

Photos: William Matlala



"Trade unions need to look at the possibility of 'quota systems' where unions would include in their constitutions reserve seats for women in decision-making structures..."

NACTU women *speak out*



CRECENTIA MOFOKENG from NACTU's Women's Unit and THEMBI TSHABALALA from NACTU's Information

Unit believe trade unions need to embark on affirmative action programmes to encourage the participation of women.

In South Africa, participation of women in the managerial structures of companies is very low. Only 11,5% of people occupying middle-level positions are women, while only 6,7% of those in high level positions are women. There are reasons for this low level of representation of women in managerial structures. Few women reach matric, receive vocational training and attend universities. This problem has not been adequately addressed.

Trade unions

In NACTU alone, women exceed more than 40% of the membership.

A survey was recently conducted by NACTU

Women's Unit on the status of women within the federation and its affiliates. This survey pointed out that there are only two women general secretaries; two women presidents and three women vice-presidents.

The level of women's participation in meetings, national congress, national executive and education activities is very low. Even in affiliates where women constitute more than 80% of the membership, male domination is highly visible.

Women's Unit

The NACTU Women's Unit was formed in 1984, following a resolution taken at the Joint Executive Council of the Council of Unions of

South Africa (CUSA). When CUSA merged with the Azanian Congress of Trade Unions (AZACTU) in 1986 to form the National Congress of Trade Unions (NACTU), the Women's Unit was adopted as a structure of the federation.

The main objectives of the Women's Unit are:

- to ensure full participation of women within NACTU and its affiliates;
- to create a platform for women's issues;
- to examine problems encountered by women in the workplace and the union and to conscientise women about the economic, social and legal issues affecting them;
- to eliminate discrimination

suffered by women on the basis of gender, race and marital status in education, health and safety employment opportunities, promotions, pay, social benefits and so on;

- to integrate women into trade union activities through trade union education and to give women access to decision-making in all trade union structures;
- to develop assertive leadership and self-sufficiency in women to build strong unions;
- to research and propagate issues faced by women and conduct workshops and seminars.

Structure and activities

The unit has a committee composed of two women per affiliate at the local, regional and national level. It holds a monthly meeting and a national congress once a year.

The Women's Unit of NACTU co-ordinates and runs its educational activities based on the women's identified needs.

Problems faced by women

It is not enough for a trade union to be a non-sexist organisation when women continue to be under-represented in the decision-making structures.

In the various education activities of NACTU Women's Unit, problems women experience both at work and in the trade unions

have been raised. These can be summarised as follows:

Problems faced by women at work:

- low wages;
- lack of promotional opportunities;
- restricted paid maternity leave;
- extremely long hours;
- damage to health and threat to safety;
- limited sick leave;
- expensive childcare;
- sexual harassment by supervisors and others.

Problems faced by women in the trade unions:

- Lack of confidence among women is rife because of their under-representation in decision-making structures of the trade unions.
- Lack of discipline in the unions. There are still male comrades within the unions who regard women as sex objects, not as equal partners. This discourages women from participation in trade unionism.
- Lack of support by husbands to share responsibilities on the home front to allow women to participate in trade unions activities.
- Lack of information about the trade union and women's rights as members of the trade unions.
- Lack of women role models. The paucity of women shop-stewards, organisers and national leadership figures does not encourage women to see

themselves as able and united trade unionists.

- The timing, locations and agendas of union meetings can discourage instead of encourage women to see the union as being concerned about women's issues.
- Few women's issues are a priority on the union bargaining agendas.

How can the situation be addressed

Trade unions need to have clear policies on women's issues, to address barriers to women's participation and to deal with the concerns of women.

There is a need for the Women's Unit to be positively supported, strengthened and incorporated into the union constitution and structured according to the overall structure of the trade union.

Trade unions need to embark on affirmative action to develop and encourage the participation of women and to look at the possibility of a 'quota system', whereby unions would include in their constitution reserve seats for women in decision-making structures.

Finally, the issue of women's participation must be looked at very seriously by addressing barriers to women's participation. A code of conduct must be formulated for the protection of women against sexual harassment by their own comrades. ☆