

# *clearing the* **gender hurdles**



Photo: William Matlala

FIONA DOVE\* compares the seven-year battle for gender equality in COSATU to a major obstacle course, with the finish line barely in sight.

**W**omen are under-represented in the power structures of COSATU. Since 1985 women have made up 36% of COSATU's membership and constitute a mere 14% of COSATU's shopstewards at the lowest level. At national level there are even fewer women.

Because so few women have been elected as shopstewards union education and training programmes, higher levels of debate and decision-making structures are inaccessible to women. Male domination of the unions continues.

The lack of women leadership at the most influential levels of the federation is reflected in the formation of gender-blind demands in national negotiations on labour legislation and economic restructuring. A glaring example was the amendment of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. The draft amendments had been through all of the relevant COSATU structures a number of times - but the simple question of job security for pregnant women was forgotten!

Yet one of COSATU's first policies was aimed at achieving equality for women.

## **Great paper policy**

COSATU's 1985 policy states gender equality could be achieved by

- raising consciousness through normal education programmes;

- planning special programmes aimed at building women workers' confidence;
- establishing a watchdog subcommittee under the education department to monitor progress;
- promoting women's rights through collective bargaining.

It looked great on paper, but by 1987 the federation acknowledged little progress had been made. There were some efforts to introduce the issues into education programmes by tagging on a section on women.

But most union education officers are men, who are not particularly gender-sensitised. The courses are generally aimed at shopstewards, who are mainly men. They are often not particularly interested in looking at women's issues.

## **Collective bargaining gains**

Some concrete gains were made in the collective bargaining arena - notably around maternity rights - but these were confined to a few unions which had greater shopfloor participation from women.

The development of women leadership and setting up a watchdog committee to monitor progress was not addressed.

\* Fiona Dove is editor of COSATU's *The Shopsteward*





*COSATU women: no easy road to power in the federation*

*Photo: William Matlala*

### **Women's forums are formed**

In 1987, women's forums were formed in the unions in preparation for the Women's Conference early the next year. Initially, these drew on women shopstewards, organisers and administrators. Few held positions on higher constitutional structures of the unions, and fewer still in COSATU. The union officials were overburdened. Despite a commitment in spirit to seeing women in the unions develop, they simply did not have the time to become involved.

On the conference agenda was the monitoring body, agreed to in the 1985 resolution. It was called the National Women's Subcommittee (NWSC) and fell under the National Education Committee (NEDCOM).

Had it not been for the original Congress resolution, the 1988 Women's Conference might have vetoed NWSC's existence. The period was fraught with tensions over the relationship of trade unions to political organisations. A strong lobby in the Women's Conference argued that to organise women as women in COSATU would usurp the role of

the about-to-be-revived Federation of South African Women, which was affiliated to UDF. This was interwoven with a more serious argument that separate women's structures would ghettoise women's issues.

The conference reluctantly accepted the NWSC and women's forums at local level, but no co-ordinating structure at regional or national level, aside from existing structures like the education committees. The women's forums ended up with a mediated relationship through (male-dominated) education committees, which were also not decision-making structures, to the (very male-dominated) constitutional structures.

### **On their own**

By 1989, the shopstewards and administrators were by and large left to organise the forums on their own. They drew in rank and file women.

The women's forums thus comprised mainly women lacking in organisational and educational skills. They had scant understanding of the machinations of the



**Bed politics**

Bed politics often scares off women from leadership positions. One high powered, outspoken woman unionist tells of how some men in her union felt she needed "taming". They encouraged one of the national officials to seduce her, presuming this would give him power over her. The plot backfired when he found himself supporting her strident views rather than "taming" her. She reckons the strategy is not unusual.

Many men in the unions abuse their power and 'hero' status to take advantage of a woman sexually, and then to drop her for another soon after. This creates competition and tension among women.

Sexual harassment is a similar hidden issue. Most women in the unions can tell tales of fighting off a drunken union man late at night or having to refute political smears by a rejected man. Staff of one large union recently revealed sexual harassment as one of the single biggest problems raised by women. ❖

unions, no idea about how to get items on to official agendas of the unions, how to plan campaigns and so on. There was no specialised leadership training programme to assist these women. They had little or no access to resources and could only relate to constitutional structures via the education sub-structures.

These women also commanded little respect. They met opposition from other women - many did not think women's forums should exist at all. Men were often threatened by the subjects women chose to discuss - like sexual harassment and sexual politicking.

When the NWSC started operating, it had no fulltime official employed to co-ordinate its activities. There was very little money available for national meetings so most representatives were from the Witwatersrand region. The representatives were usually very active, but were not high level leadership.

**Women workers must not be ignored**

One of the most difficult battles to date had been against the unconscious discrimination practised by the predominantly male organisers who had a tendency to report back to men on union matters, unintentionally ignoring women workers. ❖

**Ghettoisation**

The constitutional structures started to refer anything that could possibly be construed as concerning women to the women's forums.

But because the forums themselves only had a mediated relationship with COSATU's decision-making structures, they were 'ghettoised'. They could not get the resources they needed; they could not get their programmes supported and were isolated from the mainstream activities of the unions.

Ghettoisation could have been avoided *if strong women's caucuses were allowed to flourish and to have direct representation on decision-making structures.*

At a regional level, they reported to regional education committees (REDCOMs, mainly men) and the regional office-bearers (ROBs, mainly, if not exclusively, men) who then had to take their reports, requests and recommendations to the male dominated regional executive committees (RECs).

The affiliates' women's forums complained they could never present their issues themselves; the men representing them either did not understand the issues sufficiently to argue them or were not particularly concerned about pushing on the women's behalf.

Similarly, at national level, NWSC was a sub-committee of NEDCOM, itself a substructure which reported to the CEC.

So there was no direct access to the structures which would allocate resources. Gender equality was not seen as an organisational priority and was usually placed last on the agenda; or there were bigger priorities for resource allocation.

The forums floundered. Later the male-dominated structures could turn around and say: "See how useless the women are!"

Two years later, the 1989 COSATU



## Why women are not elected

What is really required are affirmative action programmes, both for those committed to the women's forums (to groom them for shopsteward elections) and for women shopstewards (to prepare them for higher positions in decision-making structures in the unions).

Historical and cultural disadvantages have to be taken into account when viewing the disproportionate representation of women in COSATU's decision-making structures, which are based on shopsteward representation.

Why both men and women do not elect more women to be shopstewards mirrors the unequal power relations between men and women in society.

Traditionally, women have been the least educated, most unskilled and least secure workers: they are the general assistants, domestic workers, plantation workers, the lowest-graded machinists. They have less confidence than the more educated, articulate and skilled workers - who are usually men - particularly in taking on (white, male) management.

Another problem is the perception of leadership. Men are seen as commanding, authoritative, never admitting weaknesses. Women's style of leadership tends to be more co-operative, accommodating, self-critical.

Then there are the historical prejudices against women: *Women are not to be trusted, they gossip, they get emotional, they are easily intimidated.*

Men do not vote for women because of their structural position in social power relations. Why women lack faith in their own gender is more complex. Submissive customs, internalised inferiority to men and a retreat into traditional roles all play a part.

Most women are tied into oppressive domestic relations. Objectively, they probably would not be given the space or time required of a union leader. Most male union leaders are generally uncritical of these relationships, because they have a stake in them too. Women in leadership positions are often single (albeit with children).

Most organisers are men. This is partly because of the long hours, lack of transport and tenuous accommodation in areas one has to visit - all of which can make the job more dangerous for women. But it is also because of blind prejudice. Even if women apply for such jobs, the (male-dominated) employment committee assumes she will not be up to it. There is no affirmative action policy within unions to employ more women in organising positions, particularly in unions with a lot of potential women members like SACCAWU or FAWU. ❖

Congress pinpointed the problem as being the lack of women leadership. At the time the unions balked at the concrete resolution to make sexual harassment, as a barrier to women leadership, an official offence. The Congress sidestepped the thorny issue by agreeing to consider it in a code of conduct, which has not been drafted to this day.

Between 1989 and 1991, the women's forums soldiered on, collapsed and picked themselves up again. They were expected to succeed against impossible odds.

There was uneven support and development of women's forums in the affiliates. Without strong affiliate structures, there was little the NWSC could do. The only national campaign to be attempted by the NWSC was the 1990 Childcare Action, a patchy, one-day affair with

only a few affiliates participating in some regions.

A stayaway in the Witwatersrand region prevented plans for Childcare Action there. The NWSC members, mostly from the Witwatersrand, lacked the experience and vision to co-ordinate nationally. NEDCOM, into which the NESC was linked, did not normally undertake campaigns and did not have the resources necessary to finance and support Childcare Action.

## Defending the right to exist

The national leadership of women decided to identify the obstacles and start to define themselves more as a lobby group within COSATU.

There was a real danger women's forums



would be dissolved. A strong argument existed that separate women's forums had led to the ghettoisation of women's issues in the unions. This was true, but the problem, said the women, was that they had no direct representation on decision-making structures and no-one to co-ordinate the day-to-day running of the women's forums.

Prior to the 1991 COSATU Congress, the women prepared well for the debates on the future of women's forums, anticipating they would have to defend the right of the forums to continue.

There was heavy caucusing at the Congress. But what probably saved the women's efforts were the real gains for women that had been made over the years - notably maternity/parental rights.

To a lesser extent, demands such as equal pay, childcare, training opportunities and sexual harassment were being taken up in National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). These probably had little to do with the women's forums themselves, but rather with the increased awareness

### **COSATU affiliates and gender issues**

CWIU has made the most progress [see main story]. Although the women's forums are still very weak in the following affiliates, there have been developments on gender issues:

- SARHWU, FAWU, SAMWU, PPWAWU and NUM have given the women's forums direct access to constitutional structures.
- SAMWU has achieved roughly proportional representation of women at national level.
- SACCAWU has integrated parental rights and training issues into its collective bargaining programme, and has invested in gender sensitising courses for male office bearers.
- NUMSA has key gender issues as priorities on its agenda, notably non-discrimination in training and job opportunities and childcare.
- TGWU women have a strong voice in the union and issues like sexual harassment, childcare and AIDS are key union issues. But like NUMSA women, they are still battling for the right to status on constitutional structures.
- SACTWU has achieved proportional representation on its structures without legislating this and is now actively participating in COSATU women's forums.

The other unions have organisational problems that have to be addressed before they can give women much attention or resources. Ways of rationalising resources across the unions will have to be investigated. ♦

generated by all the hot debates over the years.

Another lifeline could have been the pressure international funders had been putting on COSATU to jack up its programmes for women.

### **A victory at last**

The 1991 COSATU Congress was the first major breakthrough for women in COSATU. They won the right to:

- continue with the building of the women's forums;
- establish mixed gender forums;
- employ a fulltime co-ordinator for their activities;
- have their programme seen as both an educational and organisational concern;
- proper allocation of resources.

In less than a year, regional women's forums were burgeoning; workshops were being organised to inform women about existing COSATU policies on international affiliation, the economy and other matters of broad concern; there is new energy in the affiliates and a very united and directed Second COSATU Women's Conference in August.

The most recent CEC meeting adopted a conference recommendation that the post of gender co-ordinator be made a permanent one and that she





*Women workers, bottom of the heap in the workplace: is it any different in COSATU?*

*Photo: William Matlala*

be directly accountable to the CEC.

In the context of the struggles over the last seven years, this has been no mean victory. Within COSATU at a national level, there is now a possibility of greater co-ordination, resources and access to decision-making structures.

### **Shaping the agendas**

The women are in a better position to feed into plans for a national integrated education and training system which takes account of affirmative action with regards to women leadership development.

Women will now be able to make inputs to the national task forces, the National Manpower Commission agendas, and political negotiations. The conditions for women to be able to influence legislation, such as the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, are now being laid.

But the battle is far from over. The NWSC cannot carry the weight without the support of strong women's forums within the affiliates. Like COSATU, the individual affiliates have to set up a proper infrastructure and pump in

serious resources.

This includes specialised staff to deal with the development of women leadership, the building of women's forums and the co-ordination of women's input. It is a fulltime job. The COSATU Women's Conference recognised this in calling for the National Gender Co-ordinator's position to be made a fulltime post and for all affiliates to be encouraged to employ fulltime gender co-ordinators. SACCAWU, TGWU and CWIU women are pushing for this at the moment.

All three union NECs have opposed the proposal. In SACCAWU and TGWU the women's forums are not yet seen as very significant. In CWIU the consideration is financial.

### **Right to power**

Despite the conflicts in the past, the 1992 Women's Conference was unanimous that separate forums to discuss gender issues are necessary to build women's confidence, skills and programmes. However, their frustrations over the last few years have brought a keen awareness that without a direct say on decision-making structures of the unions, they will be side-lined and gender issues ghettoised.

Some affiliates, notably CWIU, have a policy of proportional representation for women at all levels and in all meetings as well as special ex-officio status for women's forums on all constitutional structures from local to national level. This ensures that women's issues are part of the general collective bargaining agenda of the union. These include non-discrimination in training and job opportunities, parental rights and women's health issues. CWIU provides a good example for other unions to follow in giving women access to real power [see box on p 67].

COSATU women have run a tough race but are now on a better footing. If they can achieve a specialised affirmative action, education and employment programme for women in the unions, they can go far in improving women's status and reshaping the direction of COSATU. ☆

**Next issue:** *Women and collective bargaining*