

'We're different but still equal'

I come from a family that was very involved in the struggle. My father was a teacher who was very involved with sports. Their slogan used to be, 'no normal sport in an abnormal society' because of apartheid and because of government's position that, for example, coloured schools could only play with coloured schools, and white schools could only play with white schools.

I learnt a lot from my father who believed that all people are equal, and that all deserve an equal chance, to progress in education, sport and jobs. My father was very influential in my life - he used to say to me that life is about choices, and when you choose you have to live with the choices you have made. Politically my father raised me. He used to tell me that there are no grey areas - everything is either black or white, you have to make a choice, you cannot just sit on the fence.

Education

I went to Wits University where I studied law and political science. I then received a scholarship to study at Alazar University in Cairo, Egypt. Cairo is a beautiful place, after the initial culture shock. I studied Arabic at Alazar University for a year.

I wanted to major in commercial law and went to the different employment agencies. One of the agencies sent me on assignments to different companies, and one of these assignments was at SASBO -

Rugaya Rees and William Matlala interview Shabieda Sallie, FEDUSA's gender co-ordinator

the Finance Union. That was how I started working in a union.

Gender awareness

When I talk about gender, I am referring to the role that men and women play in their daily life, at work and in society. Gender awareness means being aware that peoples' different needs and wants depend on their sex, their social class, their culture, their religion and their age.

Gender should not and does not focus on women as an isolated group. It focuses on the roles and needs of men and women respectively. Inputs from both sides are required to enable changes towards a greater equality between men and women.

For unions to survive it becomes imperative for them to attract and keep women in membership, since many workers are women. This can only be achieved once unions make women's issues a union's priority. At FEDUSA we are glad to say that we do.

Examples include a Gender Awareness Training programme specifically for



they can have a say on their future.

Trade unions are there to represent the interests of all members. Women are in a more disadvantaged position when compared to men at the same socio-economic level. Therefore, the promotion of gender equality means that we must pay explicit attention to women's needs, women's interests and women's perspectives.

In the face of privatisation, and the globalisation of the economy, trade unions can no longer afford to ignore the other half of the working population - female workers.

Gender programme

I'm busy facilitating a gender programme. One of the

questions asked was, 'why all this gender talk now?' A lot of them feel that South Africa was excluded from the international world, however, as the co-ordinator I don't have any problems. I say, engender your organisation, cater to the needs of women. Don't have late meetings, have them during the day, as you all know that women have to pick up children after work. "

Don't put wage negotiations above maternity benefits. We don't come with a feminist approach. We're not here to remove men from the earth. We're saying men and women are equal, we're different, but still equal. I have no problem if a man opens a door for me.

What should be changed?

"With regards to legislation, a lot was done for women. Not all the laws are in place -

women and a congress resolution that all meetings, training etc should have 25% women.

Women in unions

Women's participation in trade unions has been lacking, since many female members are unaware of what the union can do for them. They often do not make themselves available to participate in structures because of family responsibilities, unfriendly times and the attitude of leadership. Lack of encouragement and support are also contributing factors for not being involved in decision-making bodies.

Women should be urged not only to participate in trade unionism, but also to be involved in the activities and management of their unions - especially on collective bargaining councils where

they need fine tuning as we go along. The Maintenance Act is also good. The main obstacle is attitude, especially culture and tradition.

Women's work

A woman always works, so her work is never done. Men who work and leave the woman at home may think it's easy, but I feel she works more and it's unpaid. He should involve her in his work, there should be co-operation.

Sexual harassment

We define sexual harassment as the court has defined it - behaviour that makes the recipient feel uncomfortable. We make use of the facilitator training workshops from the Sexual Harassment Education Project (SHEP). We encourage men to attend these workshops as well and actually hope for a 50/50 representation. However, we do get more men than women.

Men are sometimes honest - they ask how far they can go before it's considered sexual harassment. So we're saying, any unwanted advances that makes a co-worker, be it male or female, uncomfortable, is considered sexual harassment. And with regards to women's clothes, I don't believe that the type of clothes women wear invite sexual harassment or any form of violence against women.

HIV/AIDS

FEDUSA is hoping to do an awareness programme on HIV/AIDS, once we have the funding. We have slotted HIV/AIDS in our occupational health and safety structure.

We have a draft workplace policy which we give out in our training sessions. FEDUSA, in conjunction with COSATU and NACTU, we have formed a labour task team on HIV/AIDS. We feel HIV/AIDS does

not have a membership - it doesn't discriminate. We must therefore have a labour response to HIV/AIDS. FEDUSA is also thinking of setting up an AIDS clinic - mainly to give advice and counselling.

Goals

I'm hoping to see constant gender awareness. We go out to educate people on gender and I hope to see our training programme advance. Sometimes women themselves encourage women to put a woman's view on the budget - we need to take gender awareness further.

We need to 'engender' our brothers in the union movement to realise the gross inequalities that still exist between men and women workers.

Message to women members

I'd encourage women to actively participate in their unions. Don't just come when you need us, go to shopsteward meetings and elections. Partake actively.

Scarf

A lot of people say to me, hey you're a gender co-ordinator, don't you think it's a form of oppression to wear your scarf? In the union I have not met anyone else who wears a scarf. I am the only one.

If a man had given it to me, I would say that it's a form of oppression and I would probably resist the order. But for me it's not oppression - my religion says that I should dress modestly to protect the honour of a woman.

Since I've been in the trade union movement, my scarf has worked to my benefit - people are put off guard. But people's perceptions are how they were socialised and they're careful what they say. Some think I'm religious and that I will faint if they slip up on a word so they speak very politely to me. ★