

# Unions short-changing women

Although women now work in mines, masculine culture continues to dominate, writes **Asanda Benya.**

**W**omen have toiled hard as mine-workers in Rustenburg and in other mines across South Africa for close to 10 years. In other parts of the world their history goes as far back as the mid-1500s, yet the industry remains mainly masculine. This masculine culture within mining has also been inherited by unions that organise in this industry.

The inclusion of women as underground mine-workers, therefore, challenges not only the workplace culture but also the union culture. The NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) is a case in point where the existing masculine culture has been challenged since the introduction of women underground.

Since the inclusion of women in mining, the NUM, with mining houses, drafted a few policies that sought to take gender into consideration and address issues facing women. While this was a noble mission, the problem with it was that women formed a marginal part of the dialogues and negotiations that took place with employers. Men took the lead, making final decisions on minimal consultation with women.

## WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Using Rustenburg in the North West as a point of reflection, there

are over 10,000 women working in mining and close to 8,000 of them are in levels and occupations that the NUM organises. Most of these women are members of the NUM but very few of them are happy with the service received. Upon probing the source of their discontent, several issues are often cited.

Women's points of grievance range from sexual harassment in the workplace; policies affecting them directly that employers implemented with little or no consultation; and finally the way union officials who are mainly men treat them when they report or bring up these issues. The main thing from their grievances is that the NUM does not do justice to their concerns and does not service women the same way it services men.

Sexual harassment is one of the major issues facing mines since the incorporation of women in underground occupations. Prior to this, sexual harassment took a different face, as Dunbar Moodie and Nite and Stewart have documented and in most cases it was between older men and younger men who were new recruits.

With women working underground, sexual harassment is the order of day. Women report that this starts the minute they walk

inside a cage to go underground, with men pushing up against them so that they can touch them in places they would not ordinarily touch them in a workplace setup.

Harassment faced by women ranges from men pushing their breasts in the cage, to being whistled at and called 'baby' and sometimes even having their buttocks smashed in passages by male colleagues.

On the surface women face the same harassment, from those in power who are meant to protect them. When these women report sexual harassment cases to the union, they are laughed at and told 'in mining everyone is pushed when entering the cage' and 'because you are the only women these men see for eight hours daily, you have to get used to the whistles and name calling. This is part of mining culture and you are being appreciated.'

Some women reported that 'union officials are friends with HR officials and they sometimes gang up against us and disregard our complaints labelling us lazy'. Women asserted that the 'union does not push much for women's struggles, they just think we are here to look pretty'. They do not take our complaints seriously'.

It seems, instead of helping to protect women and conscientise and sensitise their male members



*Women mine workers: Looking for better representation from unions.*

to sexual harassment, the union embraces and perpetuates the culture that sees women as sexual objects, rather than colleagues and legitimate workers in mining.

#### **MATERNITY GRIEVANCES**

Another grievance raised by women relates to policies adopted with little or no consultation with women. Women often cite pregnancy policies as examples of how the union does not consider or service women.

Pregnancy policies that mining houses, after negotiations with unions, have adopted expose women to income insecurity the minute they reveal they are pregnant. These policies talk of alternative employment in non-risk areas on the surface for pregnant women. But if the company cannot find alternative employment, the employee has to take early maternity leave for the duration of pregnancy with only four months' pay.

This often means, if an employee becomes aware of pregnancy in the first month and alerts the company and union, and no alternative employment is available, she has to stay at home for almost 10 months. This is eight months before she gives birth and two months for healing.

For employees wanting to breastfeed for longer than two months, the period without remuneration is longer. So most opt for re-employment over breastfeeding their babies.

This is a big issue for most women as the majority have experienced staying at home for close to a year without any income. But it seems to be a non-issue for the union since they have not effectively challenged these company policies for the past five to six years. And NUM has certainly never tried to get its members out on the streets striking over these grievances.

Women also complain about the work-suits they are expected to wear underground because these make it impossible for them to use the toilets safely. Women have to take off all their upper body protective clothing including the hard hat that is meant to protect them in an event of a rock fall. This is an issue of comfort and safety for women, yet the union continues to see it as a non-issue.

#### **CAN UNIONS SERVICE WOMEN?**

What is emerging from conversations with women is that, because of these long-standing grievances most women feel no loyalty to the union. They feel let down, not serviced and

taken for granted even though they pay their monthly dues. Most have stopped attending union-related activities.

With a new trade union player on the turf in Rustenburg, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu), many women are hoping for a change. They are looking for a union that will service them and be more sensitive to their needs and deal with their concerns in an acceptable manner. Women are looking for a union that will truly represent the workforce and take gender issues seriously.

The new player, for some, seems the answer, but for a huge portion of women in mining, it is just another union that will eventually fall into the same masculine patterns as NUM. This is because every time Amcu calls a mass meeting, especially on a week day, it forces everyone to attend by telling taxi drivers and Impala buses not to load workers until the meeting is over. Some women finish working at 1pm and meetings start around 3pm, so women have to wait and then only leave after about 5pm. This infuriates women who often have to rush home to attend to children and other household duties. Some women think that unions inherently lack sensitivity to their needs.

It seems that in the new order, with women in mining, for any trade union to succeed and attract active women members, it has to put gender issues at the fore of labour struggles. It has to move away from traditional ways of looking at labour as gender neutral and recognise the gendered ways in which organisations and labour movements operate. They need to address these issues with the same rigor as all other issues.

Whether NUM or Amcu, women are looking for a union that will meet their demands and represent them fairly to their employers. **LS**

*Asanda Benya is a PhD candidate and intern at the Work Society & Development Institute.*