

Just go for it!

I was born in the Eastern Cape and am the youngest of four sisters. When I was three months old I was orphaned and was taken to an orphanage in Cape Town where I grew up with my sisters. Life has not been easy - then again no one promised me that it would be

I became a mother myself at the very tender age of 19 years. I am a single parent and have raised my daughter single handedly. I am very committed to my sisters - we love each other very much. We are a close knit family so I have always had the support of the family. They are really proud of my achievements within COSATU, and it makes it worthwhile for me at the end of the day.

My daughter is almost an adult - she is 18 years. We have an understanding relationship. She is wonderful and can take care of herself.

Education

I left school in Std 9 (Gr 11) due to illness. I suffered from epilepsy from the age of 11 years to the age of 17 years, so obviously I could not continue with my studies due to the epileptic attacks.

Currently I'm studying a two-year course in adult education at UCT. COSATU and the university have given me a bursary. I am excited about this course - at the end of the day, it will not only benefit myself, but the federation as well. By working for the federation, I am also

Rugaya Rees interviews Elma Geswindt, COSATU's Western Cape gender co-ordinator.

exposed to various other forms of education. I have recently also applied for the Ditsela course on gender. I am also currently at COSATU's political school.

You know, when I started working for COSATU, I was not computer literate. I have been given the opportunity to improve, and I have improved tremendously.

Working for COSATU

I was a shopsteward for SACTWU. In 1979, I started working for Clicks Stores and was not exposed to trade unions. However, when I started working for Mr Price in 1991, I thought that the conditions under which we worked were very bad and I guess this attracted me to the labour movement.

I was sure that management victimised me because of my involvement in the union. So in 1996 I resigned from Mr Price by choice. I could not just sit back at home, and forget what SACTWU had taught me. I then decided I wanted to use this knowledge, not only to my advantage, but also for those workers I had left behind at Mr Price.



When a position became available in COSATU I immediately applied. I knew I did not have much experience, but I was not prepared to let that stop me from exploring something I have always wanted to do - to remain in the trade union. I was selected from 50 applicants who had applied for the job. It was like a dream come true.

What I know today, is what COSATU has taught me, and I am truly grateful.

Since working for COSATU, I have been privileged to meet wonderful people and be exposed to education at a very high standard. I was also given the opportunity to go to Malawi for some work on gender at the Malawi trade unions.

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Sexual harassment

Nedlac has set up a code of conduct on sexual harassment. COSATU has run workshops on sexual harassment to educate our members on their rights. If I can be bold enough to say that as a victim of sexual harassment myself, and being a gender co-ordinator, I feel that being exposed to the causes of sexual harassment has made me aware that perhaps I needed to take more action when it happened to me. I now

won't just sit back and allow it to happen again. I will defend the rights of workers around sexual harassment, and not just my rights alone. Most work places have sexual harassment committees. It is important that the affiliates also set up sexual harassment committees. We need to support each other, and should push come to shove, I will personally take up the case myself.

Gender equality

Gender equality, or equality between women and men, means that men and women can equally use socially valued goods, opportunities, resources and rewards. Equality does not mean that men and women are the same, but that opportunities and life chances will not depend on their sex. I would also say that both sexes can be oppressed.

Male culture

I believe that we are not born with culture, it is clearly something we have created. Society has created that perception that males must be at the forefront. Even though there are strong men out there, you will also find strong women as well. I also believe that I can do anything I set my mind to, the same if not better than my male comrades in my office.

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It is entirely up to us women at the end of the day. We keep complaining about men being the majority. But we as women must take a stance. We as women must stand together and say enough is enough. Let us not forget that we are the ones who elect the men, so the fault is ours - we cannot then say that men are dominant. We put them in those positions even though there are women who can be elected for those positions. Women don't want to see the progression of women. I have seen this happen many times and its also an experience I had to go through. Even when we are aware that a woman has the potential, we make sure she is not elected. So I would say that we have ourselves to blame.

HIV/AIDS

As the gender forum we have been playing an important role in the campaign to date. We will be concentrating on the link between child labour and HIV/AIDS during our International Children's Day campaign. We have information tables at

mass rallies and shopsteward council meetings where we distribute condoms.

We re-affirm the COSATU Exco decision that COSATU will encourage leadership and members to take HIV/AIDS tests and break the silence around HIV/AIDS. I also believe that by breaking the silence a new culture of openness will be encouraged. This new culture of openness includes encouraging parents to talk openly about the epidemic to their children, relatives and friends.

Challenges and victories

My big challenge was, when I started at COSATU - I came with very little knowledge, but said to myself, even without knowledge I was not going to allow anything to stand in my way, of making a success, it was important for me to make a success. I may not have achieved all my goals, but certainly have achieved some of those goals I set for myself. I am now computer literate, whereas before I was not.

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Message for women

I would like to say to all women, not just the women in COSATU, that I did not have an easy childhood or an easy life. It was not easy being pregnant at a young age and being single parent. But, if I could achieve what I'd set out to do, I believe that anyone of us can do the same. You have to set your mind to it, believe in yourself, and not allow obstacles to stand in your way. You can make a success. Fight for what you want and believe in. Just go for it! ★