

Building a movement of women workers

This chapter is dedicated to the late Comrade Dorothy Mkgalo

1. Our vision

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4. Recommendations

The chapter analyses the position of women in society, in the labour market, and in the unions. Despite COSATU's progressive policies and resolutions on gender and women, there has been little or no progress in the federation. We recommend a number of stronger measures, including a quota system to ensure women take leadership positions at all levels.

1. Our vision

Under apartheid black women workers suffered more than any other group; as black people, as workers without rights, and as women. Historically, organising in South Africa was almost entirely focused around male workers and their needs and interests. Most trade unions in South Africa have elected men to positions of leadership and have failed to address the specific concerns of women workers.

We have a vision of a future where women participate equally in the labour market and the world of work without having to face gender barriers or glass ceilings. The trade union movement has a crucial role to play in fighting for justice for women in the workplace, the labour market and society as a whole.

We have a vision of economic policies that include women's emancipation. We have a vision of eradicating apartheid oppression and gender oppression in all spheres of society and in the workplace in line with our new constitution.

We have a vision of the trade union movement as a home for women workers, a movement which they know will fight for justice for women in the workplace and the economy. This will forge a movement for gender equality in the labour market, and must be seen as an integral part of our vision of a strong COSATU, politically and economically.

None of this can be achieved without taking into account the unequal division of labour in the household and ensuring that COSATU fights for socially provided childcare facilities and equal participation in household labour. We have a vision of a trade union movement that plays a crucial role in empowering

women and in challenging the unequal power relations between men and women - a trade union movement which forges a movement of women workers.

2. Current reality

The commission has noted that women experience a multitude of problems at work, in unions and in society. Historically, organising in South Africa was focused around male workers. Patriarchy, the ideology of male domination which maintains and reproduces women's oppression, permeates all spheres of life from family, to school, to the workplace and unions.

2.1 Problems in the labour market

In line with international trends, South African women's participation in the labour market has increased since 1960. By 1991 women represented 36,3% of the formal labour force. With approximately 8 million South Africans in formal employment this means about 2,9 million women had formal sector jobs.

The labour market is characterised by a sexual division of labour in which women are largely associated with domesticity and service, while men are associated with machinery and technology. Thus, for example, garment workers and cleaners are mostly women. This division of labour also operates in relation to seniority, where the top of the workplace hierarchy is dominated by males.

Women are located in the service sector (68% of service sector workers are women), domestic workers (practically all domestic workers are women, and they constitute 20% of women workers), informal sector (72% of informal sector workers are women). Service sector jobs are increasing, in South Africa and internationally, which tends to create more jobs for women. On the other hand service sector jobs are lower paid than manufacturing and therefore women's incomes are lower than those of men. The informal sector is similarly characterised by low wages and bad working conditions.

Women make up a large share of "atypical labour", ie many are employed in jobs which are flexible in nature including casual work, part-time work, sub-contracted work, temporary, seasonal and home-based work. People employed in this way are vulnerable since they are often not covered by labour legislation or collective bargaining agreements.

There are also more women than men amongst the unemployed. Fifty-five percent of the unemployed are women.

Shortage of childcare facilities

Women remain the primary carers of children. The shortage of childcare facilities increases the burden on women, and makes their participation in the labour market more difficult. The increase in female-headed families exacerbates women's position. Approximately 26% of South African households are headed by single women. African women are especially hard-hit. Only 9% of all children and only 6% of African children are in childcare facilities. A NALEDI survey revealed that 47% of workers interviewed rely on

grandparents and neighbours for childcare, while 17% of workers leave their children unattended. Twenty-one percent of workers stated that existing childcare facilities affected their working hours.

2.2 Practical barriers to women's participation in the unions

Various organisational problems are experienced by women in COSATU. Their under-representation in leadership positions is a primary concern. Some of the practical barriers which require breaking down are:

2.2.a The nature of shopsteward work

The extensive responsibilities of a shopsteward are a big deterrent to women who already have to combine their housework and childcare with a job. Even though the need for both parents to be responsible for childcare has been an ongoing demand in COSATU, in practice women remain the primary child-minders. Shopstewards have to attend to a range of meetings at their place of work, in the union and in the federation. Although the new Labour Relations Act makes provision for shopsteward time-off, it does not adequately compel employers to pay shopstewards for the time-off. This means that a number of meetings are either held after working hours during the week, or over weekends, times when it is very difficult for women to attend.



2.2.b Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment has been described as a hidden problem in COSATU. However, no research has been done on the extent of its impact on women in the federation and affiliates. COSATU has adopted a Code of Conduct and Procedure On Sexual Harassment for internal application. It is a sound starting point to create conditions to make the issue an organisational one rather than a private one.

2.2.c Representation

The commission noted that COSATU's long-standing resolutions around building women in leadership have not been implemented. Women remain under-represented at all levels of leadership in the federation, from shopfloor to national executive levels. The number of women in the national executive is not only low in proportion to the number of women in COSATU, but also compared with other union federations in the southern African region.

National Executive Council Members of federations in southern Africa, 1996

Federation	Female	Male	% female
Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions	1	25	4%
COSATU	6	82	7%
Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions	2	17	11%
Federation of SA Labour Unions	3	12	20%
Botswana Federation of Trade Unions	4	8	33%
Front des Federations Syndicales, Madagascar	4	4	50%
Lesotho Trade Union Congress	5	5	50%
TOTAL	23	153	13%

Nyman and Naudascher, 1996

Percentage of women in regional and national leadership of COSATU affiliates

Union	Female regional leadership (%)		Female national leadership (%)	
	1994	1996	1994	1996
CAWU	0%	0%	0%	0%
CWIU	5%	21%	0%	0%
CWU	0%	1%	0%	0%
FAWU	21%	40%	0%	0%
IPS	-	38%	-	43%
NEHAWU	41%	38%	0%	0%
NUM	0%	0%	0%	0%
NUMSA	2%	8%	0%	0%
POPCRU	-	3%	-	0%
PPWAWU	14%	18%	0%	0%
SAAPAWU	-	16%	-	0%
SACCAWU	7%	10%	33%	33%
SACTWU	21%	30%	33%	13%
SADTU	4%	4%	20%	27%
SAMWU	0%	9%	0%	0%
SARHWU	0%	3%	0%	0%

SASBO	-	46%	-	22%
TGWU	9%	10%	0%	0%

Average	8%	15%	8%	8%
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Templeton Filita, 1996

2.2.d Employment

The employment record of the trade unions reproduces the gender discrimination found in the broader labour market. The majority of women employed by the unions are employed in administrative positions.

Gender and positions among union staff

Current position	Male	Female	Total in position
Administration	11	157	168
Organisers	180	24	204
Branch & regional secretaries	40	5	45
General secretary	10	0	10
Research/legal/media officers	27	9	36
Education officers	27	3	30
Other	43	40	83
Total	340	238	578

Sakhela Buhlungu, 1997

3. COSATU's past strategies on gender equality

3.1 Organising

Relative successes in organising women workers is evident from the fact that women comprise 36% of those in formal sector employment, and 37% of COSATU's members are women. However, no significant inroads have been made into the agricultural, domestic or informal sectors.

3.2 Education and training

The Federation and some of the affiliates have devoted considerable resources to running educational programmes on gender issues and the empowerment of women. However, it is not clear what the impact of this education and training has been in advancing women's issues. For example, is there an increase in making gender issues the subject of collective bargaining? Do organisers take up gender-based grievances? Are women empowered as union activists? Clearly, gender education on its own has not led to an increase in the number of women leaders in the federation. This does not mean COSATU should abandon education focused on gender and women. There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness of the educational programmes of COSATU and affiliates, and refocus them in line with the recommendations of this report.

3.3 Gender co-ordinators & committees

Gender committees exist in some unions and not in others. Their effectiveness needs to be evaluated. Whilst a few affiliates, together with COSATU at national level, employ national gender co-ordinators, some have opted for part-time gender co-ordinators or even no gender co-ordinator. Their role is limited if they are not represented on constitutional structures, and if they have no separate budget allocations. Gender co-ordinators are also often over-loaded with administrative or other tasks, which prevents them from concentrating on gender work.

While there is a danger that special committees can result in "ghettoising" women's issues, the dilemma is how to ensure that these issues are taken up in constitutional structures. Gender committees have played a role in placing gender issues on the union's agenda, but this role has been limited. There is a need to ensure that gender committees become real campaigning structures. Therefore further research needs to be conducted on whether gender committees are the best and only method to advance women's issues.

3.4 Grassroots activism among women workers

The Commission has the impression that there is very little grassroots activism or campaigning amongst women members. Gender structures, like so many union structures, appear to have become bogged down in policy debates and processes, neglecting the tasks of implementation, organising and activism.



Building grassroots activism: NUMSA gender co-ordinator visits members at their workplace - *Photo: William Matlala*

Shopstewards are the pool from which worker leadership emerges. If there is no activism among women members, few women will be elected as shopstewards and so there will be few women to elect to union structures, or to employ as union organisers. Through grassroots activism, women workers could start defining what issues are important for them, and so start influencing the overall union agenda.

It is therefore essential for the unions to develop a strategy to encourage and support grassroots activism among women members. They need to rediscover their tradition of active organising and mobilising around concrete issues. Gender co-ordinators and workplace gender committees could play an important role in this.

3.5 Collective bargaining

Collective bargaining remains one of the powerful weapons to bring about change at the workplace. It is an important barometer to gauge the extent to which the goal of equality is being implemented. Great unevenness exists amongst affiliates on what gains have been made. Lack of female organisers and the lack of gender sensitivity on the part of male organisers contributes to this unevenness.

3.6 Women leadership and the quota debate

Education and gender structures have not effectively opened the door for women to play a leadership role in COSATU. Women remain out in the cold with regard to leadership. With a new constitution in South Africa, new labour legislation, and various new institutions in place, COSATU needs to devise new strategies to make the Federation a real home for all workers, especially women.

The ANC's quota system has had many successes in parliament as a method to allow women onto its election list. Although the COSATU national office bearers (NOBs) clearly support a quota system, it seems that there is great resistance from a number of men in the federation. A quota system is a direct

threat to male domination. Those opposing the system should offer alternatives that would bring about the same results, ie making COSATU a home for all workers.

Although COSATU has a policy on affirmative action, it seems that the policy applies to everyone *except* COSATU. It will be necessary to take the debate forward by discussing the nature of the quota system, at which levels (national/regional/local) it should be implemented, targets, deadlines etc. Another issue which will have to be addressed is that of affiliates which organise industries such as construction and mining, where there are few women workers.

3.7 A broader women's movement

Whilst COSATU's gender committees have played a role in networking with its alliance partners and NGOs, this has been very limited. COSATU has not had any success in playing a central role in leading and building a women's movement. A women's movement is necessary to place gender issues on the national agenda and to unify and co-ordinate all pockets of struggle into one stream. Examples of these are: the Termination Of Pregnancy Act; cuts in child maintenance grants; the non-commercialisation of National Women's Day.

4. Recommendations

The recommendations we make below, will not in themselves bring about the desired results. That will require the political will and commitment of all affiliates and workers to the principles of fighting against women's oppression in all its forms, and striving for the empowerment of women in COSATU. It will also require the commitment of significant financial and other resources. As an organisation committed to socialism, COSATU has to place both gender and racial oppression and exploitation at the top of the agenda. Phrases like "we agree with the need to build women leadership, but it should be based on merit" are not different to the phrases used by bosses to refuse to promote black workers and women. By biting the bullet during the elections, in spite of fierce opposition, the ANC was able to ensure that there are many women in parliament. They are not there as window-dressing, but as part of a commitment to build a nation.

We recommend that COSATU should focus on a number of strategies: *organisational; bargaining & campaigning; the labour market and implementation.*

4.1 Organisational strategies

4.1.a COSATU structures

- i. COSATU and affiliates should adopt a quota system for electing worker representatives and office-bearers. The target should be 50% representation by women in all COSATU and affiliate structures by the year 2000, starting at this year's COSATU Congress with the election of at least three women office-bearers.
- ii. COSATU and affiliates should also adopt a phased quota system for employing organisers and other staff to ensure a more gender-sensitive interface with members. By the end of 1997 COSATU and affiliates should draw up a gender profile of their staff, set targets for increasing the

number of women in job categories where they are under-represented, outline their strategy for achieving this, and create the mechanisms to implement and monitor implementation. The gender sub-committee should be empowered to assist affiliates, assess progress and report to COSATU structures and affiliate structures.

- iii. COSATU and affiliates should recognise the pressures faced by women, particularly single parents, and accommodate their need to balance union tasks and home life. COSATU and affiliates should facilitate breaking down the practical barriers women face to participate in the trade union movement by, for example, taking a policy decision to have childcare facilities compulsory at all Federation or affiliate meetings, and implementing it.
- iv. All affiliates should employ one or more gender co-ordinators with three main tasks: firstly, to develop a gender agenda for collective bargaining, and monitor all bargaining in terms of this; secondly, to build grassroots activism among women workers through workplace gender committees; and thirdly, to monitor implementation of the above proposals.
- v. Every affiliate should allocate a 'gender programme' portfolio to one of its NOBs.
- vi. To break down the practical barriers further, the federation and affiliates should ensure that conditions under which shopsteward elections take place are conducive to electing women shopstewards. Some unions in other countries have policies that a list of women available for election should be drawn up, thereby assisting a campaign for women leaders. Union staff should be trained to encourage the election of female shopstewards. Unions should be vigilant in preventing employers from undermining women shopstewards.
- vii. COSATU and affiliates should commit themselves to build a women's movement within the Federation. In other words, to raise the consciousness of women and ensuring they are empowered to take up issues, campaign, debate together across affiliates, and with Alliance partners and NGOs. This will ensure a cohesive movement and agenda in pursuit of our vision.

4.1.b Building workplace engines

- i. Workplace gender activities and campaigns are necessary mechanisms in empowering and developing women, from creating conditions for the election of female shopstewards to shaping a gender programme for the trade union movement. Active union support and assistance would give grassroots activities a kick-start. This could include gender co-ordinators targeting a small number of workplaces as pilot projects for building workplace gender committees and grassroots activism.
- ii. The COSATU 'Women and work' project at NALEDI should conduct periodic research on the effectiveness, successes and failures of gender committees nationally.

4.1.c A gender programme for education and training

- i. the education and training run by COSATU and affiliates on gender issues needs to be refocused to ensure that it is effective in contributing to the goals set out in this chapter. It should focus on the following issues:
 - o empowering women trade unionists with practical skills, such as how to run a meeting
 - o supporting and deepening a gender agenda for the workplace, as outlined above, and for collective bargaining, as outlined below
 - o supporting a programme of affirmative action for the workplace and the labour market more broadly

- deepening understanding of women's oppression in society, and the struggle to challenge this, with a view to building a broader women's movement
 - providing information about women's struggle against oppression internationally
 - encouraging debate about, and analysis of, the barriers and obstacles women face in the labour movement, and how these may be overcome
 - providing support and back-up for women in leadership positions
 - popularising the COSATU sexual harassment code and how to use it.
- ii. As mentioned in section 3.2 above, it is not clear what impact the gender education programmes of COSATU and affiliates are having on any of the above areas. COSATU needs to establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess whether education is effective, and how to make it more so.
 - iii. Gender education programmes must be adequately financed and resourced to be effective.

4.1.d Building a broader women's movement

- i. COSATU needs to consider how it can interact with, and contribute to, a broader women's movement in society. This should include linking up with women in political organisations, with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other formations in civil society.
- ii. The organising department, the NOB for *organising, education and campaigns*, and the gender sub-committee should initiate a discussion on this issue inside COSATU, as well as initiate contacts and discussion with other relevant organisations and groupings.
- iii. In addition COSATU should identify areas in the South African constitution which guarantee gender equality, and develop strategies to make equality a reality for women workers.

4.2 Collective bargaining and campaigns

- i. Organising strategy : The COSATU organising department should devise practical strategies for the federation and affiliates to organise workers in the vulnerable sectors. They constitute the majority of female workers and as part of our campaign on *new workers, new members*, the status and working conditions of those women in the agricultural and informal sectors, domestic workers and others should be addressed.
- ii. Bargaining - our trade union tool for change: COSATU and affiliates should use their collective bargaining power as a tool to bring about changes for all women and to overcome unevenness in the federation with regards to bargaining victories. COSATU needs to co-ordinate collective bargaining with a clear agenda that would include amongst others: enforcement on paid time off, ban on scab labour, parental leave, compulsory transport provided by employers when working overtime, skills training and training levies, equal pay, childcare facilities, and the implementation of COSATU's sexual harassment code of conduct for the workplace. Appropriate forums need to be identified where these issues can be placed on the bargaining table; either at plant level, national sectoral level, NEDLAC and /or legislation.
- iii. COSATU and some affiliates have made progress in negotiating a framework for skills, grading, training and wages. In most cases there has been no effort to develop a gender perspective on this. It is important to address this issue or women workers will find themselves once again at the bottom of the heap.

4.3 A campaign for parental rights and childcare

- i. COSATU and affiliates should embark on a campaign to negotiate and establish parental rights in all sectors of the economy. Parental rights must entail a full package of provisions, and must not only be seen as negotiating some maternity and paternity leave. The campaign must be aimed at enabling women and men in waged work to combine a working career with a full family life, while infants are given all the care and attention required. The benefits of such a campaign are numerous. It will deliver concrete benefits for all working women, it will play an important role in challenging and addressing women's oppression, it will contribute towards the proper care of infants and children, and it will enable women to be more active unionists. Such a campaign could also be linked to broader issues, such as extension of the child maintenance grant.
- ii. Adequate support must be given to affiliate negotiators and organisers in conducting this campaign. This needs to include education programmes, research backup, and a parental rights negotiators manual.
- iii. The campaign for parental rights should also be conducted at a political and ideological level. COSATU should embark on an active publicity campaign calling on employers to agree to its parental rights proposals, and promoting the need for a full package of provisions. This should also include vigorously promoting equality in the household, and calling on all men to take their share of the responsibility for childcare and household work.
- iv. In collaboration with other interested organisations, COSATU should campaign for socially provided childcare facilities. This should include revitalising and developing COSATU's original childcare campaign.

4.4 Affirmative action in the labour market

- i. As a component of affirmative action, more women need to be employed in, or promoted into, jobs that have been traditionally regarded as only for men. Affiliates should demand representation on company recruitment and promotion committees to ensure that such affirmative action is taken into account by employers.
- ii. Workplace affirmative action is not sufficient to substantially alter women's place in the labour market. Only broader access to education, skills and career paths will do this. COSATU and affiliates should draw up a programme of negotiation at bargaining council level, in industry training boards, and with training institutions, for increased industry-wide access for women to all training institutions and careers, and affirmative action for women applicants to industry training programmes and institutions.
- iii. Labour market discrimination begins before women actually enter the labour market, in the family and at school. COSATU could encourage members to help their children think beyond "traditional" gender roles in the labour market. SADTU should encourage its members to challenge the way schools discriminate against female students, and to encourage their students not to be constrained by gender expectations in their choices of subjects and careers to pursue.
- iv. COSATU should commission NALEDI to conduct research into the position of women in the workplace and in the labour market to inform and implement affirmative action strategies.

4.5 Implementation

- i. The COSATU gender-subcommittee should focus on facilitating the practical implementation and co-ordination of the above programme. This should be done through all relevant structures, departments, affiliates, institutions etc.
- ii. The gender committee should act as a vigorous policing structure to realise the goals of making COSATU a home for all workers. Time-frames need to be established and regular gender audits carried out, the results of which must be submitted to regional and national congresses of affiliates and the federation.
- iii. The gender sub-committee should also act as a vigorous policing structure on economic policy and all other policies of COSATU.