

# Economic policy – *where are the women?*

JANE BARRETT \* tackles what union women call the “all male choir”.



“No woman no cry ... Umzabalazo” sang the women at COSATU's Special Congress in September as they hoisted Connie September and carried her to the podium after the announcement of her

election as vice-president.

At its founding Congress in 1985, COSATU resolved to “actively promote the necessary confidence and experience amongst women workers so that they can participate fully at all levels of the federation”. Some have hailed September's election as COSATU's first woman office-bearer as proof of the successful implementation of this resolution. While September's election is undoubtedly a step forward, COSATU cannot afford to rest on its laurels about women in leadership or the “gender sensitivity” of its programmes and policies. There is indeed a real danger that September's election could result in some complacency on the gender issue.

The content and process of COSATU's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) reveals that there is a long road ahead for the federation's women.

## Women in COSATU structures

Women comprise roughly a third of the total

employed workforce in South Africa, as well as a third of COSATU's membership.

However, women are poorly represented in structures determining economic policy and practice.

- Less than 10% of delegates at the 1992 Economic Policy conference were women. With the exception of SADWU, affiliate delegations were entirely male dominated, even amongst those affiliates whose women membership is one third or above (SACTWU, SACCAWU and TGWU). The COSATU Gender Forum was present, but in a non-voting capacity. The conference conclusions were referred back to the federation's Central Executive Committee (CEC). COSATU's recent congress also referred the RDP to the CEC, a structure where women are conspicuous in their absence. Today the seventy person committee has a total of three voting women members – from SADWU (two), and SACTWU (one).
- The CEC has delegated many tasks on economic policy to the federation's Economic and Development Task Force (EDTF). Of about 40 representatives on this body, only five are women. COSATU's eight representatives to the National Economic Forum are all men. Four of the co-ordinators of the 13 EDTF task groups/projects are women, but all are officials, not workers. The only active woman worker on the committee

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is September, who has the task of negotiating with the government on Site Tax.

### **Affiliate weaknesses**

Women's poor representation on the structures dealing with COSATU's economic policy reflects women's poor representation on most affiliates' national, regional and local executive structures. If anything, women workers' participation in these structures has declined. This is partly due to increasing levels of violence (including an exponential rise in the rate of rape) and the attendant dangers of evening public transport. This poses a serious threat to women worker empowerment. If they are absent from representative structures, even at the lowest levels, how can they contribute to policy formulation and implementation or receive the information so vital to this process?

As the level of sophistication of negotiations increases, so active women members of COSATU are finding it increasingly difficult to participate in debate. This is partly because of a lack of self-confidence in taking on matters of national political importance.

### **COSATU's Gender Forum**

The COSATU Gender Forum has tried hard to bring women workers' specific concerns to policy makers' attention. However, the Forum involves mostly women who are not in senior leadership positions. They find it difficult to influence discussion within their unions. In addition, the Forum relies on the services of only one full-time COSATU official, the Gender Co-ordinator. She also represents COSATU women in a myriad of committees, forums and conferences, both inside and outside the federation. She has no back-up research or organisational team. Whether the federation's new research department will fill this gap is yet to be seen.

### **The need for checklisting**

The argument is not that men are incapable

of ensuring that the question of gender is adequately reflected in policy formulation and implementation. Nor do women always automatically represent the interests of their gender. However, the fact is that the male-dominated structures (both constitutional and committee-based) have not entered a process of constant "checklisting" as to whether redistribution in favour of women is taking place, or whether women workers are being empowered, both within the federation and in society at large.

### **A long way to go**

A stated objective of economic policy is the redistribution of both resources and power in favour of those previously discriminated against on the basis of class, gender, and race. Surely, then, in the process of promoting such redistribution, redistribution of power itself must take place. And this includes the redistribution of gender-based power. It is no good hoping that economic change will in itself lead to such a redistribution of power. The federation and its affiliates will have to take much firmer steps, including: backing up the Gender Co-ordinator with serious research and information initiatives; education programmes geared to women shopstewards; promoting women leadership; and the adoption of a process of "gender checklisting" on all major policy discussions.

COSATU's economic policy and its recent RDP hold enormous potential for the democratic refocusing of priorities in the direction of both long-term growth and meeting the basic needs of the majority of South Africa's people. Already, as the implementation process unfolds through the workings of a range of forums, and with demands backed up by campaigns and activity, the goods are beginning to be delivered. However, it is clear that COSATU has a long way to go both in policy and practice in ensuring that the specific economic needs of women workers are met, and that women are empowered in the process. ☆