

Celebrating 25 years of Cosatu women's empowerment

The unions in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and its predecessor, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), adopted women's emancipation as an important goal. **Maud Dlomo** remembers her own experience and celebrates their success in creating an empowering culture for women and makes a plea for unions to continue their work amongst young women members today.

As Cosatu celebrated 25 years of existence in 2010 some of us, who were once involved with this great organisation, realised how old we have become. What is good about getting old is that hindsight allows us to appreciate the past as we compare it with the present.

In supporting Cosatu's coming of age let me reflect on how far the women who were groomed by the progressive labour movement, Fosatu and Cosatu, have come. But also, more importantly, highlight that the values which we were taught are still relevant today. This is based on my own experience as an administrator and organiser for a Woman's Forum in Durban between 1980 and 1989.

This piece does not cover all the activities which women embarked on in the union movement and the few women mentioned here does not mean that there were no others who played a crucial role.

I base my piece on the discussions which took place in my branch which may have been different in other branches. I also hope that other current and former

Cosatu women are inspired to write about their experience in the labour movement.

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

During my teenage years in the 1980s, black trade unions in Fosatu, later Cosatu, became very strong due to the 1973 spontaneous Durban strikes and the Wiehahn Commission's recommendations which changed the law. These early unions provided an enabling environment for thinking and dreaming about a future free of sexism, racism and discrimination. Meetings provided the platform to shape young people's ideas on the importance of liberation and equality.

Everyone who worked for these unions was expected to attend all leadership and management meetings although we were office workers.

In the 1980s the apartheid government intensified its oppression through states of emergency, detention without trial, forced conscription for white males and in response it faced continuous wildcat strikes and community

struggle. As the apartheid regime became more intransigent, activists became more militant.

In Fosatu union meetings debates on how to strengthen the fight against apartheid took place. Debates about gender equality however had the potential to divide men and women and compromise workers' unity, but Fosatu embraced gender equality as one of the key issues to fight for as a central human right.

There was a big debate on whether gender issues should be addressed like any other agenda item in union meetings or whether a special committee dealing with women's issues should be established. This committee could then bring recommendations to regular structures.

One school of thought argued that gender inequality was based in the way society defined gender and allocated power and privileges to men at the expense of women. The issue then had to be addressed like any other issue with both men and women working together for equality. This would prevent women's issues being 'ghettoised'.



South African Domestic Workers Union workers on International Women's Day in 1989.

An alternative school of thought pointed out that there were very few women who participated in union meetings except for women organisers employed by the union such as Ma-Lydia Kompe, Maggie Magubane, June-Rose Nala, Thembi Nabe, Jane Barrett, Adrienne Bird, Pat Horn and Ntokozo Mbhele.

Women shop stewards, elected by fellow colleagues on the shop-floor, were few and far between and it was difficult for them to attend meetings on weekends. This was because they had domestic chores and also that meetings went on for hours, often into the night.

Although the South African Democratic Teachers Union, the Domestic Workers Union and the National Health and Allied Workers Unions had more women members because of the nature of the work, women's participation in leadership and in meetings, was not significantly different. Most women needed the confidence to perform at the same level as men in meetings.

Understanding the basics of how the union movement functioned, its structures and broader politics was therefore crucial. The issue then was not about creating a 'them' and 'us' scenario, the argument

continued, but was about creating a safe forum to build the capacity and confidence of women to effectively participate in all union activities. And that's how Women's Forums were established to build women's confidence, deliberate on how women's issues should be addressed further and take recommendations to branch executive meetings.

I became the facilitator of Fawu's (Food and Allied Workers Union) Women's Forum in 1986 in Durban. Sitting and listening in union meetings as an administrator, had given me enough confidence and basic political understanding of why gender equality was important along with other rights. I also understood the constitution and the structure of the union movement.

Perhaps the fact that Susan Shabangu, the current Minister of Energy, started as an administrator in the Transport and General Workers Union and progressed to be an organiser says a lot about the ability of unions to build the capacity of its employees, through the quality of its meetings.

BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Women's Forums contributed towards building the capacity of women workers on the constitution,

structures and the culture of Cosatu unions away from men who were more confident in participating in meetings.

Although I was a facilitator of the Women's Forum, I did not have experience in teaching adults, or in understanding politics. But we sought assistance from experienced organisers who taught in workers' political seminars, such as Jayendra Naidoo, Henry Zondi, Bobby Mare, Michael Masondo, Geoff Schreiner and Jay Naidoo. They urged us on and provided information or assistance we needed.

The challenge was to ensure that Women's Forum recommendations were implemented as the gender item was always at the end of the agenda and most meetings ended late without completing the agenda. Putting women's issues on top of the agenda has always been an issue of contestation literally and figuratively.

The 1970s and 1980s were also a period when organisers woke up early in the morning to stand at the factory gates to recruit membership. Sometimes they were arrested by management for trespassing and on release they would go back and continue. I participated in some of these campaigns to experience the

process and gain political education in a way that no text book could give me. It was an exciting time for young people.

Union meetings were very important. They formed part of the conscientisation and education process. Members learnt how meetings were conducted, issues debated and decisions taken. The principles of democracy, workers' control, non-racialism and the differences between socialism, communism, Marxism and capitalism were taught in special workers' schools but were practised, or argued for or against, in these meetings between members at branch level, in shop-floor meetings or with management during negotiations fighting for rights, better conditions and wages.

Meetings provided a platform to mobilise members and educate young people. They provided an opportunity to learn even if it took years for these groups to gain confidence and articulate issues eloquently. Women such as Edna Molewa, now Minister for Environmental Affairs, Elizabeth Thabethe, Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry and Pat Kumalo, speaker of the Ekurhuleni Municipality, are women who developed through the shop floor, through community involvement, and they have achieved what Cosatu should be proud of.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN PRACTICE

I learnt in those meetings that democracy is time consuming, requires respect for everyone's voice and opinion and complete commitment to its practice and growth.

In our meetings everyone's opinion was listened to even if a person repeated what others had said. Debates were robust, comrades fought hard for their ideas to be adopted, but it was about debating which idea or tactic was more appropriate in dealing with workers' issues rather than personal attacks.

Such a culture meant that meetings were long even when the agenda was short. It was a difficult time for black women who did not have enough confidence. For a teenager like me I found the debates very aggressive but I soon learnt that outside of the meeting comrades would hug, chat about soccer and make jokes.

Unions also taught its members to compromise and embrace final decisions on issues which they had not necessarily supported as individuals, but were accepted by majority. A member of the union could not then stand up to oppose a fellow colleague in public because they were defeated by the final vote on the matter. With hindsight, I realise how important these skills are in organisations, the diplomatic field and in developing leadership abilities.

What was inspiring about Cosatu was that it was prepared to look closely at itself and change its culture in order to reflect its values.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Besides the union movement, there were other women's organisations such as *Speak* magazine team comprising Karen Hurt, Jean Ngubane and Phumelele Ntombela. *Speak* raised pertinent women's issues ranging from health, confidence building and the challenges of being a woman in a patriarchal society. It supported women in Cosatu and encouraged women to speak out about women specific issues and engage male comrades in meetings.

Organisations such as the Natal Women's Organisation and the Federation of Transvaal Women brought together women's organisations and provided political direction and women such as Nozizwe Madlala, Pregs Govender, Ma-Dorothy Nyembe were very active in Durban.

Naturally most of these women were part of community and activists' organisations which supported

the general struggle for liberation. Some were leaders in church and other women's organisations which had international support. These later came together in the United Democratic Front (UDF).

The 1980s was full of activism as it tackled issues pertaining to inequality and institutionalised discrimination at work, on farms, in homes and in communities. The struggle took up broad issues ranging from women's right to own property, their right within customary marriages, effective child maintenance laws and support for women's ability to participate in the economy productively whether in the formal or informal survivalist sector.

NEW NEDLAC ERA

After 1994 Cosatu participated in Nedlac (National Economic Development and Labour Council) and in the process of reviewing government legislation to ensure that it supported the spirit of democracy and non-discrimination. The Labour Relations Act of 1995 reflected the long journey which Cosatu had travelled but also the new era it had fought for.

Some of the new legislation such as the Small Business Act of 1996 was finalised after long debates on issues such as lack of collateral for women to raise bank loans when starting their own businesses.

In 1994 parliamentary public hearings, we fought for a woman's right to choose, which culminated in the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

In a study Miriam Altman found that many women in workplaces had experienced, and were afraid of, sexual harassment. She then raised funds and established the Sexual Harassment Education Project, which partnered with Cosatu to educate its members and establish procedures for



Launch of the Sexual Harassment Education Project at Cosatu head office in 1994.

dealing with sexual harassment at the workplace. Through sexual harassment education workshops the tensions and contradictions between traditional and modern values were highlighted.

For instance, it was noted that in traditional times, women played the courting game by dragging out the process as long as possible. The longer it took for a man to pursue his love interest, the better it reflected the woman's moral system and proved that she was not promiscuous. She would therefore say that she was not interested even when she was. In modern times we educate women to say 'No' and mean it.

The problem with dealing with sexual harassment is that it is situational and subjective. Nevertheless, Cosatu ensured that procedures on handling sexual harassment at the workplace were adopted as part of the Code of Good Practice as an Addendum to the Labour Relations Act.

PAST ACHIEVEMENTS, NEW CHALLENGES

It is evident that many women from the union movement have progressed in their careers to become deputy presidents, ministers,

members of Parliament and senior managers in South Africa's economy and that calls for celebration.

But there is still much more work to be done. The question for Cosatu is, now that these women have moved so far up, is it ready for a woman president in South Africa?

When we celebrate Cosatu's 25 years therefore it is worth noting its achievements regarding women's emancipation. We should not, however, disregard the challenges which continue to face South Africa with its high levels of violence against women and children.

While government is trying to address this scourge, it is clear that it cannot regulate people's values and their responsibility towards others. Arguments have been made that perhaps we are experiencing a backlash from men because of the success of women's empowerment since 1994. The truth is that patriarchy is alive, and like racism, it can only be dealt with by consistent efforts and determination by all our leaders in order to ensure that we do not lose the gains we have made.

Women who achieve powerful positions are still perceived with suspicion that 'they slept their way to the top', while men are spared such accusations. We need an

environment which affirms both men and women. Leaders in the union movement, political parties, schools and all institutions should create and maintain a safe working environment for young and aspiring women, who may otherwise be vulnerable to harassment of all kinds.

Let us confront new challenges head on. As teenagers we were schooled in meetings about concepts important to the development of our society. The youth today learn from the World Wide Web about everything and everyone except the values which make us who we are as communities and a nation.

We now have social networks which enable our youth to create unreal friendships and share their sexual adventures through cyber networks. Cosatu and other organisations need to embrace such a challenge as it did during the 1970s and 1980s. Cosatu needs urgently to educate the youth.

Despite the challenges there is a lot to celebrate about Cosatu's impact on empowering workers, women and youth. The passion and the commitment which was shown then, must be revived today. The role of Cosatu to provide a platform to educate our youth and future leadership should not be underestimated. The issues have become more complex since our time but it provides Cosatu with an opportunity to shape the values of future leadership - principled, determined, humanist and empowering. As we celebrate Cosatu, let us salute all those women who have developed through it. The baton is now firmly in their hands to develop the youth. **LB**

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