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Women’s structures in the trade unions

CWIU’s Elizabeth Thabethe argues that separate structures need not sideline women, but are essential to their advancement.

In South Africa, the majority of women are oppressed and exploited as workers, blacks and, in particular, as women. In CWIU our resolution says that one of the key ways women can take up their rightful place as active members and leaders of our society is through active policies of affirmative action at the workplace and within

our own organisations. The resolution further calls on employers to work towards ending discrimination at the workplace as quickly as possible and for an end to discrimination within our own organisation.

It has been identified that women’s problems are common worldwide and it is through determination,

education, perseverance and a clear practical programme that, in the long run, practical results can be achieved. Apartheid policies, as well as our own customs and traditions, contributed a lot to retarding women’s participation at the workplace, in the union, and in society at large.

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The big question is how to organise women in a way that will not be difficult for them to participate and which also makes them feel accommodated at all levels. During this process education is vital. But the core issue is building women's confidence.

In CWIU we believe women's forums are key structures, both in addressing the imbalances that exist in our organisations and in developing women comrades. It is not enough to call for women's issues to be put on the agenda of all the existing constitutional structures without also clearly understanding the situation that women comrades face.

After the establishment of women's structures in CWIU, and in COSATU locals and regions, the voices of women workers began to be heard. An example of this is the Workers' Charter campaign. Because of the increased participation of women comrades, important women's rights were included in this document.

Within CWIU women co-ordinators at branch level sit on the Branch Executive Committee, Office Bearers Committee and Education Committee. At national level, women have a representative on all major committees such as our National Executive Committee, National

Co-ordinating Committee and National Education Committee (this in addition to other women delegates elected by constitutional structures).

CWIU's women's forums do not operate in isolation, but are directly accountable to constitutional structures. Through this process we have witnessed drastic changes in our organisation at large, as well as an improvement in the attitude of our male comrades.

To be honest, male comrades (from shopstewards to officials) have assisted us wherever possible. The number of women shopstewards and women in other leadership positions has also increased in the branches. Within CWIU we have a system of proportional representation to all major conferences, congresses and workshops within the union and COSATU. In our

delegations at least 12% of all delegates are women. (Approximately 12% of CWIU members are women.)

It is also worth noting that at our last Centralised Bargaining Conference and 1991 National Congress, women workers participated fully in those highest decision-making structures. In the 1991 CWIU Congress and at the COSATU Congress, women workers argued constructively for all affiliates to join hands and establish women's forums because they successfully build women's confidence and concretely advance the struggle for women's rights.

I call on all men and women comrades in the labour movement to take forward the women's struggle as part and parcel of the struggle for a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

The rest of the labour movement should defend, promote and uphold women's rights, as CWIU does. We strongly believe that a working class united shall never be defeated.

In conclusion, I humbly remind our fellow comrades that a nation will never be free until its women are free. This should not be taken as a mere slogan.

Forward with the women's forums!
Forward to affirmative action! ☆

