

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Mona Sinha, Class of 1988*

Interviewed by  
Rebecca York, Class of 2018

May 13, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Mona Sinha talks about her introduction to Smith as a transfer student, including finding community in the International Student Preorientation program. She talks about the student group asking for divestment from South Africa, including a takeover of College Hall. As an Economics major, Sinha spent her junior year in the Picker Program in Washington. Since graduation Sinha has worked to inspire women's leadership education.

## **Restrictions**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Sinha, Mona. Interview by Rebecca York. Video recording, May 13, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mona Sinha, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Sinha, Mona. Interview by Rebecca York. Transcript of video recording, May 13 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mona Sinha, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 13, 2016, with:

MONA SINHA  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: REBECCA YORK

YORK: So, I'm Rebecca York and I am conducting an interview with Mona Sinha on May 13, 2016, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for being here. I know you're probably very busy.

SINHA: Thank you, Rebecca.

YORK: So, yeah, it just — most of our interview is going to be about your time at Smith—

SINHA: OK.

YORK: —but I learn a little bit about what you did beforehand. So what brought you to Smith? Was there anyone in particular or anything in particular?

SINHA: That's a long story. (laughs) And so—

YORK: (inaudible)

SINHA: OK, I—

YORK: (inaudible) and that there's someone in the—

SINHA: Yeah.

YORK: OK.

SINHA: Ready?

YORK: Mm-hmm.

SINHA: OK. So I came to Smith really because I wanted to move away from home. I grew up as a youngest of three girls in Calcutta, India, and I was constantly being told that I should have been a boy, and so I compensated for that by trying to be a boy and doing what boys do, you

know, doing well in school, being athletic, all of that stuff. And my first year of college in India was very disruptive, because the prime minister at the time was assassinated. There was a lot of chaos on college campuses, and frankly, I wasn't learning anything, and I just — coming into my own as a young woman, I really wanted to discover what it was going to be like without having the pressure of constantly being the boy and having to prove myself. So I applied to all the women's colleges, and by happenstance, the admissions officer at Smith was telling my daughter that I was going to take them in and choose them to her, wrote back to me and said that, "I notice you're in a college level program, so I want to change your application to a transfer." And in those days, everything was done by letter or by telegram — no, there was no email and no Internet — and (ring) I panicked because I knew the percentage of transfer students was so small. But she did it anyway, (ring) and I happened to get into all the schools with financial aid, and I thought to myself, If someone at Smiths cared about my application so much that they could actually look at it so carefully and give me a big financial aid package, then that's where I'm going. So that's how I showed up, with my suitcases, sight unseen. (laughs)

YORK: So you came as a sophomore.

SINHA: I came as a sophomore. I landed here in 1985, so I graduated in 1988, but I spent six months off campus as well.

YORK: What house were you in?

SINHA: I lived in Little Hopkins for my first two years, and then I did the Picker Semester-in-Washington Program, so I was gone the summer between my junior and senior year, and then the first semester of my senior year. So when I came back as a second-semester senior, there was not a room to be had on campus, so I basically lived in the broom closet at Duckett House.

YORK: Oh, [good?].

SINHA: (laughs) As a senior. It's tiny, tiny room. I literally had to open the door and jump into my bed because there was no way of getting — navigating around it. (laughs) But it was fine. But it forced me to socialize with everybody because I had to hang out in the living room all the time, so. (laughs)

YORK: So, at the time, was Hopkins still a [co-op?] or was it—

SINHA: No, Hopkins was part of a three-house complex. Hopkins A and Hopkins B are no longer around because they've been demolished. So it was Hopkins A, Hopkins B, and Little Hop, is what it was called. Little Hop only had ten students living in there, but the main dining room was

in there, so all of the Hopkins students used to eat in Little Hop. So it was really nice community actually because we used to, you know, rotate around three houses, and do various activities in each of the different houses.

YORK: What was it like finding a community, like, at Smith, like, being a transfer and then going away to Washington for so long?

SINHA: Well, first of all, I think being an international student — because there weren't as many international students in those days as there are now — the biggest welcome we got was during international student pre-orientation, which was very comforting for us, those of us that had come without any family or, you know, just by ourselves basically with our two suitcases, to have this inbuilt community that welcomed us. And we spent a whole week with other international students who ran the program — they still do it even now — and so that was an instant community, and that community has stayed with me all these years. The Hopkins community was wonderful because it was small, especially Little Hop. I think I got placed there by accident because no one realized I was actually a first year — you know, my first year at Smith — because they didn't allow first-year students to live there. They wanted them to have the bigger, broader experience. But I think I got sort of slotted in as a sophomore without them realizing that I wasn't here as a first year. But it was such a small house because there were only ten of us, so I got to know that group extremely well, and I'm still in touch with I think six out of the ten people that lived there with me. So that was a wonderful community. I think my advisor was an incredible woman, Dr. Cynthia Taft Morris, the economics department, and she took a lot of pride in introducing me to people and making sure I was happy and comfortable. So it's — I thought it was extremely inclusive, you know, since I — was a completely foreign experience to me in every way, shape, and form. I decided that humor had to be a part of my life, because if I took everything too seriously, I'd be really [kind of?] shell-shocked, and so yeah, people in my house would ask me odd questions. You know, somebody asked me how it felt to sleep on a mattress, because they assumed I never had. So we had (laughs) — we had a little sign on our bathroom door, and because some of my [tones?] were not American, and so there was one column said, "What Mona says," and the second column said, "What Mona means." (laughs) So for everyone who put up a query there, I was allowed to ask a question in return. So it kind of made it a fun interaction, you know, instead of making it kind of, Oh, my God, you don't ask me these things. I — was great because for me, there were a lot of quote/unquote "stupid questions" that I needed to ask and find out about, but I didn't know who I could ask them without sounding stupid, and so this was like the perfect opportunity, they let me do that. And Washington was great. It was, you know, time away from campus. It allowed me to do some independent work and I really wanted to get a sense of the political

atmosphere of the country, you know, just being around Capitol Hill and being around — I was the only economic student who was part of that group; everybody else was political science and [gov?]. So it was just a fun way to make new friends and you know, learn new things, and being off campus was, you know, it was challenging but it was really interesting. The other interesting thing about the Washington program was, I was the first ever international student to do it, and so the college had to really figure out what the legalities were in terms of my working, in terms of my visa, in terms of, you know, financial aid, all of that, and I have to say credit to them that they did figure it all out.

YORK: What were you working on in DC?

SINHA: I worked for an organization called the Population Institute, and — which basically championed the cause of population education around the world, things like maternal health care, birth control, abortion rights, things like that. And so, we were an organization that really championed our work among senators and congressmen, you know, who didn't support our work, mostly, and celebrated those that did. And so it was really interesting internship. It was called the Future Leaders Internship, which I thought was interesting. And so they would actually carve out specific states in the country in districts, where the representatives were hostile to our cause, and we would actually go out there. Each intern would be assigned a couple of states and I had California and Nevada, actually, which was interesting, and we would actually go out there and do dog shows, do a big event on a university campus, engage local speakers, and you know, do interviews on television and radio and so forth. So it was a packed agenda, and we'd have the president or the vice president of the organization fly out. We'd go out a week in advance and make sure everything was set up, have them join us, go through the whole couple of days, and then do this whole sort of letter-writing campaign. And it was amazing because it was very grassroots and you actually saw that it worked. You know, we'd get calls from some of the senators saying, "OK, stop bothering us. We know what you're doing." (laughs) And those were the Reagan years, so that was the year that Reagan actually defunded UNFPA and a lot of the population policies because of the politics of China, and he claimed that a lot of international aid was going into supporting abortion because of China's one-child policy, but there's a lot of debate about that. So, interesting times, you know, to be in the middle of all of that.

YORK: What was it like coming back to Smith, having had all of that freedom and responsibility and then being put back into the (unclear)—

SINHA: It was actually very welcoming, you know. Smith, to me, was always sort of my home because I didn't have a home here in this country, and like I said, I was in the broom closet, so I had to make new friends and

meet people in Duckett House. I felt like I developed a second community outside.

YORK: Mm-hmm. I'm sorry (unclear) there's—

SINHA: Oh, in the background.

YORK: (unclear) this interviewee seems to have (unclear) something.

SINHA: Do you want me to restart that?

YORK: Yeah, that'd be great (unclear). Just the — I think the last couple of months would be fine.

SINHA: (unclear). So Smith was always home to me, so coming back to Smith was very welcoming. Washington was a wonderful experience, but being in Duckett House and meeting new people and graduating with a new group of friends was very exciting for me.

YORK: So it didn't feel like quite as much [pressure?].

SINHA: No, it really wasn't a shock at all, no.

YORK: So what did you — like, senior year, you were meeting all these new people. What did you do for fun?

SINHA: Well, Washington was an absolutely cool experience, and I say that because I've mentioned my advisor before, Cynthia Taft Morris, she was very concerned that I was going off to this big city, not withstanding that I came from Calcutta with a population of a few million people. (laughs) So she introduced me to a dear friend of hers who she had known when she was a faculty member at American University, and I ended up living with her for those six months, and that was a fantastic opportunity, because this woman is the largest US collector of Edvard Munch, who is a famous Norwegian artist. So I lived in her house with this fabulous collection of art all around me, and I made her a promise. So most of the young interns would go out drinking after work or, you know, they all lived together, and I didn't really drink. So I made her a promise that whatever I would do, I would have dinner with her every night, and I think I never realized till now, actually, when she tells me — she's now 90 years old — that she really appreciated that because she lived alone and it was great for her to hear what the young people were doing, right? And I appreciate it because, A, I had a great dinner every night, and, B, she would invite very interesting women. And so frequently, there'd be three people at dinner, you know: myself, her, and a guest; and the guest would frequently be either an art lover or an artist, or an activist, or somebody involved in the population field, because she also supported population work. And

so it was an extremely enriching environment, you know, and quite unexpectedly, we stayed in touch all these years, and she came up, in fact, for graduation. My parents couldn't make it till the last day, and when I came back from Washington to Smith, I found out that I was getting all these awards that I had no idea about, and I went to the first ceremony and there was me, myself, by myself, and everybody had family around them. And so I was complaining to her about that, and she says, "You know, I'm coming [up?]." So she was here the whole week, which was, you know, now in hindsight, when I look back and I see how busy my life is and recognize how busy her life was at that time, I really appreciate that she did that for me.

YORK: That's wonderful. So was the Picker program like your first experience with activism in like, that kind of grassroots sense, or —?

SINHA: In an organized way, yes. My first experience was actually on the Smith campus, where I was part of a group asking for divestment from South Africa, and we took over College Hall and we camped out there for, I think, three nights it was. So that was my first sort of experience with activism, and was all very exciting. (laughs) And then really understanding the issues and getting to the roots of what we were fighting for, because at that time, in my class year there was the first two students from South Africa had come to Smith, and so we learned a lot from them and what life was like growing up in South Africa, as a black South African woman. And it was powerful, and I think, you know, a few years later when Smith actually did divest, it was a huge victory for us and the college.

YORK: So can you tell me more about the planning process that went into — because I've read *Sophian* articles and gone through your books and stuff that talk more generally about the College Hall protests, but like, it must have been an enormous thing to plan. Were you involved in (unclear)—

SINHA: I was not in the planning. The way I got involved, actually, was because some of my friends from the international student pre-orientation group had been part of the planning, and so they pulled a lot of us in. I agree; it must have been a huge job to plan this, and what I appreciate so much is that we actually planned it with the college. So even though we took over College Hall, and that sounds a little contrarian, we were consulting with the dean, and we were consulting with the dean of international affairs; and, in fact, the dean of international students came in at one point and took all of us, the international students who had US visas. He told us to leave, because there was some story that the police were coming and there may have been arrests and so forth, and he didn't want our visa status [yet but I?] — so you know, even though College Hall couldn't condone it, they were very much a part of it (laughs) in some ways, and I think that's the beauty of activism at Smith is. You

know, today, as a trustee, I tell so many students, “I did this, too,” and they look at me and they say, “You did this, really?” No, (laughs) and that’s the beauty of our DNA, and as chair of Campus Life on the board, I used to tell students, I said, “We encourage activists, but just learn what the proper way of being an activist is. You know, learn what you’re asking for; study what the issues are; ask the right questions; know the consequences.” You know? And we want to send Smithies out into the world to be activists.

YORK: So that really is for you, like, what it means to be a Smithie is learning how to deal with all these issues and—

SINHA: Well, it’s several things. I mean, what do I think of when I think of a Smithie? I think of someone who is very true to themselves, who understands who they are, and is not willing to be somebody else just to be popular, you know, or to fit in somewhere; but instead, is willing to sort of share themselves in an authentic way that makes other people respect and appreciate them. I think of Smithies as having an authentic voice, you know, of talking about issues and ideology that they believe in and stand by, and know that there’s a group of people behind them that stands by them. And I think of Smithies as being very innovative, and knowing that there are many ways to skin a cat, and there are many ways to find solutions to problems, and there’s no problem that’s unsolvable, you know, and I think the work that we’re doing on campus now with innovative things like Design Thinking, like the business plan competition that’s held every year, are just examples of some of those things, and new ways of sort of finding solutions to problems.

YORK: So, going back a little bit to what — you go and pick a program and did all of those experiences in the College Hall. Is that what kind of shaped your trajectory into creating the Asian [Women’s?] Leadership—

SINHA: The project? That did. I think that was — when I left Smith, I went to work on Wall Street, and at a time when, you know, women weren’t a common item on Wall Street. And I actually really enjoyed it, and I felt like Smith had given me the confidence to compete in a very male world and to prove to people that my work and my ethic stood for itself. I didn’t have to play the game, right? And I lived for a few years in Hong Kong, more recently in 2008, and I went back into the corporate world after an eight-year hiatus, which was quite a long gap, and I did a study for Goldman Sachs on leadership, and what we looked at were senior populations in seven huge, multicultural organizations. And it wasn’t a gender study. It was just looking at leadership; looking at how people had progressed, whether there was a different style of leadership in Asia versus the Western world, which there actually is, and how you, you know, compensate all, reward either/or. And when the study came out, there were many findings, and Goldman was quite happy with some of the things we discovered, but I went back and I started looking at it from

a gender lens, which is something I've done my whole life. I guess being the third girl in a family never goes away. And when I looked at it, what I realized is that the women who had made it to the top, really to the C suite — we were looking at very senior executives and across seven companies — every single one of them had been educated overseas. And I thought that was really interesting, you know, and I sort of dug deeper into it. And it was because in Asia — and I'm not sure if you're familiar with the education in Asia. It's very [wrought?]. It follows a British system, so you kind of have to pick your subjects when you're in ninth grade and kind of stick to that, you know. So when I came to Smith, I already had a million credits in economics and math and nothing else, you know. So it's very focused, and that's great, because you get to be very good at what you're doing. You're the best engineer; you're the best economist; you are the best writer; whatever you are; but then you get to a level of very senior CEO or C-suite manager, and you're expected to have all these skills that translate across disciplines, and where are you going to get that if your whole life you've been trained to focus on one thing? Right? And what was interesting is, when you went back and looked at men in that population — because obviously, the men had the same education — men who had been educated locally took advantage of executive education programs, went to sort of, you know, Harvard summer school, or other programs, executive aid programs. Women at that age and stage usually had families or had kids and couldn't leave. Didn't have the same flexibility.

So a couple of Smith alums were having coffee one day and I was kind of sharing this very perplexing finding, and digging in even deeper. I just wanted to know more about why this was the case. And we all came to the same conclusion: that we needed to have a Smith in Asia. (laughs) And that was how the whole project started. It was a crazy idea, I know, but crazy ideas work, and so we put together a proposal, and one of the women who's a trustee with me today, Hoon Eng Khoo, was at a women's conference in Malaysia, happened to be sitting next to another woman. They were talking about some gendered issue in Malaysia, and was sharing this idea, and she got really excited, and believe it or not, she took it to the prime minister's office, and so ten days later we get a call from the prime minister's office, and I was like, OK, this is someone playing a joke on us, right? And he was interested in us coming to Malaysia and talking to him more about this. So that's a real — and that's how the project started.

YORK: That started with Smithies.

SINHA: Yes, three Smithies as founders of the project, and then we actually went to Malaysia, met with him and his cabinet and talked about what the priorities were, came back, and they said, "We want Smith to be involved." So we came back and we were like, Smith's never going to be involved; this is just an idea, you know? And we went through the correct channels of approaching faculty, going through faculty council.

Today the project is at a different stage. We move very, very fast, because our idea was to actually open a freestanding university in Malaysia that would be like Smith, have a four-year curriculum, and really focus on liberal arts and leadership. That did not happen even though we raised the money; we had the land. There were a lot of stumbles along the way because we really felt that, while we were a prime ministerial priority project, which was the status we were given — actually the only education project ever in Malaysia to get that status; basically meant they were supposed to cut out a lot of the red tape. But a lot of the men in sort of the department of education were not so thrilled about having a women's leadership program, specifically. And so there were lots of, you know, issues, in the sense that they kept trying to stall us (ring) — oh, I'm so sorry.

YORK: That's OK. (ring) (unclear)

SINHA: And we had reached the final stages of getting approval, and we'd have questions like, "Why go to women's college?" (laughter) It got to a point where, if we haven't figured this out now, already, after a year of telling you about this, it's never going to happen. Anyway, so we decided we weren't going to do it in Malaysia anymore — even though we raised tens of millions of dollars and we had land and a lot of support — which really was very hard to do. But instead, what we're doing is: We came back as a group and said, "What was a genesis of this idea, and what were we actually trying to achieve?"

And in essence, what we were trying to achieve is to propagate a liberal arts type curriculum in Asia, focused on women, in order for them to discover and develop their own leadership. And we realized that there were other models in which we could do that, and so we are now looking for partners who are already existing universities or new universities starting up. There's one in India that just opened up in the liberal arts using that philosophy. So we're looking to partner with them and help them, because we spent three or four weeks at Smith developing an unbelievable curriculum, and that's what we're doing right now. So we sort of are restructuring it and, you know, developing it in a different way, and hopefully we can get more traction that way because we won't be involved with actually the administration and running of a university, but, in fact, you know, propagating what Smith has taught us and the Smith learning, and the Design for Learning, which is what we're doing right now.

YORK: So, you said you're doing — you're a trustee and you're doing a lot of work with students also, it sounds like. Can you tell me a little bit more about that and—

SINHA: I loved that work.

YORK: —(unclear) ideas from the Asian (unclear)—

SINHA: Well, you know that it's interesting that you ask that, because as part of our curriculum development, many new ideas — this is the first time that you have the luxury of sitting with a blank piece of paper with faculty from Smith, and we have faculty from Asia. There was a group of 20 people, and there was so much brain power in that room it was unbelievable, and we literally sat around for two full weeks designing this curriculum. So a lot of really innovative things came out of it. We talked a little bit about what wasn't working at Smith, what could work better. You know, if you could start from scratch, what would we do? And I must say I'm very proud, because some of those things have actually been implemented at Smith today — at Smith, not at the Asian, you know, university [which you understand?]. So for example, the whole Design Thinking Project, that got funded recently for two and a half million dollars, stemmed from that whole process of reinventing and writing a new curriculum. We also had this really great project called the Women's Leadership Project, which started with students having their own leadership portfolios, and that's kind of now become part of the Smith—

YORK: (unclear)

SINHA: —[thinking?].

YORK: (unclear) the university portfolio.

SINHA: So the idea was — and specifically for Asian women, we're always told we have to be very modest and very shy and never talk about what we've done, and you know, on the plate, which is not the way the world works, right? And certainly not the way the male gender works. So the idea was that every student who came into the college, or came into Smith as it may be now, would use her application to start a kind of an online folder, if you will. So in that, she would catalog all the different things she's done, and there's certain things that we'd want her to check off, you know, like a public speaking project, like something creative, you know, and all these different criteria that we had. And so at the end of four years, you would actually have an online dossier that showed everything that this woman had accomplished, which could be quite amazing, right? And so we piloted that at Smith a few years ago, and I think it's expanding out, and now the dean of the college is looking — we're looking at something called a Smith Design for Living, just to supplement the Smith Design for Learning, and this factors into some of that. So what are the, you know, competencies that we want students to have, other than the academic competencies in their lives and as they mature into leaders? So that was very exciting.

YORK: And you're bringing — I'm assuming your bringing those ideas in, too, when you're interacting with current Smithies, or—

SINHA: Yeah. So I've always enjoyed interacting with current Smithies. [Even?] my children will tell you, we have a lot of Smithies stay over at our house, you know, during breaks and so forth, and I just find them so smart and so dynamic and so full of vision and ideas and optimism. It's just great. And I think the thought processes at Smith — I mean, Smith women are hard on themselves and have always been because they always hold themselves to such a high standard, but always, also, find that community that supports and understands them. I think my interactions were informal to start with, and then as chair of Campus Life, I was, in fact, responsible for student affairs and student life, and so I — and because I enjoyed it, was a natural, that I took upon myself to meet more students and ask them about things that were bothering them. You know, we were part of the group charged with the whole changing the transgender admission policy. So that involves speaking to a lot of students and understanding, you know, what the pros and cons of changing or not changing, as well as — I come up for international student pre-orientation every year, just because it was such a big part of my life, that I come back and I speak to the international students when they come on campus, and yes, I've always interacted with students, and that's one of the reasons I come back for graduation every year, because there's so many students that I know that are graduating and moving into the next phase of their life, and I just want to celebrate them and congratulate them.

YORK: So you mentioned the decision to include trans-women in the Smith admissions policy. Can you talk — are you allowed to — I don't even know. Are you allowed to talk (unclear)–

SINHA: Yeah, I mean, I think we did it the right way. There was a lot of pressure on the board to make a quick decision, and we made a conscious choice to wait and really study the issues for the full year, which I think in hindsight was absolutely the right thing to do, because we learned so much. It was a learning experience, and we were pretty much determined to make the best decision based on everything that we had learned. And I think if you look at some of the early decisions that came up, they were not necessarily right and had to go back and be altered. I think where we came out was absolutely right, because there were many sort of gray area questions that came up, which, because we had the time and we had decided that we want to take the time, we were able to delve into; we were able to speak to experts on those matters; we were able to talk to students and people who had that lived experience, and learn from them; and then come to the best decision for Smith. So, fundamentally, you know, we all agreed, the entire board agreed, that Smith is rooted in women and women's histories, and that's who we are, and therefore, anybody who lives their life as a woman and identifies with the principles of being a strong woman is welcome here.

YORK: Have they gotten a sense, in your time, since graduation, that the environment has changed in (unclear) inclusivity with international students? Do you think there has been a change? Has it been better or worse?

SINHA: I don't see it in that nitty-gritty detail because I don't live on campus. What I hear is really sort of hearsay from students or people who share things from, you know, with me. I think not just at Smith. I think in the brains of people 18 to 21 nowadays, there is a lot of questioning. I frankly feel that this younger generation has a lot of pressure on them in terms of social media, in terms of identity, in terms of conforming or not conforming. You know, there's a lot more pressure than we had growing up. You know, we sort of had a few things we had to deal with: you know, had to do well academically; you had to find a job; you know, all those things. Those things haven't gone away, and these things have leered over it, you know? And so I think it's quite difficult for people of that age. So I think the reason that I did well in talking to students is because I did understand and empathize with that, you know, and so we came from a point where we agreed that life was quite difficult. (laughs) I think the one thing I will say that worries me a little bit about what I see on campus is sort of the unwillingness to hear an opinion that differs from your own. And I think that's challenging, because—

YORK: Do you think that's the political correctness, like, debate that's been going around?

SINHA: A lot of it is a political correctness debate. I think part of it is just the fear of hearing another alternative that you don't want to hear, or you don't want to even let enter into your consciousness, in the — in case it might affect the way you actually think and you may, God forbid, change your mind. Right? And that's not good, because I think as — especially as students, we have to take in every bit of information we can get, every opinion we can get, and then make our own decisions. You know? It shouldn't be — it can be shaped by people; it can be shaped by opinion; but it's about being that authentic self that I was talking about before. Right? You have to sort of feed in everything from everywhere and then let it coalesce, and then determine your own opinion. And I think, you know, what happened with Christine Lagarde, for example, was very sad, because agreed, we may not agree with the IMF policies, and give students that absolutely, but she, in her own right as a woman, was tremendously accomplished, and I think that our students, I would have hoped, would have risen to the occasion and said, "We want to hear about her life story." You know, our lives are all about storytelling, right? So let's hear her story. Let's hear how she succeeded, and maybe there's something we can learn from that. Right? Instead of saying, "We don't even want to hear you."

- YORK: So taking like, maybe like, how she had gotten there and applied it to another field as—
- SINHA: Potentially, or even learning about — I mean, who knows, maybe she was dealing with some of the challenges, right? Maybe she recognizes that the IMF is not the perfect place, right, and that she's come in there with her own ideas of how to change it. We didn't even give her a chance to listen to that, right? So that's, to me, disturbing. I think people on campuses need to be much more open to discourse, and much more open to opinions that don't necessarily agree to what they're thinking.
- YORK: Do we have time to ask — since you're kind of leading us into hearing her story, can you tell us about after leaving Smith, what your life (unclear)?
- SINHA: OK. So I went into investment banking right after Smith. I worked with Morgan Stanley and, as I mentioned, I enjoyed it quite a bit. I was exposed to many clients and many different [deed?] structures, and ended up staying there for three years, and then the firm actually offered to promote me to be an associate without going to graduate school, which was the normal path. But I was a little hesitant, because this was the early '90s, and I had just seen a whole round of layoffs at my firm, where a disproportionate number of women had been laid off, and I was a little concerned that, down the line, if there was another such event to happen, someone would look at my name and say, you know, "One strike: she's a woman; two strikes: she doesn't have an MBA." And so I said, "I really want to get a graduate degree." So I ended up going to Columbia because I wanted to be in New York, and then, I made a little shift in my career and went into brand management and marketing working for a very large company called Unilever. And I managed brands that you might know, like Vaseline Intensive Care, and Pond's, and face care, and things like that. And then, actually, life came full circle because I got recruited by the CEO of the company that hired me and had since moved to a different branch at Unilever, to work at Elizabeth Arden, which was owned by Unilever at the time, and which he had been charged with restructuring. So my finance background, actually, and all my work in brand came together, because when you restructure a company, you have to look at every piece of it. And that was very exciting. And along the way, I had been invited to join the board of a human rights organization, and I sort of put it off for a long time just because my work hours were very long and I just felt like I didn't have the time to give it. And then one year, I was just like, OK, I'm just going to do it, and I'm not around a lot — I travel a lot — but whatever I can do, I'll do. And it was fascinating work. I'm still involved with them, you know, 20 years later, 25 years later. But it was really fascinating because I just felt the passion of what these people were doing and the lives that, you know, they were affecting, and I also realized that these were visionary people who founded these companies,

right, with a mission, but they really didn't have any kind of business structure or business background to think about sustainability, to think about fundraising, to think about, you know, PR and communication, and all of those things that I had been trained to do. And so all of a sudden, you know, I found that I was adding all this value where I didn't think I would be able to do anything. So I made a big shift, and I moved into sort of that world, and decided that I wanted to use my skills in helping nonprofits and helping sort of these visionary people achieve what they could do in the most sustainable manner, and I still do that. And I'm still very involved with education. I'm obviously on the Smith board and have been for six years now. I also sit on the Social Enterprise board at the Columbia Business School, which really teaches business students and future business leaders the importance of governance and the importance of contributing to social enterprises in their lives, and understanding that society is not different from the corporate world. You're functioning within a society, so you have to recognize and understand the needs of that society to be a good leader. And that's a lot of fun. I also serve on the board of the Columbia School of Public Health, in a new program on global mental health, and identifying and coalescing the issues of mental health around the world, and that has been a huge learning experience for me, as well as the board. Because I am from Calcutta, I do want to give back to my own community, so I support the work of Apne Aap, which is an anti-trafficking organization whose founder, Ruchira Gupta, is actually getting an honorary degree at Smith this year. So I — we were in school together and she's a brave, brave woman, and does things that I could never even dream to do. So I sit on her board and I help her navigate sort of structurally and her [organizationship?] grow. And I do a few other things. We have a dog who's trained as a therapy dog, (laughs) so we get everybody in the house working, too, and my daughter, Anya, is also trained to take him to hospitals and work with, you know, patients and so forth. So my life is full and busy, but I'm very happy with it.

YORK: Are you still in New York?

SINHA: Yes. I spent three years living in Hong Kong when I did the project for Goldman, and where the Asian Women's project started, and then we came back to New York, yeah.

YORK: You have three children?

SINHA: I have three children. I have a 17-year-old, who just called to interrupt me, and then I have my 14-year-old girls who are here with me this weekend. We had to support Ruchira and also to meet Abby Wambach. (laughter) Girls who play sports, very important.

YORK: Well, we have time if there's anything — what—

- SINHA: What is the scope of this project? Are you just recording to keep narratives in the archives?
- YORK: Yeah, pretty much. We're trying to build up narratives of under-represented women in the archives. Especially in, like, coming closer to present day, less and less is getting (unclear) the archives at graduation or something like that. And especially with women of color and international students, there really aren't any—
- SINHA: Right. I'm trying to convince Ruchira give us her archives. [We?] can see she's got a lot of stuff.
- YORK: And this is also within the whole umbrella of the Alumnae Oral History Project, so, (unclear). I have been doing this now for, I don't know, ten years I feel like. (laughter)
- SINHA: Yeah, that's amazing.
- YORK: It's really wonderful to hear stories (unclear)—
- SINHA: That's amazing. And how do we distribute these stories, or share these stories?
- YORK: (unclear) who probably (unclear) on the way in, and she can tell you more.
- ?: (unclear). I don't think she was here, but yeah. There just—
- YORK: It's going online. It's being [reviewed?].
- SINHA: That's exciting. Yeah, I think it's important for the next generation of women to hear the histories of what went before them, and to hear that, you know, other women fought the same battles, and other women succeeded and had challenges that they had to overcome, and that there are new solutions — there — you know, there's no problem that has no solution — and to, you know, lean upon them and learn from them and then develop their own solutions. That's very exciting, and I know in my life, you know, when I went to Morgan Stanley and I was one of the few women, there were a few other token Smith women who were there who had done extremely well and who were much more senior than I was, and I did take advantage of that and I did go up to them and seek counsel and learn how they had been successful and, you know, what could I do best. It was wonderful. It was wonderful to have that support. So sometimes, you know, other people say the Smith afterlife is even better than the Smith life on campus, (laughs) and I tend to agree with that. I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed meeting Smith graduates from every year, you know, different years, races, classes, countries, you know, all over the world. It's been wonderful.

YORK: So the alumnae, they're really still—

SINHA: There's such a closeness. There's such a closeness, and there's such a desire to connect, and I think, when you introduce somebody, a Smithie to another Smithie, it just cuts through every level of — can I say BS? — (laughs) that one goes through when one meets a new person. And there's a certain level of trust and comfort and familiarity that emerges from just having been at Smith, which is a huge thing to say, that an institution is able to, you know, engender that kind of trust among its alums. It's just huge, and that's something we need to preserve on campus, and I think, you know, preserve it and grow it and let this place flourish. You know, sometimes, someone will ask me, "Oh, you sit on the board at Smith. Is — that's a girls' school?" I said, "No, it never was a girls' school. It's a women's college." (laughs) And people are like, "Oh, I'm so sorry," you know. (laughs) But it's just setting that narrative straight, you know, and I'm saying that it's a very important place for women in the world, to be here and to learn and grow and, you know, step out into the world. But we still have a lot to do. So — but thank you, this was really fun.

YORK: Yes, thank you so much for (unclear) the time.

SINHA: Really fun. No, I'm happy to.

YORK: (unclear) really wonderful.

SINHA: And we have a few minutes to walk over (unclear).

YORK: (unclear). (laughter)

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Lisa Rodwell, June 2016.*