

Men and quotas

Women constitute about 41% of full-time union officials. Most of these women are in administrative positions and at the lower level of the occupational hierarchy. A key question is: why do we have so few prominent women unionists? Interviews I conducted with women officials in COSATU affiliates provide some answers to this question.

The women I interviewed said they are not in senior positions in the unions because of family responsibilities, male unionists' attitudes, discrimination and sexual harassment. This article focuses on male unionists' views on the lack of women in senior positions in unions.

Unions not to blame

The perception among men is that the patriarchal nature of society is responsible for women's lack of career success in unions. The male officials think that women's roles in the world of work conflict with their full-time roles in the domestic sphere. They generally agree that being male makes a difference in terms of participating fully in trade union activities.

Although men acknowledge that women are disadvantaged in terms of fully participating in union activities, they maintain that unions should not be blamed for the lack of women in prominent positions of the organisation. One male official pointed out that 'It is

Maleboko Tsboaedl explores the reasons men give for the lack of women in senior positions in unions.

true that most of the administrators are women, but that is the way society is organised. Women have to do secretarial jobs and office jobs, and men have to do the fieldwork. That has a long legacy. On the unions' side, we are at the receiving end.'

Since men believe that the problems experienced by women in these organisations are caused by the patriarchal nature of society, they also believe that solutions lie at a societal level.

However, when examining these responses, we must consider that unions have struggled against racial discrimination, social stratification and unequal power relations in the workplace and in society. Unions have relied on their collective strength to challenge different forms of inequality in society. Ironically, they have not used their collective strength to address gender inequalities within their own organisations. Male unionists do not think they have control over the external forces they regard as influencing inequalities experienced by women in unions. But, if unions are the



Some men believe that women are not committed.

same organisations they claim to be (representing the collective interests of everyone and fighting to end discrimination), then they should apply their collective strength to women's struggles. If men are conscious of the negative effects of the patriarchal system on women within their organisations, they should (together with women) work to transform the system.

Discrimination

By explaining the occupational structure of the unions through the patriarchal nature of society, most men are unwilling to take responsibility for the absence of women in the senior positions of unions. While women argue that they are being discriminated against, men officials perceive unions to be organisations where both women and men are given equal opportunities for career mobility. Men officials argue that union positions are often advertised openly for everyone to

apply. However, women never apply for senior positions in the unions. One male official disagreed with women's arguments: 'I don't agree that interviews are skewed in favour of men. We don't discriminate because of people's sex. We normally interview the person based on the requirements of the job. For instance when employing organisers, we used to employ people from the shopfloor, who had been shopstewards, who know exactly what is happening in the union. When we advertised for jobs, you would find most applicants would be men.'

However, even though male officials do not acknowledge the discrimination of women in the unions, a *power culture* seems to be in operation. Since men are in decision-making positions, they have the power to define requirements for particular positions. Because men lead organisations that have been influenced by patriarchal notions, it is possible that the requirements they set are informed by

gender stereotypes dominant in society. They may therefore place value on masculine or feminine attributes when selecting individuals for particular positions such as organisers.

One male official acknowledges the influence of gender stereotypes in appointing full-time officials: 'If the post for an organiser is advertised, we, as the union leadership, do not expect a female to apply. For instance, if a woman has applied for a local organiser post, people will normally look at the CV and say, "look it's a woman". Your judgement is already biased because you will think that because she is a woman she will not do the job well. This happens across trade unions. So we are still trapped in that mentality, that certain jobs are suitable for particular sexes.'

A male official points out that unions' acceptance of the dominance of patriarchal attitudes in society has made the discrimination against women a norm. As a result, even when union practices discriminate against women, they may not be regarded as discriminatory. According to this official 'there is inherent discrimination - sometimes people are not aware of it even when they do it, by for example arguing that because she is a woman she cannot perform a particular job. Officially, and as a matter of principle, discrimination is not allowed in trade unions. But it's not what is written that matters, but what is practised.'

Blame the victim

Although men blame the patriarchal nature of society for the subordination of women in trade unions, some male officials also blame women themselves. They perceive unions as equal opportunity organisations where an individual's success is based on his or her commitment to advancing worker

struggle. However, most men believe that women are not taking advantage of these opportunities and as a result 'they remain secretaries' of the organisation. The argument is that: 'If you are working in a trade union, you should be committed to the cause - the workers. If you see yourself as a nine to five worker, if you see yourself as a secretary, you will remain that.'

Some men explain that women are not visible in union leadership because women are not committed and are ignorant of union issues. Some men suggest that women are less interested in union issues that do not concern them directly. They further argue that women often come up with 'excuses' if they have to attend union functions. Apart from not attending 'sometimes if they go to these meetings they just keep quiet. The question that one then asks is "what is their role?" Are we not wasting resources in terms of accommodating them and then the next thing they don't participate?'

Interviews with women show that a male culture is dominant in COSATU unions. Women are expected to participate on terms set by men. Union activities are often defined in male terms, where actors are expected to be masculine, assertive and one of the 'boys'. Most men officials deny women's claims that women are not taken seriously in union meetings. For men officials, women use these arguments as excuses for their lack of success in trade unions. However, one general secretary confirms that men officials often treat women as inferiors. He indicates that: 'People will always look at the person's sex when they respond. We have seen many cases of that nature in national executive meetings. When a woman makes a suggestion it is normally rejected or not even considered because it is made by a woman.'



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The quota system

Men still oppose the quota system in spite of COSATU and its affiliates' resolutions on quotas and an acceptance of the need to address the lack of women leadership. Men argue that women should be put into senior positions on the basis of skill and capability. According to men officials, the proposed quota system is problematic since it means compromising well-established democratic principles within the trade union movement.

The rejection of a quota system in unions reflects the contradiction between principles and practice in the unions. On the one hand, unions support implementation of such policies in workplaces for their members in order to address inequalities created by apartheid. On the other hand, many men reject the implementation of policies in their organisations that will address inequalities created by the systematic exclusion of women. One of the male officials interviewed perceives the

rejection of the quota system as something based on fear of change.

The quota system challenges most men officials in unions since it means restructuring the occupational structure of these organisations. According to this male official's explanation, 'this was one attempt aimed at advancing women in the unions and other people felt threatened by that, because it meant that unions had to undergo a restructuring process. It meant that COSATU in the 1997 congress was supposed to elect two women national office bearers and that would have meant that all affiliates had to follow suit, and ensure that women are represented. It has that potential of threatening people in their positions'.

Although most observers of the 1997 COSATU congress viewed the rejection of the quota system as a 'step back' for the trade union movement, the male union officials perceive it in a different light. A prominent official argues that the fact that

the quota was even debated at the congress signifies progress in terms of addressing gender issues within the movement: 'There's slow movement. In 1989 a woman general secretary from TGWU made a suggestion for a quota and she was not taken seriously. She was laughed at. In 1991 that same union made the same suggestion and it was not even discussed. It was a major joke. People used to laugh when you mentioned gender issues, and it became the liveliest thing with everyone in the congress whistling. In 1997 we spent four hours debating a quota. The percentage of delegates supporting the quota system has been steadily increasing.'

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a major problem for many women in the trade unions. Women unionists maintain that it is also one of the factors that contributes to the low participation of women in union activities. Most men officials admitted that sexual harassment is a problem and measures have been put in place to address it. They quote the code of conduct on sexual harassment as an example of measures taken by trade unions to address sexual harassment of women. Women indicate that implementing the code of conduct is not a total solution to the problem. Men officials on the other hand seem confident that the code of conduct is a solution to the problem. According to one of the male officials: 'If you don't have courage to complain then the code won't help. It is a problem if I harass you and you still think that it is natural and you don't see the need to regard it as sexual harassment. Thus you would find the code of conduct on sexual harassment useless.'

However, what the male officials seem to overlook, is that sexual harassment is a problem of unequal power relations

where those with power harass the powerless. To challenge the assertions made by men, I highlighted arguments by women about their fear to report senior officials for sexual harassment and the fact that such cases are not adequately addressed by male office bearers. The response from one prominent male official is that: 'In some cases it may be because of the environment which still favours men. It may be that all those men have also been accused of sexual harassment or of having a multitude of relationships - which is seen as a symbol of braveness, you know the culture. It is true that it is a deterrent to many women. It may be difficult for women to approach the same people (male officials) about sexual harassment, because they may think because those men are sexual harassers they may not do anything about the problem. But on the other hand, office bearers who are supposed to handle the case may be faced with a situation where the person who is accused is very popular and powerful in the organisation. The office bearers may then not know how to deal with the matter, so they push it under the carpet.'

In general, most of the men agree that levels of harassment are decreasing, although harassment is still a problem. Unions are taking tough measures against cases of sexual harassment. Men officials also argue that they and other men officials are becoming more sensitive to sexual harassment issues.

Conclusion

Men admit to the problem of a lack of women leadership in trade unions, indicating their awareness of the under-representation of women in senior, decision- and policy-making structures. However, men officials are not prepared to take responsibility for what they see as



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women's failure to rise above the ranks of union positions. For these officials, unions are democratic organisations that promote equal opportunities for everyone. Women are blamed for not being committed to the unions, and that undermines their chances of occupying leadership positions. Although men recognise that the patriarchal nature of society constrains women in participating in union activities, men still believe that women show less interest in trade union activities.

The approach taken by men officials is problematic because it perceives the under-representation of women in senior positions of the unions as a women's problem and therefore needs to be dealt with by women alone. However, this is a problem about achieving representivity. This is a problem for the whole union movement. Not having women well represented in the leadership structures brings challenges for organising or recruiting women, representation of

women's interests in collective bargaining and policy-making structures. It raises the question of whether women's interests or needs are well represented in leadership structures dominated by men. Unions need women for their survival and it is important that they commit themselves to full representation of women's needs and interests. Representation of women's needs is especially important given the changes in the labour market where there is increasing casualisation and outsourcing and women are particularly vulnerable in this regard. Unions have to look at strategies of achieving a higher representation of women in senior positions. The quota system is one such strategy that has been successfully employed in other organisations. ★

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