

In the union...

women union officials speak out

The number of women in wage labour in South Africa has grown dramatically. A survey by S Pityana and M Orkin shows that between 1970 and 1992 women as a proportion of the labour force increased from 33% to 36%.

Women workers suffer various forms of discrimination in the labour market. The starkest way in which this is manifested is in their exclusion from senior positions.

South Africa's trade unions have been at the forefront of struggles for gender equality at the workplace. Their record as employers shows, however, that they have a long way to go in terms of putting their own house in order. Since the 1980s the number of women holding leadership positions in the unions has actually declined.

Writer Roseline Nyman refers to a 'glass ceiling' which prevents women from progressing through the ranks to hold high positions in the unions. A recent survey of full-time officials in COSATU and its affiliates by Sakhela Buhlungu highlights the effects of this ceiling. While 41% of union officials are women, women are concentrated in administrative positions, which are the lowest paid jobs in the unions.

The survey also found that although a number of women officials have moved between jobs within their union (job mobility), this has not resulted in their moving out of administrative work. Instead, they have tended to rotate in

Women workers in South Africa suffer various forms of discrimination. The labour movement is no exception to this rule. Women who work for COSATU and its affiliates shared their experiences with Malehoko Tshoaedi.

administrative positions (from branch, to region, to head office).

Buhlungu's survey has been complemented by in-depth interviews with 20 women employed by COSATU and its affiliates. The majority are administrators, though there were a couple of organisers, and one full-time gender co-ordinator.

Education

In his 1991 study of COSATU, Jeremy Baskin concluded that one of the reasons why women do not advance in the unions is their lower educational qualifications.

Buhlungu found that, overall, the educational level of union officials is improving. This is one of the factors which has enabled male trade unionists to move on from the unions into positions in business or government.

The evidence shows that women in the unions are also improving their educational qualifications. The number of women with higher qualifications is, in fact, proportional to that of males. Unlike their male counterparts, however, this does not open doors to new career opportunities.

The women who were interviewed identified the following problems which impact on their job mobility:

Patriarchy

South African society is still extremely patriarchal. The common perception is that it is the responsibility of a woman to take care of her family and children while the man is out establishing his career.

This perception has tended to limit women from advancing in *their* careers. Since union leadership is predominantly

male, union activities are structured in a way that does not accommodate women, making it difficult for them to fully participate.

A CAWU branch administrator said: "Sometimes it may be that women have too many responsibilities. Working in a union and having domestic duties is too much for women...if a woman is a general secretary of the union, it may be impossible for her to participate in union activities like her male counterparts. If she is asked to attend a conference in Cape Town, she has to first think of her family."

Meeting times put women in a very difficult position. A SACCAWU administrator said: "They hold their meetings late...at the very time when we have to get home and cook for our families, help the children with their homework and wash them. Everything is

waiting for you...when we raise the problem, we are not taken seriously."

A NUMSA regional administrator added: "You know, I would have liked to have done more things. I just couldn't. There are opportunities to go somewhere - meetings, conferences and so on, but there's that pressure on you. Being a woman limited my participation in the union."

Male partners often add to the constraints: The administrator from CAWU noted that: "A problem for most of us married women is that some of our husbands are not happy with women who are involved in politics. They do not understand why you have to attend a conference on a weekend or

COSATU and affiliates

Occupational positions according to gender

Current position	Male	Female	Total (M & F)	Females as % of total
Local administrator	2	32	34	94
Branch administrator	1	24	25	96
Regional administrator	3	48	51	94
H/O administrator	6	53	58	91
Local organiser	79	7	86	8
Branch organiser	33	8	41	20
Regional organiser	46	6	52	12
National organiser	24	3	27	11
Branch secretary	17	4	21	19
Regional secretary	23	1	24	4
General secretary	10	0	10	0
Research officer	6	3	9	33
Legal officer (regional)	14	3	17	18
Legal officer (national)	2	3	5	60
Education officer (branch)	4	0	4	0
Education officer (regional)	12	0	12	0
Education officer (national)	11	3	14	21
Media officer	5	0	5	0
Other	43	40	83	48
Total	340	238	578	41%

Source: Union officials survey, Buhlungu (1997)

attend meetings in the evenings."

Women have to put their careers on hold in order to hold on to their relationships. A PPWAWU branch administrator had the opportunity to apply for a job as an organiser, but she declined. "Since I am engaged, I had to take a break. I used to attend meetings, some of them in the evenings or on Saturdays, and conferences, which often took two or three days. But now I have to take a break. Being an organiser is too demanding." A woman organiser from another union was given an ultimatum by the father of her children: "leave the union or I will leave you!"

Attitudes

The research indicates that men in the unions still have a very long way to go in overcoming these attitudes. A (female) CAWU regional organiser argued that: "In the labour movement, there is still that belief that women can not be good organisers, that it is only men who must occupy these positions. Men are still oppressing us in the unions, it is our own comrades who are suppressing us." A woman from SARHWU noted that: "At staff meetings issues on gender are pushed aside. If you try to challenge them they will come to you and say you talk too much, such that you are scared to talk, that maybe you'll be fired."

Discrimination

The women who were interviewed believe that they are being directly discriminated against when it comes to promotion: "Even if you apply (for an organiser's position) they do not even call you for an interview. It is mostly men who are called for the interviews" (SAMWU administrator).

"When an application comes, they don't read the content of the CV, immediately they see that it is a female, then they'll put

it aside" (PPWAWU gender co-ordinator).

In some unions women are denied access to positions because they have to break their service when they are pregnant. A CAWU organiser reported that: "The union used to employ women organisers. But now they are saying that they will no longer employ women organisers because we get employed and soon we get pregnant and we have to go for maternity leave."

Lack of support

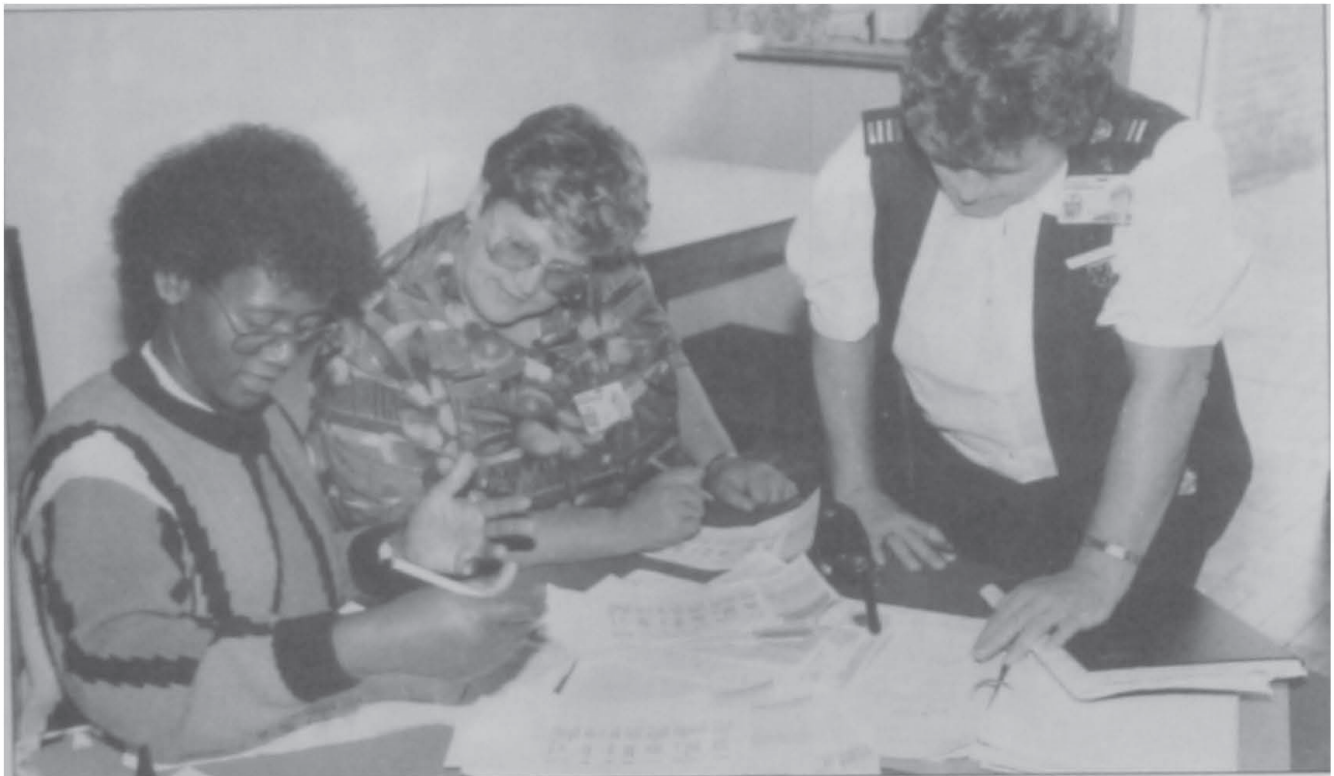
Women are also not given support by fellow women officials and members: "Even us as women we do not support each other. For instance, if I apply for an organising position, women will not support me, instead they will discourage me. They will say you won't make it because of the distances that organisers travel and the pressures that you will get from the companies."

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a major problem in the union movement. According to a SAMWU organiser: "In each and every workplace sexual harassment exists."

One of the interviewees who is an administrator said sex was sometimes used as the means to job security or promotion: "Most of the girls in this region do it. To be where they are (referring to top positions) they either had to sleep with somebody or be somebody's girlfriend."

Reporting the matter does not help. The CAWU administrator said: "We had difficulty because many people are afraid of this person. For us women, there is no structure where we can report such issues. Even when we approached the office bearers, they failed to solve the matter because they were afraid of this person." Another pointed out that the matter would never be resolved, because "the



Martha Mokwena, NEHAWU organiser. Most women officials work as administrators.

person you are reporting to is a man." Women have left the unions because they cannot stand the situation: Some women prefer to stay at home because "they don't want to pay for the job with their bodies."

Frustration

Administrators are at the bottom of the union hierarchy. There are few challenges or opportunities for growth. A NUMSA regional administrator said: "It's really becoming a routine because I know exactly what I am going to do today or tomorrow. There's no longer any challenge."

The women are office-bound: "We don't go out, (we) don't really know issues or problems that affect the union. Sometimes you read about it in the paper or see it on the television news" (SARHWU administrator).

Lack of training

- There is a general lack of training. Where training is given, it relates only to administrative work. A SAMWU regional administrator said: "We were interested in

the new LRA, but none of us has been selected to attend such courses."

In contrast to the administrators, women in organising positions find their jobs challenging and interesting.

No career path

Due to the limits on upward mobility in the unions, most of the women who were interviewed plan to leave the union.

Most of the women interviewed indicated that there were no career prospects in the trade unions. A woman from SAHRWU stated that: "I don't really see myself within the union for a longer period. There's a lot more going on outside the union that we people working in the unions are missing out on. If you are in a career, you want to grow. If things remain the same, I can't see that I will be growing in any way in my current position."

Asserting rights

Some interviewees felt that women are partly to blame for the situation they find themselves in. The PPWAWU gender co-



SARHWU meeting: meetings are held at times when women cannot attend.

ordinator said: "There is also a weakness with us. We are saying that we are not given opportunities, whilst we do not force ways to get these opportunities." Her colleague in the union felt that: "We can't keep on making excuses by looking at what was happening in the past."

Women's abilities are doubted not only by men, but by themselves. An administrator from SAMWU said that: "They don't have confidence in themselves as women and they have feelings of inferiority. They do not believe in themselves, they have that belief that women are not capable of achieving anything that men can do."

While there is clearly some truth in these statements, asserting their rights will not be sufficient to change the position of women in the unions. If women are not given support, either at home or in the workplace, their chances of advancement are slim. It is unfortunate that an opportunity for concrete support – in the form of the quota proposed at the recent

COSATU congress – was missed. The union movement will have to search for ways to make up for this lost opportunity. ★

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