

# Gender audit of shop stewards

## Inequality remains

A gender audit is part of union organisational development and the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) took this into account when it carried out its gender audit, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

In order to increase the number of women participating in the governance of the union, Samwu conducted a gender audit of its shop stewards in 2011. According to the audit report, the purpose of the exercise, which surveyed the provinces of Mpumalanga, Northern Cape and Western Cape, was to come up with 'a guiding tool' for the union's 'programmes, strategies and policies' on women's representation.

Among other things, the audit looked at women's participation and representation in union structures which continue to be dominated by men. The challenges the union faced also came under the spotlight.

The audit was not only concerned with problems but also suggested solutions. In that sense, the audit report can also be seen as an advocacy tool for gender equality for use by union officials and leaders.

The audit also assessed the political will of the union's leadership as 'illustrated in the policies and how the political leadership use their position and power to communicate' on gender issues in line with the Samwu constitution.

The leadership's accountability in relation to gender issues was also tested. How vocal were the leaders when it came to gender? Did they understand the dynamics and how they played out in union activities?

### WOMEN'S QUOTA

Clause 12.1.3 of the union's constitution reads: 'All constitutional structures of the union must be composed on a basis that no less than one third of the members of such structure must be women.' This provision applies to national and regional office bearers as well as the local shop steward committees.

'The idea of a quota is to acknowledge that the voices of women are important and must be heard and that women make up a critical number.'

The quota system attempts to lessen the existing discrimination and is an effective way to correct gender imbalances. Therefore it 'cannot be viewed as discriminatory'. However, those against quota systems argue that women elected using the system are 'less respected' and that the quotas 'takes away freedom of choice from the voters and distort the idea of representation.'

Yet the quota system has proved that it is an effective way to

increase women's representation, remarks the report. For the quota system to be successful it should be supported by other measures such as the continued recruitment of women to join Samwu. This allows for women leaders to develop through the union structures.

The union can also create conditions that enable women to take leadership positions such as re-electing women to positions at the end of their terms. This was in response to the audit's findings that more male leaders were retained than female ones and this worked against women's representation as voters had more confidence in a seasoned leader than a new one. It was concluded that the failure of women to retain positions could be a result of a 'hostile and fiercely competitive environment' in which union positions were contested.

There were also other factors. 'Sometimes cultural and marital obligations restrict women participation in union activities whilst at other times, the resources become a challenge (not having own transport to travel to meetings etc).'

### YOUNG WORKERS REPRESENTATION

Men constituted 58% of representation while young



*Delegates celebrate women's day at Samwu's 10th National Congress in Mangaung.*

men's (aged between 18 and 35) representation was 20%.

However, the representation of women and young women (18 to 35) was 15% and 7% respectively. This showed that there was underrepresentation of women, especially the young women. There was also underrepresentation of younger workers in general.

The audit report proposed that in order to build future leadership young workers should be developed as 'strong cadres in the labour movement.' The report recognised the challenges of youth unemployment facing mostly young people especially women.

'Employed young people today are amongst the most vulnerable in the workforce. Reports indicate that they are violated of their rights to unionise, employed as casual employees and often employed through agencies which cheat them of their hard-earned income by deducting huge amounts as agency fees.' Other workplace challenges for young workers were 'sexism, stigmatisation, mistrust, and arbitrary discrimination on the basis of age.'

Furthermore, the unions were seen as patriarchal and operating in paternalistic ways. The situation was also made worse by globalisation, which further weakened unions as work was organised in different ways commonly characterised by contract and casual work. Fewer unions had developed strategies to deal with this new environment.

However, young workers could learn from older workers especially on trade union politics. 'Class politics must be entrenched in them so that they understand and are able to articulate their challenge as the workforce.'

The disproportionate representation between young men and women 'illustrate that gender equality will continue for a very long time to come' and this made the need for gender equity an urgent one.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The report concluded with a number of recommendations. These included that 'real change' will come through 'educating union members (men and women) on the traditional stereotypes that limit gender representation and the participation of women.'

Emphasis was also made on making efforts to transform the political environment that continued to disadvantage women.

The union's electoral system should also be transformed to enable it to promote women's participation thus enabling more candidates to take part. Increasing the quota system to 50% would also have its benefits.

It was also recommended that the union should advance empowerment programmes for young workers, especially women, and align them to those of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu).

Usually unions never run out of words to put in their resolutions, but putting the words into action is another matter. In that respect the audit called upon Samwu's central executive committee to ensure progress.

'The central executive committee must monitor and discuss the implementation of organisational resolutions particularly in as far as those resolutions seek to advance gender equality and women empowerment.' <sup>18</sup>