



Organising Women Workers in South Africa

Adrienne Bird*

Outside of domestic service and agriculture, black women workers have been conspicuous by their absence. Except for a few isolated pockets, women hardly entered the sphere of wage labour at all until recently. In 1946, African women accounted for only 1,8% of all production workers in South Africa. In 1960 it had increased to 6,2% (quoted by J Yawitch, SALB 9.3, p87). In February 1982 the figure stood at 12,8%. Bozzoli has explored the possible reasons why black women entered the labour market relatively late (Journal of Southern African Studies 9.2, April 1983, p140). This paper will not focus on these historical issues, but rather looks at where women are employed in industry at present, the problems they experience there - and the challenges this presents to the emerging independent trade union movement.

The situation women find themselves in

Up until very recently there was no attempt by unions to pull together their growing experience of organising women workers into a separate debate. This is partly because women constituted such a minority, partly a pragmatic question of resources and partly because women have not, until recently, begun to see themselves as a separate sub-grouping in any real sense. All these things are now changing. But perhaps these comments beg the question: why are women a distinct constituency in the working class as a whole? The answer lies in the particular problems which face women. Perhaps an example can best illustrate this.

The following factory was recently organised by the FOSATU affiliate, Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union. I spoke to the women who had been fired for union membership. The factory processes and packages sweets and chocolates. It employs 129 workers of whom around 90 are women. Men and women

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do the same or similar jobs but do not get the same pay. The women earn between R22 and R33 a week. The men earn R49 to R52 a week. Over time there has been a tendency to replace men by women - to reduce labour costs. One young woman packer, earning R22 a week after 4 years, asked her employer for an increase - she was told that if she needs money she must go and sleep with men in the nearby hostel! This same woman is the sole supporter of herself, her young daughter and sick mother. She pays R80,86 for rent, water and an electricity scheme called "master plan" which as yet has not produced any electricity. Only by a stockvel arrangement with four friends at the factory, and by borrowing, is she able to meet her basic bills.

In January 1984 the workers were given individual increases - most women got R2 while the men got R6 to R8. On weekdays workers work from 7.15 am to 5 pm with 15 minutes tea-break in the morning and a 45 minute lunch break. On Saturdays they have to work overtime from 8 am until 4 pm with only a 30 minute lunch break. For Saturday working women get R6 and the men get R8 to R10. Workers are fined R10 if they fail to work this overtime once, R15 the second time and so on. But it is not only as regards basic wages that the women are worse off than the men. The boss imposes R2 fines on any woman found talking, even if she is working at the same time. Men are not fined in this way. Women, not men, are made to sign a register when they go to the toilet.

As if this is not bad enough, women are continually sexually harrassed by the management - verbally, by the use of words such as "bitch" and "cow", and physically; management seems to feel completely free to touch their breasts and their crotches at any time. One particular woman was hired on the understanding that she would sleep with the boss at R15 a time. However when he tried to implement the agreement she flatly refused. He sulked for weeks afterwards, and now she is one of the workers who has not been re-employed. The factory fired all its workers when the union asked for recognition. It has selectively re-hired some of the workers - union activists were not re-employed. With such a catalogue of discrimination, it is very difficult to know where to start. And it must be appreciated that the union is in a very weak position even though it has nearly 100% membership, particularly because the factory is small and the workers unskilled. It is

very easy for replacements to be found. This example may seem extreme, but it is only a matter of degree. All over, but particularly in the textile and food industries where the proportion of women is high, such practices are common.

Where women work

Before looking more closely at the problems, and at the strategies unions have adopted to challenge them, it is first necessary to clarify exactly where black women do work in South Africa. Table 1 below highlights the growth of women's involvement in manufacturing, commerce and the service sector since 1970.

Table 1: African Women Workers by Industry Divisions, 1970-81

	1970	1981	% change
Agriculture	43,9%	16,6%	- 27,3%
Mining	0,1%	0,4%	+ 0,3%
Manufacturing	3,5%	10,7%	+ 7,2%
Commerce	2,6%	15,0%	+ 12,4%
Services	38,0%	54,4%	+ 16,4%

(Negligible % in Electricity, Construction, Transport)

SOURCE: South African Statistics, Central Statistical Services, Pretoria, 1982

Table 2 below is a closer breakdown of the industrial sectors in which black (African, "coloured" and Indian) women are employed. As can be seen by far the majority are trapped in traditionally non-union areas of work, domestic labour in particular. However, from a trade union point of view, those in production present an immediate challenge. They can exercise collective bargaining power against employers, are not isolated and powerless in the way domestic workers are.

Over the period 1973 to 1983, wages for labourers rose in real terms. Employers did not accept these higher costs without resistance. This was also a period - in the first part at least - of economic growth necessitating increased employment. Instead of taking on more men, Debbie Budlender in her

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Table 2: African Women Workers by Industry, 1981

Industries where more than 5,000 women work	Total number	% of black employees in the industry
Total community, social and personal services	889,920	59%
Domestic services	685,060	83%
Agriculture	289,280	25%
Wholesale and retail	183,840	39%
Wearing apparel, not shoes	91,360	74%
Schools, (primary & secondary)	69,340	51%
In-patient institutions	63,340	66%
Catering	31,200	60%
Accommodations services	30,400	44%
Public administration	21,220	7%
Spinning, weaving & finishing	16,180	45%
Canning fruits and vegetables	11,760	51%
Textiles	11,180	42%
Motor trade, accessories & repairs	10,380	11%
Made up textile goods	10,060	57%
Footwear	9,280	40%
Slaughtering & preparing meat	8,400	32%
Knitting mills	7,900	63%
Laundries	7,460	46%
Banks & building societies	7,400	42%
Welfare organisations	7,360	69%
Sawmills	6,540	36%

SOURCE: South African Statistics, Central Statistics Services, 1982

1984 paper to the Carnegie Conference notes that women were employed in greater numbers. According to the biennial Manpower Survey of the Department of Manpower, the employment of African, "coloured" and Asian female labourers increased by 10,2% between 1973 and 1983; male labourers fell by 4,2%.

Women and the independent, emerging trade unions

A great deal of debate about the relationship between women workers and the trade unions has taken place in countries

like Britain. And what literature is available comes from the same source. However it is not possible to simply import the debate wholesale. The trade unions into which women workers are now being recruited in South Africa are militant industrial unions - very different from the hostile craft-dominated trade union movement in Britain. The black male workers in these South African unions suffer similar hardships of low pay and poor working conditions as the black women. The vast majority of black men are unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Some of the demands that British women trade unionists are making, such as more equal training and promotion opportunities for women workers and less discriminatory recruitment practices are not even on the negotiating table for black male or female workers in South Africa. Firms still legally advertise for "coloured women workers" or "African men" - this is illegal in Britain. Similarly positive action to encourage more girls in the schools to take the sciences to help them qualify for apprenticeship is not on the agenda given the discriminatory nature of black education in general. However as the following discussion hopes to show, women are at the bottom of the pile here as elsewhere. So, with the South African situation, the question still arises as to whether or not the new unions have been able to effectively challenge the ultra-exploitation of women workers.

Low pay

The first question to consider is that of low pay. According to a 1980 United Nations report, women put in two-thirds of all the hours worked in the world but receive only one tenth of the world's income. In South Africa it is certainly true that women, black women in particular, are clustered in the very low income brackets. (see A Bird, "Organising women in South Africa", ASSA Conference, 1984, graph 1.) It is also true that the 1984 Basic Conditions of Employment Act makes it illegal to set separate wage rates for women, nevertheless, as we have seen from the pattern of female employment, this is unlikely to make any substantial difference to the income of black women in general - as most women are segregated into so-called "womens' jobs".

The question here is - where unions exist and have been strong enough to negotiate wages, has their strategy advantaged or disadvantaged the very low paid grades where women

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tend to be employed? For FOSATU unions, the answer is very clearly positive. Unlike many unions in Britain, where a great deal of weight has been given to the "Family Wage" (where male wages meet family needs and female wages are extra argument) and to negotiate for percentage rather than flat rate increases - FOSATU has actively resisted this tendency. In an early resolution this was made clear:

FOSATU believes that management has attempted to justify the system of wage exploitation by the use of so-called scientific surveys of an adequate wage to support the needs of black workers and their families... FOSATU does not accept concepts such as the Poverty Datum Line (PDL) or the Minimum Effective Level (MEL) where these have been worked out without consultation with organised workers and are based on some abstract formula on what workers need to live. These scientific surveys are normally inaccurate because they talk about a non-existent family of five, something which few African workers know about... FOSATU demands that employers now start paying workers a living wage as a combination of two factors:

1. What workers themselves decide they require to live on,
2. What workers are able to get from their managements... based on the Company's ability to pay, its profits and the ability of the union to get higher wages.

FOSATU believes that an acceptable minimum wage level is R2 per hour. (1981; as from 1984 the target was R3.50)

This policy clearly backs up all groups of workers trapped in low-paying wage grades. To take an example from 1984 Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union negotiations with Simba Quix - the factory had 500 workers of whom the vast majority are women in the lowest grades. Using the living wage argument the union was able to increase minimum rates from R40 to R85 per week. Another example can be taken from National Automobile and Allied Workers Union negotiations with a motor components factory where women machinists sew and trim seat covers for cars. The minimum rate was increased from R1.31 to R1.80 per hour in addition to which the number of grades was reduced from 11 to 5. Such a reduction in the number of grades helps the low paid in that the differential between the lowest and the highest paid tends to be reduced. The biggest FOSATU union, Metal and Allied Workers Union, has recognised this principle but has not succeeded in negotiating any reduction because of strong, organised employer re-

sistance, particularly in the industrial council and because an industry-wide negotiated grading system operates which doesn't exist in the motor industry. Employers tend to believe that more grades and wage differentials help production because they provide incentives for workers to work harder and get more training. However many workers dismiss this argument in favour of giving the biggest increases to the lowest paid - in appreciation of need not greed.

Where the "living wage" target could not be reached unions have at least tried to negotiate for flat-rate increases for everyone rather than percentage increases because the latter tend to increase the division between the low and high grades.

The broad policy then is highly advantageous to women in low paying jobs. There is, however, one clause which is potentially discriminatory in the living wage resolution:

FOSATU demands that remuneration and benefits should be linked to long service with the company.

This is a well tried and tested trade union principle, but it fails to recognise that women are seldom likely to accrue the same length of service as a man, because of time spent having children - and the termination of service this frequently brings. This is an example where blindness to the differences between men and women workers can lead to inadvertent discrimination. Where a woman returns to the same company after giving birth, clearly the solution is for her service to be regarded as unbroken, or at least cumulative if not continuous, and a clause to be inserted into the agreement to this effect. Where the woman is forced to find a new job after confinement the problem is very much more difficult to solve. Good maternity agreements are important here.

Unequal pay

Fighting for the "rate for the job" to do away with unequal wages being given to men and women is apparently straight forward. It has long been an accepted negotiating principle within FOSATU. However, the problem is more complex than would first appear as the following example shows. At SA Fabrics, a textile factory in Durban, management started in 1980 recruiting women for jobs at less than half the rate that they were paying the men. In February 1981 there was a

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3 day strike over the issue. In the end the case was taken to arbitration. As a shop steward at the factory put it: "The finding became very sweet to the union, and very sour to the company... the company was ordered to close the wage gap between male and female workers. Thereafter the company became so hostile to the workers that they started retrenchments. In those retrenchments most of the workers were women. The company has now only two female workers left from those who were employed during the big rush. One of those workers has been saved because she is making tea for the bosses. The other one is just there by sheer good luck".

In this example the union had not yet won a retrenchment procedure agreement to control the pattern of dismissals, but had the union had its way, it would have used the LIFO ("last in, first out") principle which would still have meant that women went first. There is a difficult problem here which has been highlighted time and again within the textile industry - in particular with the Frame group - that if women demand equal wages then employers will replace the women either by men or machines.

Winning the "rate for the job" is difficult enough. There are many examples where unions have been battling for years to reduce the pay differential between men and women doing the same job. Some of these struggles have been successful. The Chemical Workers Industrial Union managed to win equal pay for Grade 4 machine operators at a General Tyres subsidiary. Before the negotiations women were getting R49 while men got R65 a week. The union won R65 for all machine operators. However these same negotiations highlight a second aspect of the problem of unequal pay. The least skilled workers in the same factory are in Grade 1. The women are trimmers and earn R44 per week. The men are labourers and earn R60 per week. The union tried to argue that the same pay should be given to all Grade 1 workers, but the management said that it would replace the women by machines if the claim was pressed. Total job segregation of women into specific grades, which are in turn rated low and paid accordingly, is an extremely common problem for women workers. Putting women into "light industrial work" and men into "heavy industrial" was ground for Smith and Nephew to pay women 30% less than the men. The labels themselves become part of the justification for lower pay. But why should it be women who

do these jobs? It transpires that women have special qualities - "their nimble fingers" for example enable them to sort rotting rags into colour bins in the textile industry or "their creativity" which enables them to stick flower transfers onto enamel pots day in and day out. If these qualities are so admired, why are women so often the lowest paid! This difficult battle has yet to be won both here and in other countries. Job segregation is extremely common in England - with the same consequences of low pay ghettos.

Overtime

The law has recently been changed in South Africa, lifting the limitations previously placed on women doing overtime. Women are now legally entitled to do the same overtime as men. This has not changed discriminatory practices on the part of employers, however. In particular, managements often recruit men rather than women arguing that men are more willing to work overtime. This happens particularly when women and men are both earning the same rate. An example of this was experienced by MAWU at Krost. During 1983 many women assembly workers were retrenched. After business started to pick up again around Christmas, more overtime was temporarily worked. The union argued that the original women workers should be taken back and less overtime worked. They were partially successful - many women were re-employed. However, many of the jobs were filled by men, because it was said they could work overtime.

At a SFAWU company 6 women were fired. When they queried their dismissal they were told they were doing "men's work" (taking intestines out of animals killed at the company's abattoir) and that the company had no facilities for women - no separate change rooms or toilets. This seemed a strange argument given that the women had been specifically employed to do this work in the first place. It seems that the real reason was that women were only prepared to work until 6 pm while men frequently worked after 8 at night.

Problems around overtime clearly highlight women's dual role as homemakers and as paid workers and also highlight women's subordination. It is taken as a god-given fact of life that they are the ones who must carry the domestic responsibilities of childcare and therefore that they are the

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ones who must limit the time they spend on paid work.

The fear of sexual or other forms of violent assault late at night further underlines women's relative powerlessness in fighting questions of overtime. A union policy of banning all overtime working would best suit the needs of women workers, but this is not possible while workers in general need to work overtime in order to earn enough money to live on. Once the struggle for a living basic wage is won, the overtime battles have a better chance of success.

In recognition of the fact that women experience particular problems regarding overtime and night shift working the National Union of Textile Workers has tried to retain, through plant-level negotiations, protective provisions for women. Until the recent law change, women covered by the knitting industrial council were protected from doing any compulsory overtime. Night shift work was also voluntary. With the change in legislation, these protective clauses have had to be removed. The NUTW, which sits on the industrial council, tried to argue that protection did not constitute discrimination, but as they discovered this interpretation is not recognised in law anywhere in the world. So they took the battle back to the factory where they argued that women's conditions of employment could not be changed, "midstream". Management conceded the point for old employees but said new women employees would be expected to do compulsory overtime like the men. The union's reply was that you can't have women in the same plant employed under different conditions, because the effect would be to force all women to do compulsory overtime. The general question about protective provision remains. Protective clauses are potentially double-edged swords. They can be used as grounds for excluding women from certain (often higher paid) jobs. The question of whether they are in women's long term interests is debatable. But clearly unions need to continue fighting for improved hours of working for all workers - and here there is no substitute for organisation.

MAWU and NAAWU are presently arguing for a reduction in the length of the working week to 40 hours in wage negotiations. This would advantage women - but the employer opposition is very strong indeed at the moment.

Job security and retrenchment

Over the last 3-4 years retrenchment has been the number one issue facing many unionists. As the recession has eaten away markets, more and more companies have been cutting back on production or cutting costs and hence laying off workers. Some smaller companies have gone out of business altogether, while others have been taken over by the giant monopolies that control South Africa's economy. This is a traditionally difficult time for trade unions to win anything. Unionists are forced to negotiate at best short-time working and job sharing, and at worst, who goes, not if anyone goes. The LIFO ("last in, first out") principle has been widely used to protect older workers with long service who might otherwise be in danger of being out with no recognition of the service given to the company. But as has already been noted, agreements based on length of service can discriminate against women. However the situation is not simple. Many companies apply LIFO department by department. So if predominately women, or women only, work in the assembly department of a metal factory then management applies LIFO amongst those women. But where there are mixed departments, then women may suffer. A compounding factor is that many women do unskilled jobs where finding replacements when work picks up is no problem, particularly in the current climate of unemployment. "Women's jobs" are hence likely to be the first to go.

Maternity rights need to be considered here. Without job protection, women can find that maternity leave becomes retrenchment. As one woman put it "when management sees you are pregnant, you just get fired that day". The Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa maternity agreement with Metro (SALB 10.5) illustrates what is possible, where women are a significant force in the industry. But there is still a long way to go in the battle for job security after maternity leave. Getting pay for women whilst on leave is even more difficult. Employers seem to be fiercely opposed to setting any precedent on this question. Although strangely at Kelloggs, a SFAWU company, the workers get a third of their normal pay - but without any guarantee they'll get their jobs back. As with the example given at the beginning, it seems that most women tended to get their jobs back when times were good (although many did not get the same pay - one woman in Pretoria earned R23 a week before

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maternity, and afterwards was told to be grateful for a job at R17 a week). However during recession it has been much more difficult for women to regain their jobs after maternity. In general it is probably true that maternity has now become an important negotiating issue.

Health

There are health hazards that only women suffer from, and others which both men and women suffer, but because there are more women in the particular job which causes the problem, we see more women suffering. A problem which only women suffer from is that of spontaneous abortions; or the birth of handicapped children. This can be caused by a number of things - carrying heavy articles for example. At a SFAWU factory some women complained that the loads of salt they had to push on trolleys were too heavy - they were told that if they couldn't cope men would be employed in their place - they had to accept the loads. There is another problem that many women in the food industry suffer from, that is working in extremely cold refrigerated spaces, without adequate protective clothing. Gangrene easily develops in situations like this. Then there is the problem of night shifts where women work all night and then have to go home to take care of the house. They end up sleeping very very little. Stress-related diseases are very common amongst night workers.

Problems can occur with medical aid schemes as well. An interesting case was recently taken up by the motor union, NAAWU. A company wanted to exclude pregnancy and VD from the company medical aid scheme. The union opposed. The medical aid scheme, MCG, to which most FOSATU employees belong specifically excludes contraception. This is discriminatory because women invariably have to take responsibility for this.

In general then, it is clear that women trade unionists need to be continually vigilant to see where gains can be won from employers, that their interests are not overlooked by default - for example on long service clauses, or on questions of contraception etc. Perhaps watchdog committees need to be established in the union structures to perform this function?

Sexual harassment

In the British TUC book on women workers sexual harassment is defined as "any verbal or physical approach, including jokes and innuendoes, right up to actual assault, that's unwanted, that makes a woman feel uncomfortable, is continual and affects her work". Apparently when this was told to a young English hairdresser, she said, "Oh that, that goes on here all the time". And unfortunately the same can be said of South Africa: "it goes on here all the time". The example from the sweet and chocolate factory cited at the beginning underlines the point. Sexual harassment is a trade union issue, but it is often difficult to win. At the end of 1983, however, members of the Chemical Workers Industrial Union at a Dunlop factory gave us an example of how it could be tackled. The workers all knew that the training officer was demanding sex from women he employed. The women felt powerless because they needed the jobs.

So the shop stewards decided to lay a trap for him. (SALB 10.8: for an account of the struggle given by Andries Raditsela) When the security workers next saw him entering the training centre with a woman they were to tell a shop steward who in turn would summon top management. This was duly done, and the training manager was caught "with his pants down" (literally) and fired on the spot, the woman was not even disciplined. For subtler forms of harassment perhaps women workers need to devise methods of ganging up on men with "roving fingers".

Trade union women at home

At a talk on women workers organised by FOSATU as part of its Education Workshop, Lydia Kompe described the constraints that women workers and trade union activists operated under - constraints directly related to their position in the household, and particular, related to the expectations placed on them by men. She damned the independent trade unions saying: "Women have shown commitment in the trade unions, they have shown bravery. They have been active in the shop stewards' committees. We have got unions where the majority of members are women. But why have we not seen a woman as chairperson of one of these unions? And I don't expect the answer because they are women." She continued: "Women start

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to feel the pressures at home. Not only is it dangerous for a woman to attend meetings late at night, but she also knows that when she gets home she will find everything as she left it. Her husband will be sitting idle. And he might not believe she's been in a meeting - he will accuse her of going around." (Some unions have been forced to write formal letters to husbands to get around this problem) "She doesn't want to lose her family for the union, even if she's committed to it. So the organisation becomes weakened. The people who weaken it are those who say they are committed but don't see the need to assist in the liberation of women".

But women's problems don't end at home. As one shop steward put it "it is not always easy to work actively in union matters at work, because men tend to want to defend their positions." She gave us an example: the fact that women use a short, direct language, whereas men talk more without necessarily having more to say. Men interrupt women more often than the reverse. Women are often ignored when they speak.

British women trade unionists have also complained of the hidden messages within the movement for example union publications tend to convey the idea that trade unionism is a male arena. Fortunately this does not seem to be a problem here - Fosatu Worker News frequently shows women in the struggle. In education we are particularly aware of the possible danger of featuring the "invisible woman" - we try to get around it by ensuring that women are used to exemplify points as often as men.

The big question is whether South African women trade unionists need a separate forum in which to build their confidence, gain experience in articulating their needs and so on. British trade unionists have found that positive action is helpful in promoting women's participation in the union's activities, for example:

- reserved women's seats on executive and other bodies
- women's conferences
- women's advisory committees - nationally and regionally
- women's only training courses for shop stewards
- appointment of national women's officers.

In the Transvaal, we have set up a study group, open to men and women, which hopes to consider the position of women

workers more carefully. The group is accountable to the regional education committee of FOSATU. Whether further action is needed will depend on the response to appeals made - appeals such as that by a male comrade at the FOSATU Education Workshop:

Brothers, its high time we surrendered... This is the struggle and for the sake of the struggle we should be hand in hand. If we're both in the struggle - my wife and I - and we are both working, then when I get home I must expect to rest while my wife carries on for 24 hours... We say we are the oppressed nation, but women are more oppressed. They go to work and then start again at home. It's high time we showed the bosses we're equal.

Indeed the bosses create and exploit divisions wherever they can. That women and men workers often have identical interests is true, but not always. The challenge to the new independent trade union movement is simply: how to acknowledge the different objective conditions of women and men workers in order to forge real, meaningful equality and unity in the working class struggle in the long term?

The first task is to pull together the lessons that have already been learnt and information that is already known and to integrate these into broader strategic planning. For example, to always provide for maternity within agreements containing long service clauses. This requires a more integrated approach to negotiations than has been possible to date.

Secondly, there should probably be an ongoing watchdog grouping within the movement to check that women's voices are heard and that their points are taken up in democratic discussion. In this way the obstacles which intervene to inhibit women's involvement in union affairs, eg. not only questions of confidence, but the timing of meetings, the issues discussed etc, can be systematically tackled.

These strategies will be needed to help the unions build the necessary ammunition to counter the deeply divisive, exploitative and discriminatory practices of employers.