

White women, race, gender and employment equity

Recently the policy of white women as recipients of affirmative action laws has been questioned.

Kezia Lewins examines if white women have excessively benefited.

This focus leads her to questions that entail examining broader employment equity where, she concludes, much still needs to be done.

Thirteen years of democracy and the workplace still remains a site of race and gender-based contestation. Are continuing white privilege and racism the core problems and is removing white women as employment equity beneficiaries the answer?

In *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*, Andries Bezuidenhout describes how the apartheid workplace regime was highly racialised. The division of labour, the structure of power and workplace facilities were divided along racial

lines, the divided industrial geography as well as a dependence on migrant labour extended racial labour politics into an already racialised society. Under apartheid, the South African workplace was highly exclusive and access to opportunities and preferential treatment were reserved for white people and white men in particular.

During the 1990s, several pieces of legislation sought to make the workplace more democratic and inclusive to all. In 1998, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) emerged as the principle piece of legislation designed to reconfigure the workplace by outlawing discrimination and by providing opportunities to all categories of people who had previously experienced disadvantage. By taking into account race, gender and disability, the EEA was then applied almost universally with the exception of able white men.

WHITE WOMEN: SHOULD THEY BENEFIT?

The rationale for the inclusion of white women as employment equity beneficiaries was rooted in the fact that disprivilege takes many forms including political, social, cultural and economic. White women, under apartheid, had limited opportunities and experienced prejudice and discrimination both within the workplace and society at large because of their gender.

In society, white women were accorded less status than white men. Family investment in white women's education was typically less, with white women often

groomed solely for social reproduction including the domestic management of the household, raising children and supporting their men to ensure their success in economic and political pursuits.

Within the workplace, white women's position was also secondary to white men. White women's access to work and its benefits, their mobility within the workplace hierarchy, their capacity to make workplace decisions, and gender discrimination was entrenched by the apartheid workplace regime.

However, not all forms of inequality, discrimination or prejudice are equal in their severity and effect. Undoubtedly, white women experienced much race-based privilege during apartheid as they had access to, and benefited from, political and social legitimacy as well as having greater access to economic capital than the nation's black majority. However, with the drafting and passing of the EEA, it was decided that national unity and reconciliation were additional core goals and hence opportunity should be provided for all categories of previously disadvantaged without distinction or differentiation.

Recently the debate on the legitimacy of white women as employment equity beneficiaries has once again surfaced in the public domain. The Black Management Forum (BMF), for example, has advocated a sunset clause which would either exclude or stagger the exiting of white women as employment equity beneficiaries. On the other side, Solidarity argues



that such a move is politically motivated rather than economically rational. In addition, opposition is levelled against any move that prioritises race-based equity above gender-based equity.

In moving forward, how can we negotiate these two ideologically opposed positions?

For starters, the discussion needs to build on the key issues embedded within each position so that we talk to each other rather than passed each other. Those supporting a sunset clause on white women argue that white women have benefited the most in the post-apartheid period. For example, using data from the *Employment Equity Commission's 2007 Annual Report*, the uppermost levels of the labour market (including top management, senior management and professionally qualified people) are dominated by white men, African men and then white women. They represent 20.6%, whilst African women only represent 6%.

In 2006 especially, white women appear to have made the most progress out of all designated groups in the categories of top and senior management. This raises some serious potential problems as not only has there been some backward slippage of African men and women

in this occupational category, but there has also been an increase in both white women and men.

These statistics raise some important questions. Does the continued privileging of white women come at the expense of black advancement, particularly at the expense of coloured and African women who remain at the bottom of the labour market hierarchy? If so, is it morally defensible to keep a system in place that reinforces the historic inequality of the majority of South African women? Most would agree that such a system should be modified to give more privilege to black women. Questions are also posed regarding the skills deficit amongst black people and black women in particular.

STATISTICS, LABOUR MARKET EQUITY AND SKILLS

Whilst comprehensive data is not available, some statistics may help us to answer this question. The *Community Survey 2007* found that 97.6% of white people above the age of 20 have some secondary education or more formal education, whilst only 61.9% of African people have a comparable level of education. The situation becomes even more stark when we look at higher education, as 31% of white

people have formal education above grade 12 whilst only 5.6% of African people have the same. In the post-apartheid period, there has been an increase in the number of people gaining formal education across all racial categories due to the increase of higher education and the work done by sector training authorities (SETAs).

The difference between white and African education levels should not blur the fact that since 1996 there has been a 36% increase in African people with some or more secondary education and an increase of 56% in African people with post grade 12 education. Whilst there is still an immensely long way to go, significant progress has been made and the labour market should begin to feel the impact of this. Without a more comprehensive skills audit of black people within, and outside of the labour market, caution is necessary in moving forward. A combination of aggressive skills development for black people, and women in particular, with the staggered exiting of white women as employment equity beneficiaries may well be one possibility.

Another point of contention is the adequacy of statistics used to support the argument for the sunset clause. Opponents to the sunset

clause argue that the Employment Equity Commission's data is unrepresentative and based on a dwindling source of employer reports. These reports, they claim, exclude much of the public sector where the proportion of black workers at the top of the labour market hierarchy is much greater.

The inadequacy of current statistics based on voluntary employment equity reporting is clear. But this should not be used to invalidate the claims that white women are privileged. It is widely acknowledged that transformation in the public sector is further ahead than the private sector - even if transformation within the highest levels of the labour market is lacking everywhere.

In the previous *SALB 31.4* Geoffrey Modisha quoted Thomas Sowell who suggests that representativity of all racial groups throughout the labour market is not realistic and feasible. Unlike Sowell, I would not accept a new form of labour segmentation where previously disadvantaged workers occupy positions in the public sector, and the previously advantaged continue to dominate the private sector. It may be a necessary first phase, but is not the desirable end goal of employment equity.

A different way of looking at the

available statistics is to compare each race and gender category on its own merits by evaluating the proportion of workers in high ranking occupations with all workers within that race and gender category. See Table 1 from the *Employment Equity Commission's 2007 Annual Report*

This table shows that the proportion of African women in skilled occupations compared to all African women workers is 20.7%, whilst the comparable proportion for African men is 20.8%. This makes the category of African workers the only category in which the traditional gendered differentiation between men and women workers has been overcome.

Meanwhile, the racial categories that show the greatest tendency towards gendered differentiation are white and Indian workers. This indicates that in the labour market, racial categories with some previous advantage have been the most resistant to gender-based change.

Table 1 shows that the effects of race are still significant. It shows that African and coloured workers (of either gender) are located towards the bottom of the labour market hierarchy, whilst white and Indian workers are located higher up in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, the difference between white and African women

workers becomes most evident if we compare top or senior management positions. African women in these positions constitute only 0.7% of all African women workers, whilst white women in senior and top management represent 5.9% of all white women workers. This means that a white woman worker is almost 12 times more likely to be in the top echelon of the labour market than an African woman worker.

Whether or not a sunset clause is adopted, it is abundantly clear that there is a need for comprehensive statistics that will allow for informed decisions. It is also clear that we are desperately falling short of the anticipated levels of both race-based and gender-based equity and a way forward needs to take this into account. It is also necessary that we take the discussion on workplace dynamics further to seriously examine the division of labour across the labour market in general and within specific sectors. Workplaces need to seriously address both race-based and gender-based prejudice, discrimination and inequality and seriously enforce a minimum standard of decent work for all in South Africa. LB

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Table 1: Proportion of workers per occupational level per race and gender category

Occupational level	Total national labour market	Women				Men			
		African	Coloured	Indian	White	African	Coloured	Indian	White
Unskilled	24.8	37.9	23.6	5.4	1.2	32.9	21.5	5.3	1.7
Semi-skilled	39.5	41.4	47.5	44.9	31.6	46.3	43.2	31.9	13.6
Skilled technicians	25.4	16.7	23.9	35.2	45.4	17.9	28.3	40.9	47.9
Professionally qualified	6.9	3.3	3.9	11.1	15.9	2.2	5.2	14.9	22.5
Senior management	2.2	0.5	0.8	2.5	4.3	0.5	1.3	5	9.3
Top management	1.0	0.2	0.3	0.9	1.6	0.2	0.4	2	5