

In this article FIONA DOVE looks at the gender structure of wage work in South Africa, and union attempts to give women equality in the labour market

affirming **women in** *the* **workplace**



Maternity rights and childcare facilities are important in supporting women's equal right to paid work. But not all women workers are mothers of small children and so these are

not the only issues affecting women workers.

Black working class people in South Africa have suffered race and class discrimination. But the gender specificity of this is not well understood. For example, black working class men have not had the education and training opportunities of white workers, but this lack of opportunity has been even worse for black working class women. Families' financial constraints, and traditional notions of women's social role have restricted women even more than men.

Similarly, racist job segregation excluded black workers from many jobs and trades, but sex-based recruitment limited women's access even further. Where black workers predominate in particular grades, or industries, wages have dropped. Where black women predominate the value given to that work is even lower.

In reality, the justification for the low value of women's work in terms of gender roles

simply does not exist. Crudely, employer logic has been: all families have two parents, only one needs to work and tradition dictates this be the father, so he should get paid more. This may be bourgeois reality but it is not working class reality. A large proportion of black households are in fact headed by women supporting their families on very low wages. In any case, the migrant labour system was always used to justify not paying a family wage to African men.

Winning wage parity

One of the first issues progressive trade unions took up for women members was the question of equal pay.

A 1981 Wage Act amendment prohibited separate pay structures based on race and sex in wage determinations. This meant that men and women doing the same work could not be paid at different rates. Sectors not covered by wage boards, however, were not covered by the law. CAWU (Construction & Allied Workers Union) had to resort to strike action as late as 1988 to win parity, and it took CWIU (Chemical Workers Industrial Union) and POTWA (Post Office & Telecommunications Workers Association) until 1990! Chris Bonner of CWIU suspects some homeland employers still discriminate against women.

Sometimes organisers have been ignorant of the law and have not questioned separate pay structures. FAWU's (Food & Allied Workers Union) Viva Mtai says this was their problem as late as December last year! On the whole though, discrimination in this blatant form has been eradicated.

Unionists are aware that gains for most women workers have been negligible. Martin Nicol of NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) points out, where men and women do the same job, they are given different titles: "the grading system in the mining industry is structured in such a way that there is a wide spread of wages for similar work." The same phenomenon was observed by unionists in other industries.

Deciding value

So the principle that wages cannot be determined by sex has been established, but the practice continues in a less obvious way.

COSATU unions are beginning to examine grading systems to ensure the principle is enforced. "A first step in removing race and sex as criteria for grading, is to rationalise and reduce the number of grades," says a draft proposal to the March COSATU Campaigns Conference. Objective criteria have to be developed to determine how a worker is graded.

NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers), SACTWU (South African Clothing & Textile Workers Union) and SAMWU (South African Municipal Workers Union) have agreements to negotiate grading systems with employers this year. SACCAWU (South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union) is pushing to have a say in the Hospitality Industry Training Board constitution, and thereafter hopes to reshape the grading system in the hotel and catering sector. Their proposals have equality for women high on the agenda.

Job segregation

It is uncommon for men and women to do the same jobs because sex has long been the basis for recruitment policies. Interviews with collective bargaining co-ordinators and

delegates to the COSATU Women's Conference last year, revealed that women in COSATU unions are clustered in the lowest grade jobs, such as teamakers, cleaners, low level machine operators, and in the lowest paid sectors, such as forestry, domestic service and clothing manufacturing. So it is clear that it is not enough to say the same job should receive the same pay regardless of sex, because women still end up in the lowest paid jobs.



Recognition that sex cannot be the basis for determining wages has also opened the way to challenge this unequal valuation of different work done by men and women. NUMSA has spearheaded a COSATU participatory research programme that is exploring the possibility of a national training/grading framework across industries. This could fundamentally challenge devaluation of work dominated by women, and open up opportunities for women to enter categories of work, or whole industries, where they have been excluded.

According to SACTWU's Connie September the clothing industrial council has agreed to negotiate desegregation of jobs this year. NUM has a policy on equal access to all jobs for men and women, although Nicol says there has been no noticeable impact on the mines.

Training

Lack of access to training has been an important aspect of women's exclusion from particular trades. In 1987, for example only

0,2% of African women workers were artisans*. In 1989, there were no women apprentices in the furniture, building or motor vehicle trades, and only 0.8% of those in the metal and engineering industry were African women**. In 1992, there were 1 800 African apprentices in the metal and engineering sector - and only seven women!

COSATU wants to institutionalise training and career paths which open up possibilities for women to break through old job barriers. It is envisaging a system where every worker has access to education and training. Modules completed would be certificated by industry training boards and recognised nationally.

Ideally, the training offered would enable workers to gain skills applicable across industries. This would give them greater freedom in choosing jobs, and would start to break down sex and race-based job segregation.

A NUMSA bargaining demand is that every worker should have the right to paid time off to complete at least two modules of training a year. And according to Khaya Moila, POTWA wants a say in choosing trainees for all jobs this year, and is committed to women being given more opportunities.

Affirmative action

Affirmative action is a way of promoting those who are discriminated against. In industry it is commonly understood to be about quotas in recruitment or training programmes. This is only part of it. The exercise would be pointless if the oppressive social relations and institutions underpinning such discrimination are not also radically changed. This is why COSATU is calling for a complete reconstruction of society - every vestige of apartheid must go.

It is clear that black working class women have been the most discriminated against in South Africa. If any group should be prioritised for upliftment, it should be them. And so reconstruction must involve the

elimination of sexism. Reconstruction is not just a legal matter. It is a question of changing attitudes and practices. Albie Sachs, in *Protecting Human Rights in a New South Africa* (1990, p12) argues for constitutional backing for affirmative action. He says this would oblige the state to use institutions and resources to promote the rights of all citizens.

Affirmative action is integral to the success of NUMSA's industry training programme. Obviously the NUMSA proposals are primarily directed at eliminating race discrimination, but they are also wanting to address gender discrimination. The one problem is that in most COSATU-organised industries, the workers are mainly men.

NUMSA's industrial councils have agreed to negotiate the union's proposal for a Code of Practice to End Unfair Discrimination. Central to this is affirmative action to ensure women have access to training and jobs where they have been excluded. This is also part of SAMWU's proposals on job evaluation to be negotiated this year. Although CAWU tabled job segregation to its industrial council in 1991 without success, Thabo Morale says CAWU will raise affirmative action this year. Affirmative action was raised at SACCAWU's bargaining conference this year, and is central to its proposals on the HITB constitution.

CWIU's Bonner says "job classifications are being challenged throughout industry and affirmative action has been tabled as a demand since 1991, but more research is required on how to implement such policies." CWIU has a policy that all jobs should be open to men and women, and "women shall be in 50% of the jobs". They recently held a women's forum workshop on affirmative action to start giving some definition to this.

It is essential for COSATU to work out clear guidelines for affirmative action around both race and gender. Without these, it will be impossible to monitor progress. These guidelines will be important in confronting

* Quoted in Debbie Budlender, 1991 *Women and The Economy, Paper 7, Women and Gender in Southern Africa Conference*, p10.

** *Manpower Survey 1989, Occupational Information, CSS.*



Temporary company creche set up on Childcare Day in 1992: company creches would help to make work environments more women-friendly

Photo: William Matlala

reluctant managements. While it is widely accepted that affirmative action is necessary for black workers, management are not aware, or concerned, about addressing the specific discrimination faced by women. A human resource manager, working on affirmative action for a large corporate group, said recently that her company is only concerned with redressing past race discrimination, and that management does not see the specific problems of women. She feels that to acknowledge gender discrimination would be admitting something in themselves, whereas race discrimination can be blamed on apartheid, 'out there'.

Women-friendly workplaces

Employers will have to invest more in training, and with the unions' emphasis on portable skills, they will have to put creative thinking into giving workers a long-term future in the company. In the end, if COSATU unions actively take up women's issues it will be in employers' interests to develop a

women-friendly work environment. This means a work culture which actively discourages sexual harassment, promotes equal treatment of women, accommodates women's specific needs, and offers women a secure future. If employers do not offer benefits to women they will risk losing workers to other employers who do.

Some unions are already negotiating around concerns specific to women. Health and safety issues are the most common, for example, access to contraceptive advice, cervical cancer tests, protection from work harmful to reproductive capacity, and transport for night workers. Discrimination in company benefits such as housing loans, pensions and medical aids are also being challenged. Such discrimination usually relates to women's marital status and definitions of 'breadwinner'. Good maternity rights, childcare facilities and family considerations, are becoming increasingly important, particularly for sectors employing many women.

Comment on interviews with bargaining co-ordinators

Various national officials were asked about collective bargaining developments in their unions with reference to gender. Some commented that answering the questionnaire had been a consciousness-raising exercise in itself – one official even took notes of angles to raise at a forthcoming bargaining conference. PPWAWU's Rob Rees spoke for many over-stretched negotiators in commenting that "it wouldn't be extra work! Just a gender-sensitive approach to normal collective bargaining issues."

All those interviewed stressed that any statistical information they gave was just guess work. No accessible data is kept on numbers of men and women officials, negotiators, and members. Frustration was expressed at the poor level of centralising, and collating information on national collective bargaining, let alone local agreements with specific implications for women.

On the issue of proportions of women amongst organisers and negotiators, only SACTWU was confident it had proportional representation. No union had specific gender-sensitivity training for their officials or shopstewards. The relationship of gender or women's forums, where they exist, to collective bargaining structures was non-existent. Nor had this been considered. ❖

Empower the women

In the last seven years of collective bargaining, the real gains for women have been maternity rights and the eradication of separate pay structures within the same job grade. Interestingly, the new issues of childcare and training/grading/career paths are seen as general worker issues, rather than being specifically for women. This is positive because it indicates an holistic analysis of worker issues, one which takes account of gender discrimination. But this is only at a formal level, and there is a danger that women will not be empowered through the process except as rank and file members.

The new collective bargaining arena should also be seen as an opportunity to empower women in the unions. It could attract many more women to the unions, and give them the space to become more active. In order to ensure that men do not overlook women's issues, attention should be given to the disproportionately few women shopstewards, and women in union negotiating teams. Only SACTWU is satisfied that women are proportionately represented on negotiating teams, with CWIU and SAMWU to a lesser

extent. SACCAWU and POTWA are red-faced on this issue.

The union gender/women's forums need to look at how they can assist the process. Collective bargaining around these new issues has only just begun. Clear details have not been worked out and little discussion has happened on the shopfloor. In the interviews done with collective bargaining co-ordinators a real hunger was expressed for back-up research and resource material in tackling some of the gender issues raised. All expressed a genuine seriousness about a gender-sensitive approach to organising and negotiating. In fact, most saw this as an organisational imperative, particularly where unions are not able to recruit more women – for example, PPWAWU (Printing Paper Wood & Allied Workers Union) in forestry or NEHAWU (National Education, Health & Allied Workers Union) amongst the nurses.

The 1980s raised the more obvious issues for women workers, but the 1990s look set to get to the heart of things. It will be interesting to see how far the union movement gets by the year 2000! ☆