

Decent work for women

Reflections from National Gender Conference

Poverty, unemployment and inequalities affect more women than men. Therefore, it is not surprising that women are at the lower levels of society. For women's full emancipation to happen more work needs to be done, writes **Elijah Chiwota**, as he discusses views gathered at the recent National Gender Conference of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu).

Atended by 150 delegates from the federation's affiliates and provinces, Federation of Unions of South Africa, and labour services and community organisations, the National Gender Conference (NGC) took place in Johannesburg in March.

The conference theme was: *'Fight inequalities, promote decent work and build economic alternatives for the total emancipation of women.'* The theme related well with Cosatu campaigns against labour broking and the electronic tolling system for Gauteng province's roads. The conference added more voices to the demands to reject the two practices. More so, as women workers were the worst affected by labour broking and high transport costs.

The 3rd NGC discussed the state of the gender struggle within the trade union federation and in broader society. For example, questions were raised about the work being done in organisations such as the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA).

PWMSA is mainly active in rural areas and works with such organisations as the Rural Women's Movement and the Disabled Women's Association of South Africa.

In response the organisation said it was still finding its feet. 'The reality is still that we are building the Movement to a state where ownership is not only left to the elected leadership. We are building to where all women take ownership and seek to protect and grow the Movement. We are still making strides to ensure that it carries relevance to all the women of South Africa, not just urban or rural women. Only in unity can we make our needs felt and adequately addressed,' said Baleka Mbete, the convenor of PWMSA and also chairperson of the African National Congress (ANC).

Other institutions involved in gender, referred to by the conference as machineries, were the Commission for Gender Equity and the Department of Women Children and People with Disabilities (DWCPA). Progress was noted on the inclusion of the former Office on the Status of Women, which is now part of the new DWCPA.

Since its launch the department has been involved in organising campaigns to stop violence against women such as the 16 Days of Activism of No Violence Against Women. It set up Thuthuzela Care Centres, which are located at hospitals, to deal with violence against women. The centres are linked to courts that handle sexual offences.

The conference also explored ways to include gender issues into political programmes, as well as strengthening gender structures, and tackling discrimination and victimisation in the male-controlled society of South Africa. This was in line with promoting gender equality and ending discrimination against women, as hoped for in the aims of the National Democratic Revolution.

Cosatu president, Sdumo Dlamini, said the conference was 'a platform in which revolutionaries can generate ideas and action plans on how best to take forward the National Democratic Revolution that seeks to resolve the marginalisation of women, especially black and African women in particular.'

The conference also sought to 'radically reconstruct the relationship between men and women on a more equal basis in the household and in the public sphere and [...] to ensure that a revolutionary gender perspective becomes the content of every policy both within our movement and in government legislation and programmes.'

The conference's long agenda included promoting decent



In traditional attire at Women's Day celebrations in 2011.

work and social protection for all, coming up with a collective bargaining agenda that was gender sensitive, developing cadres through political education and reflecting on gender policies. The conference also took into account the nature of capitalism, and how patriarchy showed its ugly head through male domination and harmful cultural practices such as *ukuthwala*, *ukungenwa* and *ukublolwa*.

According to the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development 'Ukuthwala is a form of abduction that involves kidnapping a girl or a young woman by a man and his friends or peers with the intention of compelling the girl or young woman's family to endorse marriage negotiations.' *Ukungenwa* was widow inheritance and *ukublolwa* (virginity testing). The South African Communist Party's

solidarity statement called for a campaign to end these ancient practices.

The conference agreed to consolidate and strengthen gender structures from grassroots to the national levels. This also helped in the mainstreaming of gender activism in both Cosatu and her affiliates' programmes.

'We are aware of the challenges confronting us. We commit ourselves to working together as comrades to respond to the challenges facing women, by implementing gender policies, resolutions and strategic programmes to respond to challenges confronting the federation and her unions,' read one of the resolutions.

Men were also targeted in the search for innovative ways to create space for women activism. Involving men was not a new idea as they had a role to play

as identified by women's rights activist Charlotte Maxeke as early as the 1930s. 'If you definitely and earnestly set out to lift women and children up... you will find the men will benefit, and thus the whole community, both white and black,' said Maxeke.

In future programmes Cosatu will include young women so as to develop them into politically conscious activists. It will also take forward campaign started by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), by extending and strengthening the existing network of young women who emerged from the campaign. A programme designed to meet the needs of young women will also be developed.

South Africa is infamous for being one of the most unequal societies in the world. This inequality can be seen at the workplace where women are the least paid. As

wage gaps were widening, the conference resolved to revive the 'Equal pay for work of equal value' demand. In an effort to secure a better deal for women in collective bargaining, Cosatu will also continue to demand greater involvement of women in the negotiations. For this to happen, women will be provided with the necessary training and support.

To restore the dignity of women, the fight against sexual harassment both in the workplace and in unions will be strengthened. Among other things, this will be done through activities such as reviving the Sexual Harassment Education Project (SHEP) and up-skilling for women within Cosatu structures. In the past the project aimed at eliminating sexual harassment in the workplace. It also helped women to access justice in cases where they were sexually harassed at work. Promoting gender relations were also part of SHEP's work.

Efforts will also be stepped up to eliminate gender-based violence through programmes and campaigns in the workplace, unions, and communities. The proposal by the DWCPD on the formulation of the national council against gender-based violence will be supported.

Cosatu will continue to pursue decent work and social protection with an emphasis on the most vulnerable workers, including domestic workers, farm workers, informal economy workers and sex workers. Furthermore, it will support the union for domestic workers, the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (Sadsawu). Efforts to fully recognise sex work and not make it a crime to engage in such work will be assisted by Cosatu.

Campaigns for greater access to maternity protection for all classes of working women and taking forward the campaign for the

ratification of International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions C183 (maternity protection) and C189 (decent work for domestic workers) will be scaled up.

'Being critical of our role in and relationship to various arms of the National Gender Machinery, we are determined to strengthen our engagements with machinery stakeholders, to ensure that issues impacting on working-class women are fed into their programmes,' added another resolution.

Cosatu pledged that women must be at the forefront of fighting HIV and AIDS, while in the process encouraging advocacy programmes for men. 'Freedom cannot be enjoyed in an environment where gender relations are unequal. The emancipation of women also meant the emancipation of men too as well as society as a whole'.

The conference recognised women's oppression as a global problem. In that respect working relations with international trade union movements and labour organisations, in particular with the ILO, would be strengthened.

The struggle for women's emancipation was a fight for social justice. Therefore, the conference felt that other players had roles

to play. 'We will accordingly strengthen our working relationship with Alliance partners, other federations, progressive non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, and join hands with rights-based organisations in our quest for equality and improvement of the conditions of women,' said the delegates.

Cosatu will also engage its affiliates to review the federation's national gender policy so as to update it in line with current developments in the country.

EDUCATING WOMEN

Speaking at the conference, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, who is also the President of the ANC Women's League, emphasised the importance of educating women and girls.

'Education is central particularly to breaking the cycle of poverty and ridding women of the shackles of cultural and patriarchal domination and [...] brings lasting benefits to individuals and communities. We have mechanisms in place to which all efforts may be channelled, including the Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign. We recently



William Matlala



ANC WL members.

launched the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) Accord on Basic Education and Partnership with Schools, whose community-based initiatives include the Adopt-a-School Campaign. Cosatu is a signatory to this Accord,' said Motshekga.

GLOBAL CAPITALIST CRISIS

Besides the problems faced by women nationally there were those that were a result of the global capitalist crisis, as highlighted by Dlamini.

'We have heard some saying that the world is recovering from the crisis and we wonder which standard they are using because for the working class, the economic crisis found us already in a deep crisis of poverty, unemployment and inequality.'

Those who argued that South Africa had recovered from the crisis should say how this has happened. They should also explain how the crisis has maintained inequalities. 'Those who say that there is recovery do not say that the gender inequalities and power imbalances that predate the current crisis have resulted in the effects of the global crisis falling disproportionately on

those who are already structurally disempowered and marginalised,' said Dlamini.

He argued that inequalities that led to fewer women in economic decision-making but more in informal, vulnerable and casual work were simply worsened by the crisis. Women's inadequate access to social protection fuelled the inequalities.

Explaining the impact of the crisis, Dlamini said: 'The crisis resulted in a total number of jobless worldwide escalating to 205 million in 2010 following an unprecedented increase of 27.6 million since 2007, on the eve of the global crisis. Because of the crisis the global unemployment rate rose from 5.6% in 2007 to 6.2% in 2010.'

'According to the ILO, between 2007 and 2009 the global female unemployment rate increased from 6 to 7% - slightly more than the male rate, which rose from 5.5 to 6.3%.'

Women suffered more from the crisis as they increased their working time to make ends meet. For retrenched women it was a double blow as in some instances male family members also lost jobs or had their working hours reduced thus reducing household income.

'Furthermore, because mothers have to increase their hours of remunerated work, female children are likely to face a high risk of being withdrawn from schools, in order to take care of younger siblings and sick family members, undertaking unpaid work - replacing the mother's role in the household.'

'The reduction of income at the households could cause excessive hours of both paid and unpaid work (such as collecting water and fuel and caring for families), having negative impact on the well-being of poor working women and girls,' said Dlamini.

The situation was not made better by the cuts in expenditure for public services and investments in infrastructures for improving water and energy access that were promoted by neo-liberal economic policies.

Reduction of resource and incomes among poor households worsened the living conditions of women and children. Some of the harsh effects included children dropping out of school because parents could not afford the fees. According to Dlamini this led to 'inter-generational poverty'.

CONCLUSION

South African women continue to be on the receiving end of poverty, inequality and unemployment and the Cosatu national gender conference recognised this. As part of its response the Conference adopted resolutions to deal with sexual harassment, training of young women, and strengthening the progressive women's movement.

Calls were made for the ratification of the ILO convention on maternity protection and for sex work to be legalised. The conference noted the progress made so far by current laws and policies. The delegates were all aware of the pressure that the global economic crisis put on women and their households. ^{LB}