

Building women, building unions

A fundamental challenge facing the trade union movement is building real democracy, which embodies true worker control. Workers are women and men, casual and permanent, 'skilled' and 'unskilled' - real democracy means giving voice and space to the most exploited and marginalised. A delegate to the ICFTU International Women's Conference in May 1999, expressed the point as follows: 'Building union democracy necessarily implies women's full participation because it means listening to the ones who are not listened to.'

Since its launch, COSATU has taken resolutions and developed strategies to challenge women's oppression in the workplace and in the unions.

One of the strategies was to set up women's structures in the federation and affiliates where women could come together to deal with the challenges they were facing. Later, these structures became gender structures (although some affiliates maintained women's structures).

Gender structures

A number of interviews were conducted with shopstewards and union officials for a Naledi research project which focused on assessing gender structures in COSATU. These interviews revealed a number of problems, in particular:

Liesl Orr examines how gender structures and discourse are used in unions and finds that they limit the struggle against women's oppression.

- confusion around the role of gender structures;
- the challenges of gender power relations in the unions.

A key problem with union structures in general, and gender structures specifically, is that unionists do not give sufficient attention to defining the structure's role, aims and objectives. In an interview, a union educator remarked that there is an 'obsession' with structures, whereas unionists should place emphasis on a more organic approach to ensuring that women are strong and organised. 'We tend to believe that if you have structures that meet often, we're dealing with problems and functional structures. So we set up a national gender forum - we're not sure what it's going to do, but we know that we need one. We don't first say how best can we get an exciting, vibrant women's movement, then ask what kind of co-ordination we need.'

The first thing we do is establish a gender forum and the first task of the

gender forum is to ensure that each region and local has a gender forum. And then we say gender structures are not functioning, we must work harder. But an organisation has to harness energy that's there already. So I think we need something more organic. We need women being more organised, women refusing to be pushed around, women saying we will adopt a quota system, we want a firm campaign on maternity leave. We need women supporting each other, strategising and taking up clear and simple demands.'

Links to education

Unions have also tended to equate gender work with education in a way that is not organically linked to building organisation. Both education and gender are about building organisation, but there is often a separation between education and campaigns. For example, unions might run many gender awareness-raising workshops where they discuss issues like unpaid labour and women's responsibility for childcare. Yet when it comes to collective bargaining the first demand that is dropped is about maternity leave.

An example of where education and gender could be linked into a powerful campaign could be a vibrant and active campaign around maternity pay that could raise awareness around gender issues, and specifically the link between patriarchy, capitalism and government policies. Thus, we need to challenge the idea that dealing with gender issues in unions is about a narrow conception of awareness-raising through workshops. Unions need to take up a far more integrated approach to consciousness and activism.

There is a growing emphasis on the role of gender structures in conscientising men, fuelled by the belief that this will change men and put an end to male resistance. One shopsteward expressed

the hope that if men become more involved 'maybe that stiff neck will turn'.

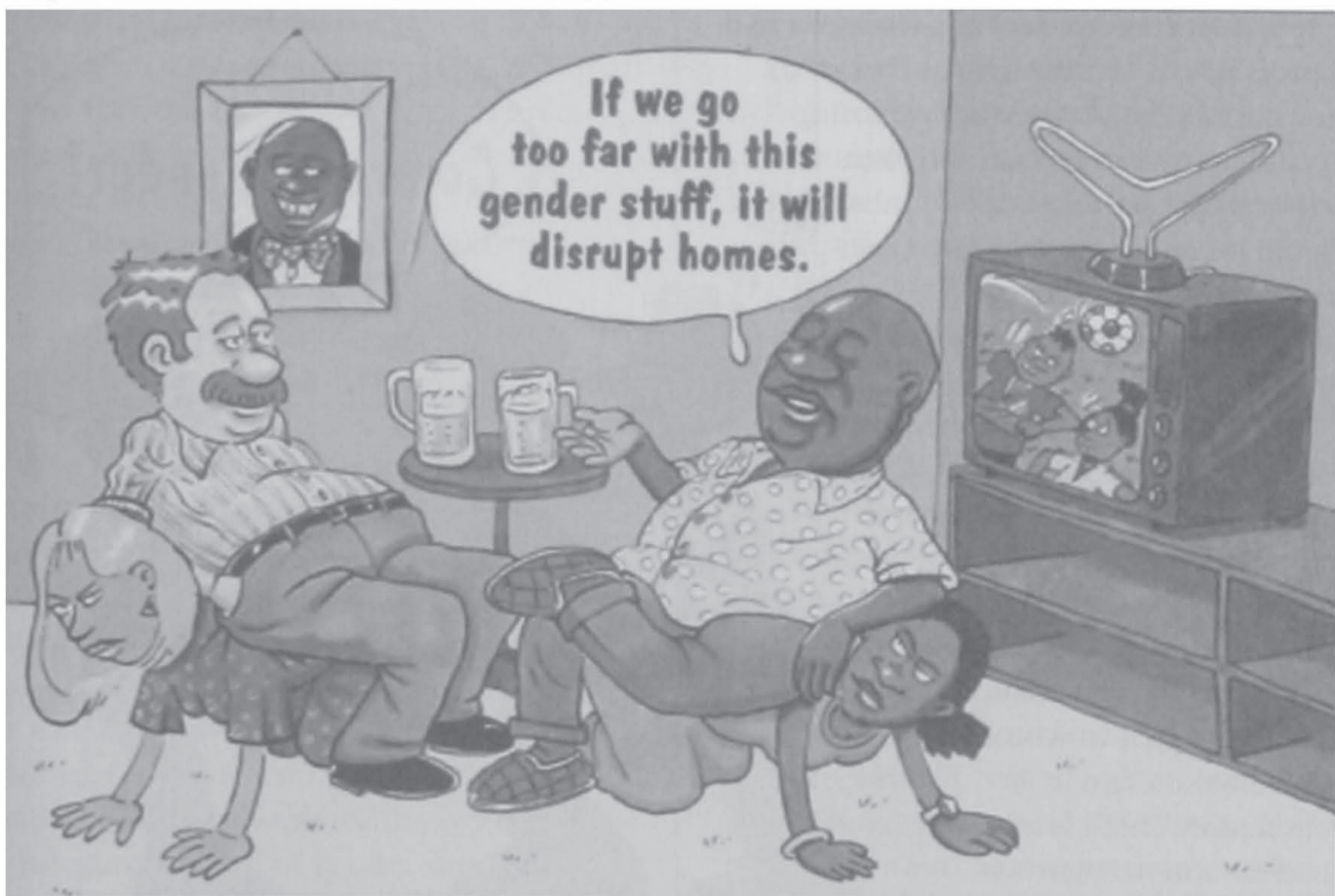
It is the role of trade unions as a whole, not only gender structures, to conscientise their membership around gender issues. Conscientising members on gender issues should be part of a union's overall political and organisational programme.

Gender structures should be seen as strategising forums, which would nevertheless have the indirect effect of conscientising membership as a result of visible and dynamic campaigns and activities. This point is captured in the following quote: 'I think that people will become more conscientised around women's problems if women become more vocal around them. And I don't think our gender structures are facilitating that vocalness. I think they're almost cushioning it. They're almost muting it.'

Gender power relations

The following quote describes the relationship between gender and power in the union context: 'Gender is about the power position. The attitude of a lot of males is that gender is fine as long as it knows its place, but if my position as chair is challenged we'll deal with this thing called gender. For male comrades, it's now becoming harder to become leaders, so they start complaining and resisting. Some people don't appreciate policies and treat gender issues with pessimism, saying "well it's a very noble thing but of course it will take the next 500 years so we'd better get on with real union business in the meantime".'

Women that have been elected into leadership positions talk of significant male resistance to their leadership: 'There's a very real power struggle based on maintaining positions for men and questioning women's capacity - "what do you know - you're a woman, and I cannot



by Duncan Proudfoot

be led by you". When it's a woman there are all sorts of criteria. We get told we don't have a clear political understanding and can't give the organisation direction. We get asked how we will cope with the demands of leadership because we have children. After a woman has been elected, male comrades will resist her, either overtly or covertly. But they will resist her until they realise that she's there to stay. Then they eventually have to grudgingly accept it.

Using and abusing

A view that was expressed in some of the interviews, is that the concept of gender appealed to men because it waters down the militance of women's structures and is therefore less threatening.

This is echoed by the following comment by a shopsteward who suggests that the concept of gender is used to appease men: 'The way I see it, gender is like a foil paper to cover everything and

make it look nice. We use it so we're not discriminating, because the men feel isolated and rejected. We say gender is for everyone.'

Sometimes the participation of men in gender structures serves to perpetuate male domination, as the following quote suggests: 'The most positive impact of the concept of gender in the union movement is of men needing to take responsibility. But that has not been the outcome - the outcome has been men's involvement as a mechanism of control and continued dominance.'

Time and again in interviews, men placed limitations and conditions on gender struggles. For example, arguing that 'gender is fine, but the problem is that women want to abuse power', or 'we must clearly define the gender issue to make sure that it doesn't get out of hand', or raising concerns that 'if we go too far it will threaten marriages and disrupt homes'; or 'it's part of our culture'.

It is important to develop strategies and approaches to involve men and ensure they participate actively in promoting equality between women and men. However, the participation of men should be understood in its proper perspective, and patriarchal thinking amongst men should not be underestimated.

These points highlight the fact that gender is useful as an analytical tool, but it can be misinterpreted and misused (like any other concept or perspective) in the interest of maintaining the status quo. Gender relations refer in essence to women's subordination and male domination. There is a need for a more rigorous understanding of the power dynamic involved.

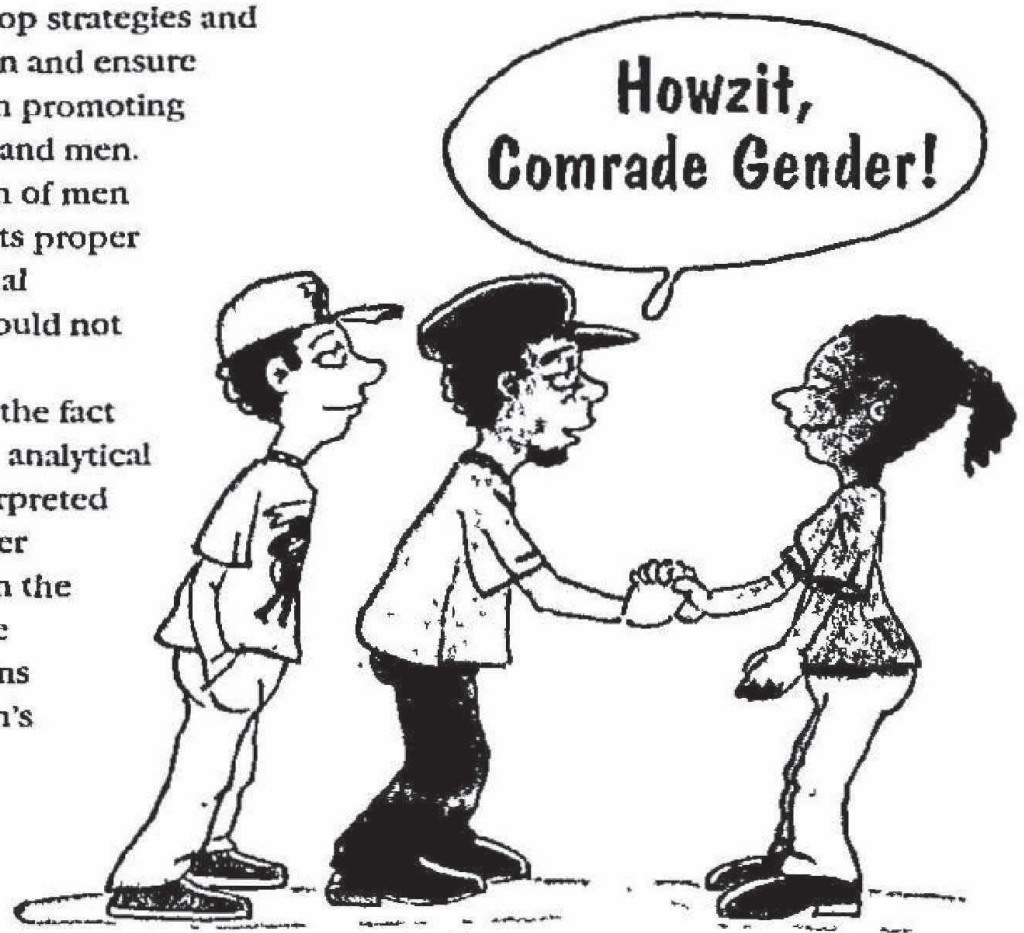
The following section highlights some of the ways in which the concept of gender is misused in unions, based on the gender power relations discussed above.

'Gender is just another term for women's issues'

Gender is still used as a synonym (that is the same word) for women. In its crudest form, women are referred to as 'genders' or 'comrade gender'.

One educator pointed out that 'We expose comrades to the concept of gender through our education programmes and materials. But the stereotypes still remain, like reducing it to a women thing. Put women there, let them deal with it, give them space. It's not an issue that's affecting us.'

Women's oppression is a societal issue based on unequal gender power relations, and women are not a 'problem to be solved'. Trade unions often operate in a



way that sets up gender structures to fall by marginalising them and not providing support and resources.

'Gender = men + women'

There is a tendency to promote an understanding of gender that assumes that you can only talk of a gender structure if it has equal numbers of women and men participating. But, the gender approach is about perspective, not equal numbers. Some unionists naively promote men's participation in gender structures thinking that once men are drawn in they will be champions of change and no longer resist. While the involvement of men in gender struggles is very important, we should be aware of the contradictions and power dynamic involved, particularly in relation to women's internalised oppression, which takes the form of submissiveness; and male domination and resistance (even in subtle forms).

Downplaying reality

A critique of the gender perspective is that it can take the focus away from the real issue - women's oppression 'If you're forever saying gender relations, gender subordination, gender oppression, it's possible that the actual reality that it's women who are suffering the brunt of sexism, gets lost and forgotten, especially by men.

We need a much stronger emphasis on women's oppression and the fact that gender relations is about women's oppression. It's not a case of both men and women suffering because of gender power relations, which is what some men in COSATU have promoted quite successfully. This downplays the reality and ultimately neutralises the overall strategic objective of gender struggles, which is the struggle against women's oppression.'

It is true that both women and men are affected by sexist stereotypes. For example, the idea that women are nurturing caretakers is accompanied by the idea that men cannot be loving and caring towards children. Or equally, the fact that men's lives are seen as expendable in the context of war, while women are protected as fragile beings. Nevertheless, men are put into a position of power and dominance in our society, and women are placed into a position of subordination.

In using the gender approach, we should emphasise power relations, as well as other very important and central concepts like patriarchy, women's subordination and the sexual division of labour.

Women's participation

Trade unions are faced with many challenges in building organisation which includes women. These include:

- overcoming all barriers to women's participation in unions,
- building women's leadership,
- organising the unorganised,
- improving the position of women in the workplace

The following are important challenges that have emerged from the discussion above:

Unpaid labour

The sexual division of labour in the home and the workplace is a key factor contributing to the low levels of women's participation in organisation. The central aspect of women's oppression in the capitalist system - unpaid reproductive labour - is itself central to keeping women from organising against the system. Sexist stereotypes and internalised oppression also contribute to undermining women's roles as leaders.

Separate organising of women

In some unions, the idea of separate forums for women has become unmentionable. Yet it has always been understood that women may have to hold separate caucuses or meetings where the need arises.

Establishing structures which include both women and men implies an advanced stage of consciousness and organisational commitment - however these are still lacking in COSATU and its affiliates. Therefore, there may be a need for women in unions to come together to strategise, assess progress and build unity and solidarity.

Taking up gender struggles

Unionists should focus on taking up gender struggles in unions and the workplace, and building gender structures as a means to co-ordinate these struggles. A clear, simple and effective campaign on



electing more women as shopstewards or on childcare facilities in the workplace could, for example, have an enormous impact if properly co-ordinated and integrated with other union struggles.

Gender co-ordinators and gender structures should be resourced to carry out campaigns and activities in unions. At present, gender structures remain marginalised from the core work of unions

Gender co-ordinators are often administrators, who do not have status and influence in unions. Unions do not provide adequate political support and most importantly, do not provide adequate resources to ensure that gender structures function effectively.

Progressive theory

An important role of gender structures and the union movement more broadly is to promote a progressive theoretical perspective that is appropriate to the union context and that reflects the organisational and workplace challenges

facing women. Women must take the lead in developing and promoting this perspective.

There are different approaches to and understandings of the concept of gender and its application in the union movement. This needs to be the subject of continuous debate and engagement to sharpen the theoretical perspective that underpins gender structures and struggles in COSATU.

There is a need to rigorously clarify and promote a radical perspective on gender power relations in COSATU. This should emphasise the principal strategic objective of eliminating women's oppression, and should equally promote women's central role in leading this struggle. It is also very important for men to take equal responsibility for eliminating sexism and supporting women leadership. However, this should always take account of the continued prevalence of male domination in trade unions. ★

Liesel Orr is a researcher at Naledi.