



“Are we going to government and address gender should we seize now to implement that would take

wait for a new constitution, to imbalances or the opportunity the practical steps us forward to

non-racial, non-sexist workplaces?”

*SACTWU's national treasurer CONNIE SEPTEMBER suggests ways in which COSATU could become more gender sensitive.*

In COSATU there are two prevailing views on how and where to take up gender issues. The debate, however, is becoming stagnated and loaded with rhetoric.

The question of gender imbalances in society and in the labour movement is not, and should not be, a debate conducted in isolation of our overall political and economic fight for liberation in South Africa. It must be part of our mainstream activity in all spheres.

We need to accept that COSATU has not adequately begun to address gender imbalances within our own

ranks, let alone within the broader society. We need to take up the challenge now in the federation if we are to avoid making the same mistakes that have been made in Africa and elsewhere where workers decided to obtain political and economic freedom first and then fight for women's rights.

It is no longer a question of merely coming up with the rhetoric that women's voices must be heard, and insisting that women's forums must address imbalances. Let us move beyond all of this and become practical. If we analyse our workplaces

carefully, we see our worker leaders are being elected by the members in a very clear-cut democratic way. There is nominating and voting. Workers vote for leaders of their choice, be they male or female, and not in a prescriptive, preferential way to advance and protect their rights and interests. There is a good gender balance among shopstewards – but it stays on the shopfloor. Our membership teaches and shows us true democracy in practice, and worker leaders in COSATU should start implementing that democracy. This would result

in a proper gender balance among the leadership, without resorting to quotas. COSATU needs to take more creative steps, to show clear commitment, and not leave important gender issues to a sub-committee that meets from time to time.

It is premature to advise that we need to resort to quota systems and proportional representation in a federation as young and able as COSATU, as a vehicle to bring about political change. All other attempts to address gender imbalances have not failed, yet, but by the same token have not actually been tested.

If we implement such measures we would be guilty of undemocratic, prescriptive measures and tokenism whilst going through a political and economic transformation. Big countries like America, Britain and Canada which still have to practice quota systems because affirmative action has failed.

Instead we should learn from the big studies conducted in the Scandinavian countries which give evidence of women's leadership in different organisations and institutions. They have achieved this through conscious practice, not quotas. They have won social security for all and of course regularly change their tactics to maintain the gender balance.

One could argue that there is a need for affirmative action, but it is a hollow cry

without a clear programme. COSATU is not a Mickey Mouse organisation, it is built on solid organised factories, powerful constitutional structures and campaigning abilities. It should begin to offer opportunities for participation and be able to make the necessary changes. The original gender imbalances might continue for a while, but the struggle has taught us that practice can master theory.

There are several practical steps that can be taken.

- South Africa is in desperate need of a proper national *health care system*. To obtain proper ante-natal and pre-natal care you must be able to pay for it. Women workers cannot afford this.
- State policy on family systems changes when it comes to the 'black population'. Women workers are daily confronted with contraceptives which are banned in other countries, but are allowed to be used in South Africa.
- Our factories, mines and shops need improved *health and safety mechanisms*. Workers are currently exposed to chemicals, radiation, back strain during pregnancies and so on. Our collective bargaining efforts should respect paid time-off for attending ante-natal clinics.
- Our campaigns should include fighting for non-discriminatory employment practices and equal tax pay-

ments but should also ensure that the taxes should be directed into proper social security, health care and equal education.

- Our own employment practices in the federations should become gender sensitive. We should not employ women as typists only.
- Our education in the unions should totally integrate gender issues; we should not only be discussing gender issues in women's workshops.
- A programme of affirmative action should include keeping recorded statistics of leadership development and apply creative and changing tactics when necessary.
- The campaigns' conference should begin to focus on gender-related issues so that we can start fighting inequality wherever we encounter it. Our own media should reflect gender successes in our federation and in other countries and offer advice to workers.

These are just a few practical steps we can start taking. There are many others.

The key question is: are we going to wait for a new government, a new constitution to address gender imbalances or should we seize the opportunity now to implement the practical steps that would take us forward to non-racial, non-sexist workplaces in society? ☆