on because of your being the Greek Information Officer, but did you go to outreach things like rural Greek organisations and things?

ROSE: We didn't go, no, we didn't go afar. As I said it was generally, like say it might have been a Greek Women's Auxiliary Group, or something that either may or may not have had some connection with their local church. They had a coffee morning or something like that for Greek women, but it was really limited to metro. area. I did not ever do country visits or anything like that to go and speak to women.

PASCOE: Did you have pamphlets that you maybe took to places or was that the time before the pamphlets?

[00:33:38]

ROSE: I think we had. I do recall there was some information that was available about the service in languages other than English. So there would have been something in Greek and Italian and I think when Lien came on board in Vietnamese and I'm not sure, there may have been others. So we must have had something that we did give people. Yes, but what that exactly looked like now I can't recall. [Laugh]

PASCOE: What were the most important issues for women? Can you remember some of those at that time?

ROSE: Look, I think as I recall it, there was quite a lot around social security for women.

PASCOE: In what way do you mean that? Their income, their ---?

ROSE: There were obviously women who were either ----. Let me just put this in a bit of context. I recall at the time we did have, for example, also a Greek Welfare Centre that was aligned with the Greek community and they also offered a social work type service to people as well. I think quite often we did get some referrals as well from that sort of service. Not that there were, the Greek Welfare, Greek Welfare Centre was probably one and whether there was another one as well because at that time the Greek community and the church, there was a split so we had the Greek community and we had the Archdiocese. I don't know how that split is going now but in any event, so they were employed by, the social worker was employed by the Greek community. But if people who were older and things like being on a pension or disability pension, that sort of thing. And if they were having an issue with social work.

This was before the Welfare Rights Centre was set up. I think I did mention when you and I spoke, Caroline, that one of the WIS workers Maggie, [Martinelli] I wish I could remember her surname. But she was instrumental, she was one of the people who was basically one of the founders, or people to establish the Welfare Rights Centre here in South Australia, which was obviously really fantastic in terms of advocacy in respect of social security issues and legislation, because that's such a complex and huge area. So if, as I recall, if I attended a meeting at one of the Social Security offices, I think usually in town, because I don't remember people asking me to come out. I can't even recall how that was set up then. Of course now we've got offices everywhere. To interpret for them. I also might have gone to a lawyers appointment as well.

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PASCOE: So legal. So we've got social services or income, legal.

ROSE: Yes. And I think certainly DV was also an issue.

PASCOE: How did you go on accommodation?

ROSE: Well, again that, in terms of, and I suppose really at that sort of time when you had emergency accommodation it would be either through the DV Service, we would either take the woman to the DV Service that then organized accommodation, because that's what they did. I suppose really all we could do is say, "Well, we have to be speaking to this service to help you with accommodation." It was either a referral or you've got to ring this person on this number and of course those services had people who also were able to speak Greek to the woman, or another language.

PASCOE: Were you fairly confident if someone rang up and said I must leave because of domestic abuse and take my children that they would find accommodation in those days?

ROSE: Yes. Actually I was. Yes. In those days. Yes. And I don't know, I honestly don't know what the situation is now, but yes in those days. Absolutely confident.

PASCOE: Do you know about the Women's Information Service or Switchboard Support Group? Have you ever heard of them? Did you work with them or have any understanding what they did?

ROSE: Look, I've honestly got to say I may have heard of the Support group and I don't know if that involved, and I'd be thinking of years ago, I don't know if that involved women who volunteered at the Service who also brought in others from other services to meet to support the Service. My recollection of that is that it was a forum for women who were committed to the work at the Service and obviously passionate about women's issues and clearly all those issues that go along with it, equality, discrimination and all the rest of it, that they came together. Look I can't remember whether there was one then. When it was actually set up. I think it did exist.

[00:41:01]

PASCOE: Well they're there to support you and so I guess, but you also always had the coordinator to go to if there was conflict or if there was some area that you needed some sort of clarification on. Women's Information Switchboard, or at least the Service had several phone-ins on women's issues.

ROSE: We did.

PASCOE: Could you tell us anything about them in your time there?

ROSE: I'm just trying to think of which phone-in ---. Oh gosh! I certainly recall being involved in a phone-in, but what was the issue? Honestly I can't remember what the issue was. I don't know if it was accommodation.

PASCOE: Or domestic violence? It was one of the big issues of the day and there was a phone-in.

ROSE: Yes, I definitely, and we did that, the phone-in happened on the weekend. So it was either a Saturday and Sunday and obviously there'd been some advertising. We are having a phone-in on this and so phone in during these hours, but I can't remember ---. It was obviously an issue of importance. You may know that we did have a legal advice service every Saturday afternoon.

PASCOE: No, I was going to ask you that when you were talking about on the phones. Did you have some link-up service that you could put women through to?

ROSE: We had a roster of solicitors who gave their time voluntarily. So really they were a volunteer, and for a couple of hours on a Saturday afternoon and they took calls to provide legal advice to women who called for legal advice. It was a roster system so, I can't recall how many women

lawyers were on that roster, but they came around every four weeks, or whatever it was, on a Saturday.

[00:43:20]

PASCOE: And you could put the client directly through to whoever was on the roster.

ROSE: That person physically sat at one of the desks with a phone and if ---.

PASCOE: Oh, that person came in to the ---.

ROSE: Physically came in to Kintore Avenue and took calls from there.

PASCOE: Would they be sufficiently occupied?

ROSE: Yes.

PASCOE: There was enough work for them to do?

ROSE: Yes, because people knew that that service existed as well, so the phones sometimes rang really hot.

PASCOE: Would people, people would come in too, to see the person, or not?

ROSE: Well, it was really meant to be a telephone service. The concern was that you could easily spend probably a long time with one person, but I guess also because the, obviously the lawyers worked for other people, and if the matter really needed some ongoing, what we would then do is we had, we'd say well, you might want to see this lawyer or this lawyer, give some names. Which is I think what they did as well, obviously, but it was a service really by phone, just to give some advice, legal advice.

PASCOE: I've heard of another service that you did. As a child contact centre, sometimes. So can you tell us anything about that?

ROSE: Well, actually, when I was there, it had been the case that the Switchboard or the premise or the office was used as the handover place,

but I don't think it happened a lot. And again I think for reasons of, you had to consider I suppose safety. I think a lot of handovers have happened at Police Stations or in front of Police Stations because at least people feel, well if anything happens and if the ex-partner or whatever gets violent, I've got the police right here. But, yes, it did actually happen there. It may have happened more before my time though, there.

PASCOE: Well Sophie, it's been wonderful talking to you. Have you got anything else you'd like to bring up about the highlights or lowlights of you time working at the Women's Information Switchboard? You've certainly filled us in on a lot of historical things.

[00:046:15]

ROSE: Look I have really good, strong, fond memories of some of the women who worked at the Switchboard as volunteers, who were wonderful women. They were fantastic women and I know in a couple of cases they've left us some time ago. I can honestly say that they did a wonderful job. They were really, I respected their commitment and, I mean I worked with fantastic women who worked there in a paid capacity, including women who, lesbian women who also were, you know, that was a place that you could, and at that time too, it wasn't easy to work in those sort of fields, but it was becoming, to have WIS, to have the Women's Health Centres, so women could come to those services and feel that they belonged there and that they would be assisted and supported, so honestly it was a really fantastic time. I very much enjoyed the work I did there and hopefully I was able to help a few women.

PASCOE: Do you think it changed your way that your life went? Do you think it added to the ---?

ROSE: Well, I think it did. Certainly I believed I was a feminist before I started working at the Women's Information Switchboard and for me it was an extension of that and a consolidation and a building and all of that,

so it was in that way the absolute best environment to be working in.
[Laugh] And going to the International Women's Day marches with all these wonderful women from ---. We had our banner and you know. So it was great.

PASCOE: That's a lovely note to finish on. Thank you very much for talking to me, Sophie Rose.

ROSE: My pleasure.

[00:48:44]

END OF INTERVIEW