

Life after retrenchments:

Clothing and textile women workers struggle

The late entry of the South African economy to global competition led to the closure of clothing, textile and footwear factories in Doornfontein, as the local manufacturers could not compete with established countries like China. Most of the job losers were women, writes **Elizabeth Mathebe**.

The Metropolitan City of Johannesburg, where Doornfontein is located, is one of the economic hubs of the Gauteng Province in South Africa. The clothing, textiles and footwear manufacturing firms that historically attracted the working class to the area declined because of intense competition on the global market. The companies, that for many years employed women, closed down, liquidated or relocated.

Former factories became warehouses for imported clothes and shoes or were converted into brothels and vehicle repair shops. The few firms that remained cut down production due to free market competition. In the downsizing that followed thousands of workers lost employment.

Manufacturing was replaced by retail. In Johannesburg streets such as Troy, Mooi and others where historical clothing, textiles and footwear factories were located, formal and informal Chinese and foreign traders took over pitting foreign goods against local. The retailers were mostly men who employed a small number of women.

Most retail stores hired two or three male tailors to work from their backrooms making various items for the outlets. What then happened to the thousands of retrenched female workers? It seems the retrenched women workers, who still had the energy to walk around, were reduced to wandering in Johannesburg streets searching for jobs.

Although they had years of industry experience, women workers lacked formal education and skills that could find them jobs in other sectors. It is because of this that they continue to look for jobs in their sector.

According to the Department of Provincial and Local Government, Gauteng is geographically the smallest province in South Africa but the commercial, financial and industrial heart of the country, Southern Africa and the rest of Africa. Gauteng has more than nine-million people and is 97% urbanised. This is why most foreign nationals who come to South Africa are attracted by Gauteng's vibrant economic activities. This also helps to explain why foreign influence is visible.

Foreign nationals, whose countries' economies are also struggling on the global market, have affected employment patterns. The competition for jobs in the few companies that remain operational in Doornfontein is high. Although the working class see the province as an area where jobs are easily found, tonnes of goods that are traded in many parts of Doornfontein are manufactured in China and other countries.

Therefore there is a lot of competition for jobs in Gauteng and this disadvantages women as some employers prefer a male workforce. However, the labour market competition benefits capital by providing cheap labour.

WOMEN WORKERS' EXPERIENCES

The free market economically frustrated women workers. 'We had so many jobs. When your employer retrenched or dismissed you at 11am, by 2pm the same day, you found another job at the firm next door. You were only unemployed for a few hours or a day. We did not bother the trade union that much with retrenchment or dismissal cases. Neither did we



Clothing and textile factories previously employed more women.

worry ourselves with understanding the Southern African Clothing and Textiles Workers Union (Sactwu) policies and strategies on retrenchments or dismissals. Only a few of the workers knew about the policies, most of us did not understand or know them. If one wished to work there were always jobs.

'But now we spend days or years without jobs. Some retrenched women have even given up the job search. Transport is expensive. Sometimes we go home with nothing when our families need food. Permanent jobs have disappeared and we now look for casual work, just for the daily survival of our children. Retrenched women have joined masses of the unemployed who are also looking for work.

'We compete for fewer jobs with people from outside South Africa. Young people cannot find jobs the way "we" did before the Chinese came to the country.'

Fewer employers engage workers with no experience. Although

most job seekers have more than 15 years' experience, what frustrates them are workers from neighbouring countries, especially desperate illegal immigrants. These workers live; sleep and cook in factories and accept low pay. Sometimes they are forced to work double day and night shifts. This forces South African workers to accept lower wages.

Contemporary capitalism has moved from individual market competition within countries to competition amongst countries. Capital's move to global competition has made developing countries' economies suffer. When capital in one country competes for the market there are fewer job losses. But with the global market thousands lose jobs. The global market favours countries with advanced technology and a skilled workforce that meets consumers' needs. In some countries women have left their families to look for work across borders sometimes to overcrowded job markets like South Africa.

South Africa embraced the global market ideology in the 1990s. This late entry meant that the country was behind other countries such as China. However, local technology and skills are also miles away for the country to compete globally.

Most women workers are getting old and training aged workers is seen as a problem for the labour market and for capital. Training young workers will make the sector competitive; but South Africa will not recover immediately as more time is needed. This means that factories in Doornfontein might not be able to create decent jobs early enough for the retrenched workers.

While all workers have been hard hit by the collapse of the clothing, textiles and footwear industries women feel more pressure. Most of the working-age women's lives have been changed for the worse as they have either no jobs or have been retrenched. The sector is also creating fewer new jobs for women. This has frustrated the women workers who depend on factory jobs for their income.

Historically, the development of manufacturing industries in South Africa created jobs for thousands of women with little education and less skills. Women at child-bearing age had a chance to mother their babies and go back to work. Retrenched or dismissed women would go in and out of the labour market at will and still secure jobs as the industries were protected from the global market through the legal quota systems and other protective measures.

Because of loss of jobs in manufacturing industries the cultural and apartheid legacy has become more clear among women on the labour market.

The global market pressures become huge on women as they were the last group to be absorbed on the South African labour market. Many women entered the paid labour market in South Africa with little formal education and few skills or none due to the fact that they were always viewed as home-makers, wives, mothers and caregivers, not as workers.

In some sections of South African society women were seen as child-bearers or caregivers and their children would become labourers. This view was the reason why some men preferred to marry many wives so that they could have many children in which turn would mean abundant labour and income.

The women's motherhood traits in societies and families made them to be considered last in many issues including at the workplace. The women's hindrances that relate to gender in societies, families and workplace stopped them from getting skills. Even today most women have fewer skills and little formal education when compared to their male counterparts.

The problems that women face in Doornfontein show that female-headed families face poverty. The government's public works programme creates jobs mostly in construction. Thus even if women

are considered, only a small number can secure jobs because of either the nature of the work or that they do not have relevant skills. The sector is believed to be mainly a 'men's arena'. This raises the issue of gender equality in job creation.

ENDLESS JOURNEYS

The macro-economic restructuring in South Africa has turned areas such as Doornfontein into a dumping site for the Chinese and other Asian countries' low-cost clothing and textiles products. As many Doornfontein clothing and textiles factories have been closed, liquidated or relocated hundreds of the retrenched workers are wondering in Johannesburg streets searching for jobs.

Most women workers move from one factory to another, seeking jobs in the clothing and textile firms. In the morning, they start their day by job searching at Doornfontein and then walk to Booyens or vice versa.

At the corner of End and Prichard streets, near or outside Sactwu offices, they sit on the pavement and have their lunch and continue searching. On some days they find a day's work or a short contract. This is not enough as the women must pay school fees for their children and also meet their other financial commitments. Besides, they also need money for transport when looking for work.

In some factories women job seekers are required or asked by employers to work for a few days or for a week without pay so that they can be given casual or contract jobs later. Although some agree to this exploitation others reject it.

In some instances the women have limited choices and are pressurised by their families conditions: 'Families expect us to bring a loaf of bread when we come back from work in the evenings, thus it becomes difficult to provide free labour.' The major problem for women in case of retrenchments is that they lose jobs and benefits

and this condemns them to a life of poverty. Therefore, whatever they secure for the day is what they have for their livelihood.

The female-headed and single-parent families are the most affected. Sarah Mosoetsa, in her study, has shown that in most families women have taken the responsibility of providing for families as men too, have lost jobs. According to Mosoetsa women who are able to take the financial responsibility of looking after their families are those who have access to social grants. This means that if a woman does not have a child or is not old or physically challenged they live without an income.

PROTECTING WORKERS

One of the main reasons why workers seek trade union membership is to protect their jobs. However, none of the workers interviewed claimed to have hung onto Sactwu membership because the organisation would provide job security. For some women workers Sactwu membership provided them with a platform for socialisation at the workplace and in the townships. The union membership also helped women to form funeral schemes or stokvels.

Some of the women workers were still members because their co-workers were Sactwu members and therefore they did not want to be excluded from workplace activities. The following summarises some of the responses from women concerning trade unionism.

'The trade union is no longer the same as it no longer helps us. We lost our jobs when we were Sactwu members but Sactwu even failed to negotiate on our behalf for decent retrenchment benefits or packages. Haa! It was lunch time when we were told to leave the factory premises with immediate effect because our factory was being liquidated. There was no time to ask questions or to discuss amongst ourselves as workers. Because we

got out of the factory in a hurry we left our belongings such as handbags, shoes and other valuables behind.

'Sactwu did not investigate the matter to find out what happened. When we made follow-ups at the office about our case we received little help. Then we got tired of running after the trade unionists as no one knew what was going on. After three months, some were called for jobs by nine small companies. This meant that one big firm (the one that we worked for and was claimed to have been liquidated) was fragmented into nine small clothing and textiles units.

'Most of the retrenched workers from the big factory were not called for jobs. The machines in those new factories were the same machines that we used in the previously liquidated big factory. Every worker who was called for a job went back to her previous machine. We knew that those were our old machines because the machines were still bearing our names, even management computers were the same. The only changes were that we were employed by a newly created company under new a name and we started to work under a new management in a new environment.

'The other eight new factories were not able to survive the Chinese competition and we were retrenched again. Thus, we consider ourselves lucky and we no longer speak about our history or try to speak to Sactwu about previous matters. Sactwu too, does not say anything about our past problems.'

The 37 workers interviewed were retrenched at one stage of their employment history. Not one of them had an idea about Sactwu's retrenchment policy or strategies at the shop floor. The women's responses revealed that there was weak or no proper collective bargaining structures

in their factory. Issues such as retrenchment and others were decided in management offices.

The shop stewards were informed about the management's decisions. Thus, as workers they were excluded from many issues that affected them at plant level. Lack of adequate collective bargaining structures weakened the shop stewards' power. Because the shop stewards are also employees, they feared to negotiate retrenchment or make inputs on issues as that could annoy management and cost them jobs.

The trade union organisers weakened plant level structures such as shop stewards, said the women workers. The organisers did not show up at workplaces

even when they were called in for serious matters such as dismissals or retrenchments or any other problem of concern to members. The workers' claims could indicate that Sactwu is strong at national level, but had lost power at the plant level.

The women workers' views show that Sactwu did not explain to its members what the union could do and not do. Therefore, the women felt that there was no reason to pay an affiliation fee to a struggling organisation that offered them no protection. ¹⁶

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