

My sister, my responsibility

women claim their rights at Gabriel

*My right hand is being held
By somebody
Who knows more than I do
And I am learning
My left hand is being held
By somebody
Who knows less than I do
And I am teaching
Both my hands must
Thus be held
For me to be.*

Author unknown

Not long ago I was lucky enough to be in the company of four remarkable women. Una Rose, Elizabeth Arenal, Irene Panda and Letchma Ockhuis are members of the NUMSA Gender Committee (GC) at the Gabriel plant in Steenberg, Cape Town. We discussed the challenges the GC faces and successes they have had at Gabriel.

We met the women during their lunch hour. Clothed in blue working overalls and safety shoes the women eagerly invited us into the NUMSA office. From the beginning the atmosphere in the room spoke of comfort and positive energy waiting to be released. We sat in a circle sipping Sprite and making small talk about their day, until we were settled in and the only man in the office had left.

Una shared with us that at first she did not see herself as being a 'gender person', but now that she is in the swing of things,

Farnaaz Majiet meets the women who make change happen for women workers at the Gabriel shock absorber plant in Cape Town.

she has developed a passion for the GC. Elizabeth, soft spoken but determined, patiently waits her turn to speak her mind. The quiet one, Ma Irene, does not say much but when she speaks it is with such seriousness and command that you have to listen to her. Letchma is the vibrant one who keeps herself and everybody else up to date with information and new happenings affecting their work.

Each woman is unique in what she has to offer and enthusiastically learns from and teaches the others. They do not have fancy degrees and diplomas to show, but they have their courage and determination. They are black working class women from the surrounding township areas making their voices heard. It was a heart-warming experience to listen, not to the words they used to form their sentences, but to the passion and power in their voices. These women deserve our admiration and respect for having committed themselves to advance the status of women at their plant.

Elizabeth explained that the current GC



The metal industry is male-dominated.

There were also instances where physically women were not able to perform certain heavy tasks and as a result there was discrimination against women in the grading system. Through pressure from NUMSA and the GC, a task team was set up to review the grading system. The outcome was that management changed the way the machines women had difficulty with, worked. The women operating these machines can now do so without strain.

Women climb the ladder

Until recently all managers, supervisors and team leaders at Gabriel have been men. The GC has been working to introduce women leaders in the factory and on the shopfloor. They have had their first success with the appointment of Fagmeedah Erasmus as the first woman team leader ever at the Gabriel plant.

at the Gabriel plant has been active since 1997. There was a committee before, although not so active. The women talked about their achievements at Gabriel.

Equal pay becomes a reality

In the past the income for men and women differed for the same job. Through the consistent efforts of the GC the pay for men and women doing the same job has been equal since October 1998, a great achievement, particularly in an industry so male-dominated. Women feel that their male counterparts respect them more and that the men are more appreciative of their female colleagues now that they earn equally.

Training – not as equal

All training courses available at Gabriel are open to women and men. The GC encourages and motivates women to undergo training for posts that are male dominated.

However, women often have difficulty completing the training courses, mainly because of their domestic responsibilities. By the time they get to their training manuals at home, it is long after midnight and they are totally exhausted. Many women become demotivated and drop out of the courses.

So fewer women are adequately trained and able to penetrate posts where women should be represented. While it is an achievement for women to have equal

access to training available, they are not able to take full advantage of the opportunity because of the patriarchal situation at home.

Equal is not always fair

Perhaps one of the most significant victories of the GC, won in early 1998, has been that from the moment they can show proof of pregnancy, women are not compelled to do shift and overtime work until their child is a year old.

In 1997 a pregnant woman miscarried in the early stages of her pregnancy. Even though the GC could not prove that this event was the result of the kind of work the woman had to do, they used the case as a motivation for their demand. Pregnant women can still do shift work and overtime if they choose to. Some pregnant women opt for this choice since they need the money.

This success did not come about without struggle and perseverance on the part of Una, Elizabeth, Irene and Letchma, who were constantly learning and not fearful of making mistakes. The first response from management was 'But nurses work night shift!' Management used individual cases of pregnant women who managed to work shifts at Gabriel, to weaken the GC's case.

The GC members stood their ground and, with assistance and guidance from the NUMSA regional gender co-ordinator Anessa Jantjies, did not allow the antagonism from management to sway them.

In their struggle the GC had the support of their fellow workers, men and women. They made a point of including men at the plant from the beginning stages of formulating the demand. The male shopstewards provided guidance and assistance whenever the GC members needed it. They succeeded in making these

men realise that the improvements they are fighting for at Gabriel, and that gender committees strive for at all companies, will benefit their wives, sisters, mothers and friends.

As Letchma pointed out, 'equality does not always result in fairness and we should focus on what measures are fair towards the particular parties in a given situation and not simply aim to treat men and women equally'. Women need to be treated fairly and in the case of pregnancy this means they must be given preferential treatment.

With the significant successes of equal pay for men and women doing the same work, no shift work for pregnant women and the first female team leader in the history of Gabriel, it is clear that NUMSA and the GC are bringing about constructive change at this plant. But there are still many challenges to face.

The struggle continues

The company's leave quota does not accommodate women who have a stillborn baby or a miscarriage. These women have to take time from their sick leave to deal with their situation and recover. The GC wants adequate cover by leave other than existing sick leave. Compassionate leave is not sufficient since only three working days are allowed.

The fact that maternity benefits come from the UIF is also of great concern. A woman retrenched after she received maternity leave would not be in a position to draw unemployment since she has already drawn maternity benefits. It has not yet been decided how to deal with this problem.

There are no childcare facilities at Gabriel for employees' children. It has been agreed that having such facilities at the plant is not practical and conducive to the development of the child, given the nature of the work. The GC would like to



NUMSA has assisted and guided the GC.

see community-based crèches that will be 50% sponsored by management and easily accessible for employees, established.

'Women do not need men to be 'considerate', what they need is for men to be aware of gender issues and to acknowledge their own male privilege in the workplace.'

Early last year the GC reacted to a rumour that the company had issued an instruction that no more women were to be recruited. Due to their swift action, the manager concerned apologised for his mistake and promised that future recruitment procedures would not discriminate against women. However, management also claimed that they never intended to discriminate against women,

they were in fact trying to be more considerate towards women at the plant. The GC will assess the company's recruitment procedure regularly to ensure that there is in fact no discrimination.

Using the argument of 'being considerate towards women' is just one of the many ways in which men in positions of power in the workplace attempt to keep women out and prevent them from claiming leadership roles. Women do not need men to be 'considerate', what they

need is for men to be aware of gender issues and to acknowledge their own male privilege in the workplace.

This ideology of male superiority is a system of beliefs that is integrated into our daily lives and all institutions of society. It sets a standard, a male standard, which becomes the yardstick that women are judged against. When women enter male-dominated posts, they are set up for failure, blamed for the failure and through this process the myth that women are failures is reinforced. Male superiority is justified and the ideology reinforced.

As working class women entering and struggling to make our voices heard in the workplace, we must take pride in our struggle and remember that we are part of a people who has a history of survival. ★

Larnauz Majlet is a social-responsibility researcher at Labour Research Services (LRS)