

# Addressing gender inequality

## Learning in women spaces

Gender inequality is an issue which affects all spheres of society. In South Africa patriarchy still has an influence on how different sexes relate to one another resulting in women experiencing inequality, writes **Zuziwe Khuzwayo**.



*Patricia Nyman: In charge of gender education at Saccawu.*

**T**he recent Employment Equity Report of South Africa (2012-2013) shows that 80.1% of top management is occupied by males and women only occupy 19.8%. For those women who are in senior management, only 6.1% of them are African, while white women occupy 18.6% of senior management positions.

However, unions in South Africa have taken a direct initiative in addressing this issue. One of the unions which has adopted a unique way in addressing gender inequality within its organisation is the South African Commercial Catering Allied Workers Union (Saccawu). The union has chosen to organise women in separate spaces in order to address gender inequality.

### **SACCAWU GENDER POLICY**

Saccawu, like the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) gender policy, has defined gender as 'socially constructed and culturally defined relations between men and women'. In order to eradicate patriarchy and gender inequality in society, a consciousness needs to be created when discussing this issue and women need to be involved. This is

significant as the union has chosen to focus more on women than men by addressing the oppression which they experience. Saccawu has achieved this by having workshops, training and campaigns mainly targeted at women.

Says one female member who appreciated the different activities: 'Having this separate space allows us to truly discuss challenges facing us (i.e. women) and not be afraid to speak'.

One of the aims of the policy is to advance gender equality by having more women in leadership positions. It intends on achieving this by having more women represented in delegations, committees and union activities. Thus mainstreaming of gender is critical within the union. Gender consciousness must also be found in the daily thinking and activities of the union from financial meetings and policies to educational meetings. It must not be seen as an ad hoc issue that is only discussed in a gender space.

The union would like the gender committee chairperson and gender coordinators to be represented from local to national levels of the union. Additionally, the gender policy advocates for regional gender coordinators to be full-time instead of part-time. This responsibility would require gender coordinators to implement relevant activities agreed upon by the union. Currently regional coordinators are engaged in other work of the union and do not have the time or capacity to deal with gender issues effectively. The union also wants a fully functioning national gender coordinating department which has its own separate budget and funds. This is important in ensuring that gender issues are viewed as equal and as important as education.

Education and training of women members is critical in order to address inequality within the union. The policy advocates

for more education on women's roles and participation in the union. This has been achieved through mentorships, workshops and empowerment programmes. Gender training of elected officials must be done so that they are able to deal with the responsibilities required of them.

### SEPARATE SPACES

Saccawu's approach on implementing their policy is by organising women in separate spaces. The union felt that a separate structure was important as it allowed women to be amongst themselves, to discuss and articulate properly the issues that affected them without being intimidated by men. This particularly pertains to the issue of sexual harassment where some women workers may be nervous when speaking about it around men. Having a separate structure was argued to be important as women could gain confidence in their leadership abilities and raise their concerns. As a result, when it came to dealing with issues outside of the women-only forums they could be educated and confident to express their points of view.

One of the most influential programmes that influenced the gender policy was the Gender Empowerment Programme (GEP) of 1997-1999. Saccawu with help from Khanya College, recognised that previous empowerment programmes were once off and did not build a foundation for future women leaders to grow. It was with this thinking in mind that the GEP programme became a three-year programme where specific individuals would be targeted and equipped with the skills and theory to deal with gender inequality in the union and the workplace.

The aim of the programme was to raise consciousness on gender inequality amongst fellow workers

and also within the union. The first year of the programme focused on basic gender training and provided skills on this topic. The second year had workshops and training on economic literacy and collective bargaining. The final year of the programme trained union members in policy formulation.

The union wanted women shop stewards to bring a gender dimension to the bargaining processes and for women to be able to participate on other issues such as on the economy and not feel marginalised.

The union targeted mainly women as more men were regional education coordinators and part of the programme as well. This highlighted and still continues to show that organising women in a separate space is a challenge within the union, because leadership positions are mainly held by men therefore trying only to target women is difficult. The union dealt with this challenge by having women only participate in the first year of the regional and national workshops. This then meant more women came to the national workshops as compared to men.

Saccawu's national gender coordinator, Patricia Nyman, said the programme was successful. 'This programme allowed us to put serious emphasis on women and allow them to be empowered and grow within the union. This was the foundation for the capacity building of the gender department. It is still a challenge, but the programme was helpful in creating the building blocks which we still use today. Many women members are starting to occupy positions of leadership and they are gaining skills which they can use not only in a gender workshop but also in a finance workshop and in their daily lives.'

Women who participated in the programme also agreed with Nyman. One woman organiser

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from the West Rand branch of Saccawu said: 'The programme helped me in that I started to grow in my job. I was first a normal worker at OK Bazaar (which is now Shoprite Checkers) and when attending this programme I believed in myself as I had the knowledge and skills so I put myself up for leadership positions. I was not scared anymore as I knew I could do the job. I moved from being a shop steward to national gender chairperson with the help of this programme. I find that I can facilitate in a group of men and not feel scared as I believe in myself.'

### CAMPAIGNS

The union has decided to have gender workshops and training aimed at women. The importance of having gender workshops and training is that they go even further than just focusing on what affects women, but they educate women in many other ways. An older woman organiser within the union said that the 'gender workshops gave me good writing skills on how to write a report. The workshops also discussed issues of shop steward education and finance education'.

According to the national gender coordinator, the gender workshops discuss all aspects of the union which affect a worker but from a female perspective. This is important as it emphasises how gender issues need to be mainstreamed in the union and not looked at as a separate issue which is the second aim of the gender policy.

Women members of the union agree that the separate space has been successful. A female shop

steward at the National Congress said: 'In my own experience I speak better in gender workshops and forums than in other spaces as I am confident in myself.' Other respondents also felt that having the separate space allows women to talk about their day-to-day experience as workers and they relate better to each other.

### CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

One of the most important successes of organising women in a separate space when dealing with gender inequality is that women are able to support each other.

'When women have frustrations about education for their children or frustrations at work, they can discuss it with other women and support or give advice to one another.'

Adds Nyman: 'This is important as it allows women to relate to one another and also fosters strong bonds between women which is important when trying to build leadership.'

The role of women in leadership has also grown as more women are occupying shopsteward roles on the shop floor which is the most important point of leadership in a union. Over 50% of shop stewards in the union are women, and 46% of local office bearers are women. This is significant as women are occupying important positions and from there they can move into higher positions of leadership within the union. This will increase their representation in the union and begin to bring forward issues affecting women even more.

There are still challenges that affect the decision to organise separately such as having gender

coordinators from local to national levels of the union as they can only occupy this position on a part-time and not on a full-time basis. As mentioned before this signifies how gender is seen as an ad hoc issue and not as part of all spheres of the union that requires full-time attention. Self-belief amongst women to be leaders is not common in unions. From observations and interviews, one can still see that women do not believe in themselves to be in leadership positions.

A shop steward from Makro said: 'Women still do not have belief in themselves as leaders and do not think that other women should be leaders.'

This thinking will take a while to change as it is reinforced by the patriarchal society in which we live. Organisation of women in a separate space raises awareness and begins to change the current belief that women cannot be leaders.

### CONCLUSION

Addressing gender inequality is an important issue for different sectors of society to address. Saccawu's approach in dealing with gender inequality shows that organising women separately allows for women to gain confidence in themselves and challenge societal norms. Mainstreaming gender issues ensures that men and women engage with these issues so as to begin to do away with inequality.

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